

Aesthetic Autonomy vs. Social Commitment: Revisiting the “Art for Art’s Sake” Debate Through New Historicism
With Special Reference to Plekhanov’s Art and Social Life

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Abstract

The issue of aesthetic autonomy versus social commitment in literature is not new, but in this paper, the focus of the theoretical background has been on Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov and his masterpiece essay Art and Social Life (1912). This central thesis of Plekhanov, namely that the doctrine of art for art’s sake develops in those regions where artists are hopelessly in conflict with their social surrounding, is analyzed, developed and subject to test against both a variety of literary texts and cultural movements using the supplementary method of New Historicism. The paper will argue that in the most important aspects, the sociological aesthetics of Plekhanov prefigure the New Historicist insistence on the historical embeddedness of all cultural production, as well as also provide a more explicitly class based account of the ideological circumstances under which the illusion of aesthetic autonomy is generated. The paper shows that the alleged aesthetic autonomy is never a universal philosophical truth, but a historically located ideological construct by presenting close readings of Pushkin’s metamorphosis under Nicholas I and French Romanticism and Parnassianism, Victorian aestheticism, Modernist impersonality and dedicated literary traditions of Brecht to Achebe. Based on Greenblatt, Williams, Eagleton, Jameson, Adorno and Plekhanov as well as on Plekhanov the paper suggests a dialectical interpretation of aesthetic production where form and social content are constitutive of each other. The research finds that the sociological paradigm developed by Plekhanov with the enhancement of New Historicist methodology is still one of the most fruitful frameworks that can be used to comprehend the mutual connection between art and society.

Keywords: *Plekhanov, Aesthetic Autonomy, Social Commitment, Art for Art’s Sake, New Historicism, Marxist Aesthetics, Ideology, Cultural Materialism, Bourgeois Individualism, Committed Literature, Historicity of Art, Class and Culture*

Introduction

One of the most debated and most significant questions in the history of artistic theory is the one concerning the relationship between art and society. In its most basic form, it poses the question of whether art is an autonomous field under its own set of internal rules of form and beauty, or whether it is inevitably entrenched in the social, political and historical circumstances of its creation. In case the artist is out to seek beauty in the absence of any moral, political or social practicality responsibilities? Or does the work of art bear a certain responsibility to address, criticize and possibly change the world out of which it is born? These queries have spawned what Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1912) has labeled two directly opposite responses that have predominated the aesthetic discourse in all developed literary cultures. On the very first pages of *Art and Social Life*, Plekhanov develops the opposition in his typical style:

“Some say: man is not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath for man; society is not made for the artist, but the artist for society. The function of art is to assist the development of man’s consciousness, to improve the social system. Others emphatically reject this view. In their opinion, art is an aim in itself; to convert it into a means of achieving any extraneous aim, even the most noble, is to lower the dignity of a work of art.” (Plekhanov, marxists.org)

The unique feature of the approach that Plekhanov developed in comparison with most previous accounts of the question is his unwillingness to decide between these two postures on a purely philosophical basis. Instead of posing the question of which view is philosophically right, he poses a question of what social conditions generate one or the other view. Plekhanov has most significantly influenced the methodology of the sociology of his era, and his most significant methodological contribution was this: the normative analysis begins to be replaced by the sociological one, and this is where the current paper is based. To Plekhanov aesthetic autonomy and social commitment are not eternal philosophical stands, but both are historical products of reaction to certain forms of class, power and social possibility. The issue is not which opinion is correct, but what social circumstances make one opinion or another seem to be not only natural and necessary but also forceful to the artists who believe it. This sociological re frame of the aesthetic argument foams, by more than several decades, the overarching methodological shift of New Historicism: the imperative of locating all cultural production within what Stephen Greenblatt described as the circulation of social energy, which defines any historical moment (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 1)

Plekhanov and New Historicism: A Productive Convergence

The overlapping of the sociological aesthetics of Plekhanov and that of New Historicism is not accidental. The shared principle behind them is the belief that no aesthetic stance is beyond a historical situation, that all proportions of transcendence are historical practices, and that the cultural production of ideology needs to be strictly scrutinized in an effort to know what art is and what art does in the world.

However, the two frameworks also have significant differences. The complexity and multiplicity of social forces which beat out the cultural production is more likely to be stressed by New Historicism as practiced by Greenblatt and his fellow practitioners, and does not lend itself to the kind of systematic class analysis that is the hallmark of the Marxist paradigm of Plekhanov. Where Plekhanov describes the rise of the doctrine of art for art sake in terms of the relationship of a particular class to the social conditions of bourgeois modernity, New Historicism has tended to pay attention to the particular, local and often contingent interactions between texts and their social backgrounds the thick description (in the words of Clifford Geertz) of the particular cultural moment but not the systematic analysis of historical periods. The current paper hypothesizes that these two models do not contradict each other but instead are complementary, whereby the class-based sociological analysis offered by Plekhanov tends to offer the broader structural context in which the close readings that New Historicist methodology offers can be used to the greatest degree of critical effect, and conversely, that New Historicism approaches add the kind of specific, textual, and contextual detail that the more schematizing approach of Plekhanov tends to miss. The three research questions in this paper are related to one another. First, it questions the way in which the sociological account of the doctrine of Art-to-Art sake by Plekhanov explains the historical circumstances, which produce the ideology of aesthetic detachment. Second, it poses the question of to what degree New Historicism supports, confounds and expands upon the analysis presented by Plekhanov when it is utilized in reference to certain literary pieces and movements. Third, it aims to find out what dialectics scheme could be restored on the basis of the intersection of Plekhanovian thought and New Historicist methodology towards a delicate interpretation of relations between the aesthetic structure and social life. The main argument of this paper is that the sociological aesthetics of Plekhanov, enhanced with the methodological instrument of New Historicism, reveals aesthetic autonomy as not a philosophical postulate, eternal, but rather as an ideological form of historical production that is the result of specific conditions of classes and social contradictions. The doctrine of art-for-art-sake, then, is not to be understood as to a general truth about aesthetic experience, but as characteristic of a particular social condition, that of the artists themselves being in a hopeless alienation by their social milieu, lack of any social movement to which they could have clung to have any real chances of historical transformation. The consequences of this reading are not limited to the context of the literary movements, as they provide more generalized patterns of exploring the relationship between art, ideology, and social life.

Plekhanov's Sociological Aesthetics: The Core Argument

The Sociological Turn: From "What Ought to Be" to "What Actually Is"

The most significant methodological break that Plekhanov makes in *Art and Social Life* is that he attempts to make the question of art-social role not be approached with the perspective of what should

be, but what is and was. This descriptive to normative analysis gravitation is the foundation of his whole argument. Following the avoidance of prescriptive prescriptions of the role of art in the social life, Plekhanov investigates the practical social conditions that really produce diverse ideas regarding the role of art. As a result, he re-formulates the key question of the aesthetic theory sociologically. Instead of formulating the interrogative question as Should art be autonomous or socially committed? he formulates the question as: What are the most salient social conditions in which artists and individuals most deeply interested in art conceive and become absorbed in the belief in art for art sake and, as well, What are the most salient social conditions in which artists and individuals most deeply interested in art conceive and become enthralled in the so-called utilitarian view of art? (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Plekhanov admits that these questions are closely interwoven. The solution to both is based on the interaction between the artist and the social milieu, both the state of harmony and lack of harmony between the artist and the existing social forces and whether this lack of harmony, in its turn, is, in his view, hopeless or even curable.

The Central Thesis: Hopeless Disharmony and Aesthetic Autonomy

The main thesis of Plekhanov is expressed in typically straightforward way: the belief in the art in the name of the art does occur when artists and people with strong interest in art are desperately opposed to their social conditions (Plekhanov, marxists.org). This analytically feathery formulation is seemingly lightweight. Not so much is it a disharmony with the social environment, which produces the belief in aesthetic autonomy, but hopeless disharmony, disharmony which knows no prospect of being transformed, disharmony which knows no social movement with which the artist may identify him/herself, disharmony which knows no historical horizon within which the social conditions which cause the disharmony might be changed. This is a critical difference to the argument of Plekhanov. He explains it by a shocking comparison between two generations of artists who in one way or the other were out of sync with the social structure prevailing during their times. David, and the French revolutionary artists of the late eighteenth century, such as them, were passionately hostile to the old regime of aristocratic France. Their contradiction of the current social order was no less deep than that of the subsequent Romanticists, but it was not eternal, as they were able to see, the columns of the third estate in the ranks, which were going to be all soon (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Their perception of social struggle was supplemented by a perception of social possibility the possibility of real historical change. On the contrary, the Romanticists and Parnassians were in a state of a truly baseless discord. The vulgarity of bourgeois way of life repulsed them but, Plekhanov underlines, they did not mind the social relations of bourgeois (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Their aim was to change the social mores without changing the social system which lay behind them- an endeavour which, as Plekhanov simply notes, was not at all possible (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Their revolt against bourgeois vulgarity had no outward

vent, and they had to turn back inward into the closed world of art, whose realm of freedom and prominence could not be marred by the tempo of social life.

The Case of Pushkin: A Paradigm of Aesthetic Autonomy

The most thorough and informative case study that Plekhanov has made is the one about his interpretation of how Pushkin was changing into a socially minded poet and afterwards into an apostle of art in the name of art. This was a sociological revolution, not a philosophical one, it was a direct reaction to the specific historical situation in the Russia of Nicholas 1. Being a politically active poet, Pushkin lived in the era of the reign of Alexander 1, when he enjoyed celebrating the freedom and condemning tyranny. His ode, Freedom, gave the sincerity of political passion: Unhappy nation! Everywhere / Men are stung with whips and fetters, / And all wrongdoing carries the day, / and proud lords wield their authority In scornful ignorance, And gloomy bigotry (Plekhanov, marxists.org). At this stage Pushkin was by no means a supporter of aesthetic independence, but he was a poet who was drawn to the left-wing idealism of his day. The major turning point was the disaster of December 14, 1825 - the crushing of the uprising of the Decembrists, the beginning of the reign of Nicholas I. As the Decembrists had been suppressed, the most educated and progressive representatives of the then society of that period were swept out of the stage (Plekhanov, marxists.org). The social environment under which Pushkin wrote turned out to be, as Herzen put it, deadness and silence everywhere around (quoted in Plekhanov, marxists.org). In addition, the personal conditions which Pushkin was subjected to were made even more unbearable by the official humiliation to which he was subjected by both Nicholas I and the Chief of Police Benkendorf, who, according to Plekhanov, in a communication to Nicholas, expresses a desire to put his pen and his tongue in the service of official morality (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Under these circumstances, political persecution, social backwardness, and humiliation of the person, Pushkin accepted the theory of art to art's sake and created the most glorified variant of it in his poems, The Rabble and To the Poet. The renowned words, no, not worldly agitation, / Nor worldly greed, nor worldly strife, But sweet song, inspiration, / Prayer the poet comes to life, are not the eternal philosophical belief, but an answer to the certain historical conditions. So to be in such a position it was quite natural that Pushkin had turned into a believer in art as an end in itself (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

This discussion has important sociological factors to our reading of the poems by Pushkin. We find, when we read the poet in his scathing denunciation of the rabble, the contempt he feels toward it: What cares / The quiet poet thy lot? (Plekhanov, marxists.org) - we do not find in it a calm philosophical utterance but a social reaction on a certain historical situation.

French Romanticism and the Paradox of Bourgeois Revolt

The analysis of French Romanticists by Plekhanov lengthens and complicates his description of the conversion of Pushkin. Similar to Pushkin, the French Romanticists, Gautier, Baudelaire and the

Parnassians, were in deep shock with the surrounding social scene. Nevertheless, the character of their dissonance was different in a very important aspect: when Pushkin dissonance was between themselves and an autocratic and repressive state, the dissonance of the Romanticists was between them and the sordidness and mundane mediocrity of the bourgeois commercial civilization. One of the clearest passages in the book *Art and Social Life* is the account given by Plekhanov of the young Romanticists who flocked the parterre when de Vigny gave his first performance of his piece *Chatterton* in 1835: pallid, long-haired youths, who were convinced that the only respectable job was to write poems or paint pictures, and who regarded the bourgeois with a scorn almost as great as that with which the fuchs of Heidelberg and Jena look down upon the philistine (Plekhanov To these men, the bourgeois was everything that was spiritually dead, aesthetically vulgar and humanly mediocre the world of bankers, brokers, lawyers, merchants, shopkeepers, etc. in short, all that was not in the mystical cénacle, and who made their livelihood by prosaic professions (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

But the most incisive point of Plekhanov is that this uprising against the vulgarity of bourgeois was not against the bourgeois social system. Him, the Romanticists, he says, had nothing against the social relationships of the bourgeoisie, but rather against the moeurs of bourgeois life; not against the order of social classes that created the moeurs. This is the basic paradox of the Romantic standpoint, that the rebellion is aesthetic, not social, or cultural, not political, but focused upon the surfaces of bourgeois life, not upon its structural basis. The Romanticists desired to reform social moeurs without in any manner reforming the social system. This, needless to say was very impossible (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

Direct aesthetic implications were to the practical futility of the Romantic uprising, as Plekhanov believes. Their literary heroes could not earnestly relate themselves to any real social movement which would change the circumstances abhorred by the Romanticists and that was why their eras were driven to a staged and pretentious nature that culminated in the disintegration of the school (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Their social position was inauthentic, and this created an inauthenticity of the artistic product.

The Utilitarian View and Its Social Conditions

Setting the doctrine of art as art against the doctrine of the art as art its purpose, Plekhanov defines what he calls the utilitarian concept of art, the tendency to project onto artistic works the meaning of judgements about the phenomena of life (Plekhanov, marxists.org). This view, in an artistic practice by painters like Perov and Kramskoi, in critical writing by the democratic critics Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, argues that the chief role that the art plays is to duplicate life, clarify it and judge of its various manifestations.

Plekhanov takes care not to confuse two versions of the utilitarian opinion. On the one hand, the progressive utilitarian position is present; on the other hand, the conservative utilitarian rhetoric - an

ideology of those who are determined to maintain the current social order; according to which, art should only support the existing moral and political principles. Political control, as Plekhanov observes, is always in support of the utilitarian explanation of art, citing the approval given to the didactic play *Shouldering Another Troubles* by Ostrovsky by Nicholas I and his desire to turn Pushkin into a minstrel of the current order of things (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The way that Plekhanov describes the social circumstances under which the progressive utilitarian view is created is in a complementary opposition to the description he provides of the circumstances in which aesthetic autonomy is encouraged. The utilitarian perspective is the one that emerges and diffuses as long as there exists a mutual sympathy in a significant part of the society, as well as among the people who have a more or less active interest in creative art (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The Decay of Bourgeois Art

Among the most powerful and farsighted arguments in the book *Art and Social Life*, there is the one made by Plekhanov as he describes the so-called decay of bourgeois art. He refers to this process to a famous Ecclesiastes passage: oppression, make wise a man mad (Plekhanov, marxists.org). As soon as a group bases its livelihood on the exploitation of some other people and suffers some anxiety over the threat to its rule, its ideological products, such as its art, start to decline.

In his argument, Plekhanov handles the case with the detailed examination of two modern plays by Knut Hamsun *The Gate of the Kingdom* and Francois de Cures *Le repas du lion*. In both of these cases he argues that the falsity of the social concept that prevails gives rise to a falsehood in the artwork. According to Plekhanov, a lie is sure to do harm to a piece of art, as it gives a wrong turn to the psychology of the characters in it (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The result of this analysis is one of the most critical general principles of Plekhanov according to which the weightiness of the content of an artistic work determines the merit of the work in the final analysis (Plekhanov, marxists.org). This does not make form useless, explicitly Plekhanov confirms that form and substance are two things that cannot exist independently of one another (Plekhanov, marxists.org)..

New Historicism: The Circulation of Social Energy

The New Historicist paradigm which was developed by Stephen Greenblatt provides a set of analytical tools which are not only supportive but also supplementary to the sociological aesthetics developed by Plekhanov. Greenblatt in his classics, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) does not believe that literary texts passively reflect external social forces; on the contrary, they are social forces themselves (Greenblatt 5).

The expression of the New Historicist principle of the doubleness of historicity and textuality, expressed by Louis Montrose as follows, namely the historicity of texts and the textuality of history (Montrose 20), is the expression of its strength and the complexity of the approach. All texts are historically positioned

and historically conditioned; but the reverse is also true: the rewriting of history is always mediated by textual artifacts. Therefore, the social circumstances that Plekhanov refers to as a background of explanation can only be made available to us through the textual remains that they have documented in writing.

Cultural Materialism

A complementary approach is cultural materialism introduced by Raymond Williams, which is described in such works as *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), which in most ways is much closer to the Marxist point of departure made by Plekhanov. The tripartite division of dominant, residual and emergent cultural formations by Williams is especially useful in breaking down the complicated social location of the art for art sake movements.

In his writing *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Terry Eagleton expands on the discussion by Williams in a different direction that would have a direct bearing on our current discussion. Eagleton also states that aesthetic discourse cannot only be influenced by ideology; it is one of the main locations where ideology is created, debated and reproduced.

Historical Case Studies

French Romanticism and Parnassianism: The Aesthetics of Hopeless Revolt

The most sustained case study is provided in the book *Art and Social Life* by Plekhanov which analyzes French Romanticism. Even the most persistently and provocatively proponent of art for art sake in the French Romanticist, Gustave L. Gautier, says of the utilitarian conception of art, at length: No, ye idiots, no, ye gelatine-soup cretins, it is impossible to induce a book to become gelatine soup, to make a novel become a pair of seamless-boots... (Plekhanov, marxists.org). He took his doctrine to the extremist that he, in the most famous phrase, would gladly sacrifice his rights as a Frenchman and citizen in the name of seeing a true Raphael or beautiful woman in the nude (Plekhanov, marxists.org). One of the most sharp comments on this passage by Plekhanov is a part of the essay because of his social and political indifferentism: his sole interest was in form (Plekhanov, marxists.org). He shows that Gautier was wholly unjustified in his assault on the Saint-Simonists since it misinterpreted arguments on social organization in the sense that they were aiming at actually expanding the human stomach. What the Saint-Simonists meant, was betterment of the social organisation in the interest of the greatest part of the population, that is, of the working people, the producing section. To refer to this intention as stupid was to betray the very bourgeois narrow narrowmindedness that the young romanticists themselves were so constantly in the flesh in question of (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Plekhanov quotes the preface by Le Conte de Lisle to the *Poems antiques* (1852): Poetry could no longer beget the deeds of a hero or the inculcation of social virtues, since now, like at all times of literary decadence, the language of the sacred was limited to the deathless expression of small personal sensations, and could no longer teach mankind (Plekhanov, marxists.org). In an expression which Plekhanov acknowledges to be the proverbial words that help reveal the entire psychological enigma of the faith in art in the name of art-as-such, Le Conte de Lisle states that it is the work of poetry to make ideal life to those who live without any at all (Plekhanov, marxists.org)

The Decay of Late Bourgeois Art: Hamsun, de Curel, and Decadence

It is illustrated by a play of Knut Hamsun, entitled *The Gate of the Kingdom*. The main character of the play, Ivar Kareno, poses as a free-thinking liberal who is above good and evil. However, as the analysis of Plekhanov shows, an ideological content is concealed: the so-called free thoughts of Karen 0 are only the propaganda of the proletariat resistance and hate towards them. A proponent of resistance to the proletariat is, Plekhanov says, the most unquestionable bourgeois ideologist (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The artistic implications of this ideological lie are at once manifested in the inability of the play to stand as an artistic work: In what corner of the world in what utopia is there a bourgeoisie which wreaks such implacable vengeance on the proletariat on the pretext of resistance? Such a bourgeoisie never exists, and never will exist (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The same disastrous criticism is delivered on De Curel, in his *Le repas du lion*. Plekhanov cites the major speech by the play, one that likens the association between capitalist and the employees to that of a lion and jackals: A lion is good, only so far, only as a fierce beast, hungry and willing to kill and spill blood. This is what the jackals lick their chops in anticipation when such a lion roars (Plekhanov, marxists.org). The denial by Plekhanov is clear: the jackals do nothing at all to insure the lion his food, which they partially feed their own mouths with. However, who will dare to say that the laborers working in any particular factory, do not play any role in the production of their commodity? (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

Victorian Aestheticism: Wilde and the New Historicist Perspective

The most fined articulation of English aestheticism in philosophical terms was the work of Walter Pater in his book *The Renaissance* (1873), which he wrote by saying that it was success in life to burn constantly with this hard, gem-like flame, to sustain this ecstasy (Pater 152). The well-known preface to the book of Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which states the following: There is no moral/immoral book. It is either books are well written or badly written. That is all it is all (Wilde 3) - is the English version of the criticism of utilitarian art presented by Gautier. In another essay, *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde states that Life imitates Art much more than Art imitates Life (Wilde 307); thus, reversing the Plekhanovian hierarchy with a typically witty twist.

New Historicist reading, based on the analysis of Regine Gagnier in her book, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (1986) brings out the social undertones of Wildean aestheticism which is apparently out of this world. Gagnier shows that the aesthetic self-presentation that Wilde had was a kind of commodity production. Another dimension is added by Jonathan Dollimore, in *Sexual Dissidence* (1991): Wilde was aesthetically dissident and his claim of the autonomy of art was, among other things, a claim of the autonomy of sexual identity in the face of Victorian moral orthodoxy.

Modernism and the Institutionalization of Aesthetic Autonomy

The epitome of institutionalization of the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy is the article by T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) which appeared at the very beginning of the field of scholarly literature criticism. Such an expression of poetic impersonality, the demand on the part of poet Eliot that the poet make himself continually sacrifice himself, continually extinct himself (Eliot 40) looks, naturally, like an aesthetical position; but once the work is read in the frame of Plekhanov sociology, one can see the ideological base underlying it.

This is validated by Michael North in his article, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound* (1991) where he demonstrates that Eliot aesthetic conservatism could not be divorced of political conservatism. Those who institutionalized Eliot aesthetics in the American academy, the New Critics, had, according to John Guillory in his book, *Cultural Capital* (1993) particular social functions, reproducing the cultural capital of the educated middle class and naturalizing the hierarchies of taste and distinction which that reproduction entailed.

Committed Literature: Brecht, Achebe, and the Progressive Aesthetic

The *Verfremdungseffekt* was not a technique in Brecht, but an intervention in the society. Brecht did not merely change the subject matter of a theatre but the whole mechanism of production, which, according to Walter Benjamin, was the greatest role of the author as producer in the 1934 article, *The Author as Producer*. There is a post-colonial analogy in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe. In the book *The Novelist as Teacher*, (1965), Achebe confirms that the African writer has a duty to make his society believe in itself again and forget the complexes of the years of degradation and self-depreciation (Achebe 45). This is a literal expression of the progressive utilitarianism by Plekhanov. As the analysis of Plekhanov would lead to expect, the life-affirming social commitment and the aesthetics excellence of *Things Fall Apart* testify to the fact that the two are not opposing but complementary.

The Dialectical Relationship Between Autonomy and Commitment

Plekhanov himself gestures toward this complexity when he insists that “there is no such thing as Even Plekhanov admits this complication as he insists that there is not a single piece of art that is entirely devoid of ideas and that form and substance are two different entities that cannot exist separately (Plekhanov, *marxists.org*). He understands that the interaction between social content and aesthetic form is not an easy way of reflection or expression but a mediation. This has been best elaborated by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) which holds that even a claim to independence in the artwork is a type of social critique. This Adornian intuition is the one which is predicted by Plekhanov when he notes that the rebellion of the French Romanticists against the bourgeois vulgarity was, however, a product more favourable to artistic production as it enabled the artists to transcend their surrounding (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

Plekhanov's Limitations and Their Implications

The belief that the value of an artistic work is, in the last analysis, the weightiness of its content (Plekhanov, marxists.org) by Plekhanov merely tends to subjugate the aesthetic judgment to an ideological scale, to which even his most subtle analyses do not wholly prove to be an adequate vindication. The problem is admitted even by Plekhanov himself as he insists that the artist is obliged to bring out emancipatory ideas in an exact way as an artist (Plekhanov, marxists.org). The structure of feeling concept by Raymond Williams is a partial solution to this dilemma. Another resource is the concept of the political unconscious provided by Fredric Jameson. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson believes that films (literary works) have underlying, repressed content of a social nature, thus showing the widespread political unconscious in aesthetics.

New Historicism's Confirmation and Extension of Plekhanov

The greatest contribution of New Historicism to this discussion is its strict demonstration, based on historical particularity, that every claim to aesthetic transcendence, then, is always placed in an ideological context. Plekhanov provides the larger structural apparatus the analysis of class position and social condition, as in a context of which the more narrow textual studies of Greenblatt can be more properly placed.

The Decadence of Bourgeois Art and Contemporary Relevance

The argument of Plekhanov, however, is extended in many ways in Jameson describing postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism in his book, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). His description of the postmodern culture can be compared to the description of the proclivities and mystical inclinations of naturalism which on landing in the hopeless predicament consumed the French naturalism (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

The prescription given by Plekhanov is clear-cut: all more or less talented artists will add to their strength significantly should they inhibit the great emancipatory ideas of our times. These were the only ideas that should enter his flesh and blood, and he should bring them out exactly like an artist does (Plekhanov, marxists.org).

Conclusion

Based on the sociological aesthetics of Plekhanov and supplemented with New Historicist approach, this paper has attempted to substantiate the claim that the doctrine of art for art sake is not an eternal aesthetic ideal but a historically contingent ideological construct that is the product of the dismal social disharmony. Plekhanov was right in his central thesis, that the belief in art as an end in itself comes about when artists and those who care most passionately about art are despairingly discordant with their social world, as discussed in the context of the French Romanticism and Parnassianism, Victorian aestheticism, Modernist impersonality, and the counter-tradition of politically committed writing

between Brecht and Achebe. A dialectical conception of the association exists between aesthetic autonomy and social commitment that has been proposed in the paper. This dialectical aesthetic is what Plekhanov in effect meant when he wrote that there exists no work of art, which is entirely devoid of ideas and that the artist is obliged to express these ideas, as an artist (Plekhanov, marxists.org). Social and aesthetic are not antithetical to one another; in the deepest art they cannot be separated. A hundred and thirteen years after it was first published, *Art and Social Life* remain a text essential to every person interested in the relationship between art and society. Plekhanov ends the work with a call to artists to assimilate the great emancipatory concepts of his time - not as a prescription of what they should produce, but as a definition of the circumstances in which art of any importance would be possible.

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