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THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND SPATIAL-TEMPORAL UNDERPINNING OF CULTURAL CONFLICT IN JOHN BERGER'S INTO THEIR LABOURS

Keywords: *Cultural Conflict, Peasantry, Rural Literature, Modernisation, Progress, Survival, Temporality, Future, Risk*
Abstract: *Keeping in mind the European context of the final two decades of the twentieth century, this paper addresses the social, cultural and artistic relevance of the British writer and intellectual, John Berger (b. London, 1926). I intend to analyse the socio-political and artistic approaches adopted by Berger in the trilogy* Pig Earth *(1979),* Once in Europa *(1983) and* Lilac and Flag *(1990), published in a single volume in 1992 under the title Into Their Labours. The author presents in this trilogy the coexistence in time of two cultures: on the one hand, a 'culture of survival', the peasant one, which he considers to be a traditional, exploited minority culture in decline. On the other hand, Berger refers to a capitalist 'culture of progress,' generated by modernisation, technological advances and the processes of globalisation, which threaten to make the former culture disappear.*

We will have the opportunity to explain how the peasant culture of survival conceives the future as a series of repetitive acts, in contrast with the cultures of progress that see the future as the possibility of expansion. As I attempt to demonstrate in this paper, both cultures can be identified and analysed in two distinct, though contemporary, spatial-temporal contexts; two forms of culture, and their different and singular relationships with time:

For almost two decades the British writer, John Berger, has been living in a small country village in the French Alps in order to become better acquainted with the social group which he aims to make us aware of through his trilogy: the peasantry. The first volume of the trilogy is *Pig Earth* (hereby referred to as *PE*). By way of a series of short stories, poems and essays, Berger shows the durability of the traditional way of life in a rural mountain village in which a group of peasants who are dedicated to their labours are ignorant of history, isolated from the outside world, and fearful of an ever more uncertain future that is based on progress. The second volume, *Once in Europa* (*OIE*), delves a little deeper into the modernisation of this rural world. A series of stories, in which love and indifference make up an essential part of the lives of the characters, demonstrates how this peasant world described in the first volume has to gradually take on a process of development and modernisation which constantly gives rise to injustice. This second volume points out the danger of transience that menaces peasantry. The third volume, *Lilac and Flag* (*LF*), shows these and many other characters in a very different environment, the metropolis. Here, these exiled peasants find themselves lost in an environment whose customs are alien to them. Due to this they feel miserable in a world tainted by crime and the meanness of their masters, and they constantly yearn for the rural life that they left behind.

Berger uncovers the peasant world through the peasant class itself, from their own everyday experiences in the heart of the rural society; he speaks to us about the present-day peasant class from his own experience as a peasant, from a practical and humanised point of view. The perspective adopted by the author is a long way from that adopted by the traditional author who, when dealing with peasant

society, does so from a distance which does not enable him to grasp it in all its depth. The distance or lack of closeness in which the traditional writer finds himself must be translated here as the result of not having lived amongst the peasants.

With that aim in mind, Berger proceeds from a set of circumstances to which he does not remain indifferent. Beneath an apparently simple reflection, he tries to denounce the progressive destruction and disappearance of a social group, the peasantry, which appears as the direct victim of a web of injustices and oppressions that are intensifying and becoming more acute as we approach the future, the latter being considered as the referential frame. Within this frame, Berger seems to propose the creation of a quite different political context within which peasants might have a vision of themselves like any other class, with enough power to enable them to develop as a social force, that is, as a relevant and decisive class within the social and cultural apparatus of each country.

Thematically speaking, he aims to trace the way of life of a certain community – the peasantry – and to provide us with a sense of discovery and contact with a reality – the rural world – that is not only different but also interesting: "A certain sense of discovery of a community and how that community works, lives, makes sense of its life, makes sense of death" (Berger in Gray 70).

However, from a political perspective, he attempts to highlight a series of truths inherent in that peasant community to which those who have power have remained passive and static, blinded by their own prejudiced sense of truth:

> What interests me politically, as a person and as a writer, are those truths possessed by those without power, to those with power are more or less blind. That's to say, those who possess power are more or less blind to certain ongoing truths. Those without power know very well certain truths, and are blind to others (Gray 72).

On the group level, within the framework of the society of progress, we have referred to the peasantry as a social group of agriculturalists who, living in small communities, rely upon themselves in great measure, maintain relationships with a far wider social market, and accept an external political authority (Mair 20). As a community, with the advent of progress, of machines and technology, the future seems to predict the near disappearance of the peasant society.

From a social point of view, the peasant observes that, increasingly, there are more members of the community that feel obliged to abandon their land to take on the difficult adventure of emigration. From the labour point of view, the peasant is witness to how his agrarian techniques are substituted by new modes of production. His work tools, increasingly more obsolete, are replaced by new machinery that, on one hand, facilitates his tasks but, on the other, makes his presence ever more expendable. From a third perspective, the psychological, the peasant warns that what has been called 'progress' constitutes a positive term which, nevertheless, expresses and implies a more than probable process of extinction from his world, the countryside. His identity can no longer be recognised neither in the fields nor amidst the isolation and loneliness the metropolis generates. Thus, in one way or another, the future has stopped representing a preoccupation about the subsistence of a peasant family, to become a threat for the community as a whole.

In the story entitled "The Wind Howls Too," we see how Pepe wishes to transform himself into a crow to thus be able to observe, from the heights, each one of the errors that progress has brought with it: "All the mistakes which had to be made! And step by step, slowly, the progress!" (*PE* 56). The peasants are conscious of what the future brings to them as a community. Pepe, when subsequently speaking with one of the young peasants attending the celebratory dinner of the pig butchering, comments on his desire to enter into the future: "And then I would like to go several thousand years into the future" (*PE* 56). This

comment leads to the affirmation that in the future there will be no more peasants: "There'll be no more peasants" (*PE* 56).

The peasant is a being who develops his life around his daily chores. As we can see in the "Historical Epilogue" of *Pig Earth*, Berger argues that the man of the country, given his cyclical notion of time, attempts to encounter in the present the keys of the past and of the future. From the comprehension of the injustices that oppress them, the peasants show themselves to be capable of elaborating an entire philosophy of their own existence.

Amidst the injustices they suffer, the peasants believe in the existence of a remote past characterised by a life without injustices, in which the country man is not obliged to produce a surplus before assuring his own sustenance or that of his family: "Such an injustice, the peasant reasons, cannot always have existed, so he assumes a just world at the beginning" (*PE* 201).

The belief in this original past is precisely what, according to Berger, has served as a motor to each one of the peasant uprisings: "All spontaneous peasant revolts have had the aim of resurrecting a just and egalitarian peasant society" (*PE* 201). The peasant does not conceive of a world of abundance in which natural resources would be inexhaustible, as occurs in the bourgeois ideal of radical capitalism, but rather a world of scarcity and of the fight for fraternity and equality:

> The peasant ideal of equality recognizes a world of scarcity, and its promise is for mutual fraternal aid in struggling against this scarcity and a just sharing of what the work produces (*PE* 202).

They project their ideal peasant communities in the same terms of opening and progress that modern societies promote. To understand the differences between the peasant community and modern society, it is imperative to explore the notions of risk that both manage. Risk, as Anthony Giddens recognises, is a notion that is necessary and inevitably related to the future; but Giddens explains that the "businesses of modernity" imply new types of risks, quite difficult to calculate, given their highly experimental character (Giddens 78).

In modern societies, risk is understood in a positive sense as a necessary element for any process of future expansion. Within the peasantry's culture of survival, the future is conceived, according to Berger, as a sequence of repetitive acts of survival, in which the risks, as we will see, are more or less foreseeable (*PE* 204). John Berger represents these ideas graphically by way of two images based on variable exponentials and different final objectives (*PE* 205).

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that the peasant associates the notion of future with the notion of risk. The narrator sees it as such in "The Accordion Player" when he signals the constant need for the peasant to adventure and risk himself (*OIE* 26-29).

Just as presented by the different narrators in the stories of the trilogy, the reader distinguishes two types of risks that the peasant confronts: one of them of a more or less foreseeable dimension, and the other, of a highly unforeseeable character. At the moment of acquiring an animal, for example, the peasant knows that there exists the possibility that it could be affected by an illness or suffer an accident, as happens to Rousa, the stupendous cow of the Abondance race of Mrs Martine, in "Addressed to Survivors" (*PE* 60), which after going mad and getting into an accident, must be sacrificed in the slaughterhouse, with the loss this entails. Also in *Once in Europa*, the adverse meteorological conditions and the storms and the lightning bring chaos many times to the life of the peasants: "holes in the earth, burned grass, smoking trees, dead cattle" (*OIE* 58). In this same story, "Boris is Buying Horses," the protagonist loses, in just one night, a lot of money on account of a storm (*OIE* 58).

This type of risk that the future entails is also present in the peasant world when he or she decides to cultivate a vegetable patch or a field, conscious, similarly, that the possibility exists that the product of cultivation will suffer adverse meteorological inclemencies that will result in damage to the crops:

> Water furtively
> unbolts the slopes
> the prisoner grass is freed
> pallid harrowed
> too weak to make a sign (*PE* 29).

We see the same thing in "The Accordion Player." In this story, Felix predicts that there will be a bad time: "Next year there's going to be no hay, no cows, no milk, no bonus for cream, no penalty for dirt… We're all going to be in the mole-skin business! That's what we are going to be doing…" (*OIE* 15).

But this type of foreseeable risk is not the most uncomfortable to the peasant, because it deals with a risk that he speaks of already, one that forms a part of his daily existence.

The peasant fears more the unforeseeable risk, that of being unable to supply for the future; a risk that can affect his community and his manner of working the land. He fears admitting the fact that his work can be substituted by that of a machine. Again, we find here an idea of progress carrying with it the risk of the disappearance of the peasantry.

The distrust that the peasant demonstrates towards progress and towards the incorporation of machines is left patently clear throughout *Into Their Labours*. In "The Value of Money," John Berger recreates the attitudes counterpoised before progress – that the machines represent – of a father, Marcel, a traditional peasant, reticent about new technologies, and his son, Edouard, distanced from work in the fields and an enthusiastic defender of the tractor as a symbol of the renovation that machines symbolise.

The conflict emerging from two opposing positions, that of tradition and that of progress, is evident even from the point of view of the materiality of the text itself. Thus, we can find a traditional portrait by a narrator in the third person, mixed with the vivacity of dialogue in different passages, and more explicit elements, typical of a clearly experimental narrative, such as the inclusion of recordings and pamphlets of propagandistic character, or the images that appear in the text of a tractor and its parts and components.

As for the characters, Marcel has many doubts about his son Edouard, when he makes his entry in his house with a tractor. This occurrence provokes Marcel's subsequent commentary to his wife, in which, while referring to machines, he affirms: "There's one job they all do. [...] Their job is to wipe us out" (*PE* 78). Further along, Marcel, after proving in his own body the difficulty of the work that he does in the fields –"[...] his spine pained him, [...], two bars of ache twisted inwards at the bottom of his stomach making his balls hurt" (*PE* 79)) – returns to relate machines to impoverishment, submission, and the progressive disappearance of the peasantry:

> On the flat plains the poor have no choice but to work for the rich. By themselves the poor, working only for money, would have neither the energy nor the heart to produce enough to create wealth. This is where the machines came in, long ago. Machines make money-work productive, and the wealth they create goes to those who own the machines. On the plains I would not have this hernia of an ache because a machine would be lifting dung onto another machine which would transport it and scatter it (*PE* 79).

We observe, definitively, that John Berger recognises in *Into Their Labours* the process of elimination of the peasantry that other economic moments and institutions have foreseen. Berger,

moreover, explains to us that this process is the result of progress, and that it has been interpreted in a distinct form in the two different ways of seeing life and two opposite forms of culture that the writer develops throughout his trilogy, and which refer respectively to the "culture of survival" – that of the peasantry, for whom progress represents the decline and the extinction; and the "culture of progress" – that of the so-called "European prosperity" – for whom the future supposes an unquestionable world of progress and development.

Given the circumstances presented and the unstoppable advance and domination of the culture of progress, we are left to ask ourselves if, according to Berger, there is any future for the peasant community. In the first instance, the writer leaves an open ending to the problem and in the development of the stories he does not explicitly state possible solutions to stopping the imminent disappearance of the peasantry.

If, on the one hand, the disappearance of the peasantry in the trilogy is assumed, as we have seen, on the other hand, a possible return of the peasant community to the world of the country and the village only seems to be possible in the world of dreams. Indeed, only in an oniric dimension do peasants, emigrants and the less-favoured sectors in general find consolation from progress. In *Lilac and Flag*, Sucus comments that his father Clement and his friend Murat are two dreamers: "My father dreamt of the village he left, and you, you dream of the future" (*LF* 72). Also the mendicant who lives in an abandoned Cadillac considers his own act of sleeping as his only moment of peace in a world of scarcity:

> In dreams money's abolished. Everywhere. Maybe you dream of money. But you never dream of paying! Nobody in the world dreams of paying. This is what makes waking up so terrible. This is what makes waking up worse than hunger. Drink your beer and get some sleep (*LF* 179).

For the peasants and their descendants, the ideal world of justice, brotherhood and love of the land are limited to the oniric dimension. This idea has already appeared in "The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol" (*PE*) where Jean, through dreams, contemplated Cocadrille in her third life in which, after her death, they all find happiness.

As the narrator of *Lilac and Flag* has signalled to us, when the state of necessity and the vital problems are greatest, the onirical illusions are more optimistic: "In villages, men, women, and children dream of palaces. The poorer the home, the more perfect the palace" (*LF* 196). Besides, in *Lilac and Flag*, the white imaginary boat that the narrator spoke of, where some of the characters reunite after their death, constitutes the beginning of this other unreal world and dreamed ideal in which the desires are satisfied: "The white ship is a floating palace. […] Voyagers who were homeless or exiled, passengers who lived all their lives in institutions are given, on my ship, the room of their dreams" (*LF* 196). In this boat there are no problems nor injustices, – "Everyone on this ship is happy. So many passengers and not a single tragedy, no grief!" (*LF* 198) – "time does not tell, and forgiveness and tenderness live like brothers" (*LF* 198-202).

The German researcher Werner Rosener, who specialised in the social history of peasant movements, has tried to answer the question of whether peasant agriculture has a future. Rosener affirmed that even though in the past decades the peasants had to abandon their work, reducing their presence drastically in the rural world, we could still speak of agriculture in Western Europe with a traditional character. The German researcher insisted that it is from the end of the seventies, precisely the moment in which Berger began to write the trilogy *Into Their Labours*, when the negative effects of business and regional concentration took place, with the growing destruction of the landscape, the annihilation of many valuable biotopes, the receding of the diversity of species and greater environmental contamination with poisonous and noxious materials, like the appearance of dangerous residues in vegetable produce and agricultural products that had been altered and became more evident. It is necessary to add to all of this

the excess of work, the renunciation of consumption by peasant families, the psychosocial illnesses resulting from the insecurity of the situation, the reduction of agricultural prices, the worsening of the financial situation of many businesses, and the drastic reduction of bank deposits amidst peasant families (Rosener 248-49).

Faced with this, Rosener vindicates a reconciliation of contemporary society with the peasant world based on an agriculture in harmony with the environment, linked to the land, that cares for the diversity of the landscape, that guarantees the stable supply of products, etc.; in other words, an agriculture in which "the people who work in it can obtain the benefits that correspond to what they put in" (Rosener 250).

Nevertheless, and in spite of the possibility of rescuing the model of subsistence and self-sufficiency of the peasant world and its culture, its survival remains remote, and their existence as a community continues to be threatened. Yet, Rosener opts to conclude his study optimistic about a future, basing his utopia on the twelve centuries of existence and, above all, of resistance, and of survival, of the peasantry in Europe:

> The peasants experienced profound transformations in the course of their history and they had to adapt to diverse new developments; among them the appearance of the lordships, the instruction of obligated crops, the insertion of a free market economy, the mechanisation of agriculture and many others. The form of peasant existence was able to subsist always in spite of all these exigencies: perhaps in this fact there is some hope for the future (Rosener 250).

Of course, Berger is not so optimistic in his trilogy. This, however, is not its function. The author provides us with an explicit declaration regarding the existing conveniences and the possibilities of the peasantry as a permanent social group. Berger is more interested in presenting to the reader the story of the experience of the peasant community. Furthermore, it is here where the value and the function of the trilogy are rooted. There exists, as Kaye affirms, a validity of historical character in the peasant culture, just as Berger has presented, and it is necessary to keep in mind: "a special historical validity which should not be dismissed" (Kaye 53).

The constant struggle of the peasant to challenge an uncertain future turns into an effort of resistance, of durability, by victims faced with their victimisation, that is, with the menace of transience. In *Art and Revolution*, Berger understands and praises the peasant's courage, "not proved by their risking their entire existence: on the contrary, it is proved by their endurance and their determination to survive" (131). By means of their determination and their resistance, as much as by their sceptical attitude in the face of progress, the story of the peasants and their culture provides us with another viewpoint, another vision of the discourse of progress that is distinct from that of a globalised postmodern society.

Anthony Giddens, in referring to the "detraditionalisation" of modern societies, has mentioned that even in the most modern of contemporary societies there can be a case for the traditions that have not completely disappeared. For Giddens, the traditions can be "articulated and defended" in a dialogic context, in such a way that their principal role would be to enter a dialogue in a "universe of plural competitive values" (128). In this way, tradition has incorporated once again the new social context of society (133).

Berger vindicates the historic durability and validity implicit in the culture and in the tradition of the peasant community, stating that it should be analysed in a constant dialogue with contemporary society. For him, it is the role of the writer to make the "discursive justification" that, according to Giddens, is indispensable for a tradition to enter into dialogue with other traditions and with different cultural modes and alternative social contexts (134).

To evoke the history, culture and tradition of the peasantry and, above all, the way the future, modernity and progress have affected them, Berger exposes the patently clear contradictions of the characteristically global discourse which has tried to justify itself adducing ideals of productivity, globalisation, inevitable transience and quality of life, but has implicitly brought numerous negative social, economic and environmental aspects:

> The forces which in most parts of the world are today eliminating or destroying the peasantry represent the *contradiction of most of the hopes once contained in the principle of historical progress*. Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading unequivocally to greater democracy. The advent of leisure – in the industrialized societies – has not brought personal fulfilment but greater mass manipulation. The economic and military unification of the world has not brought peace but genocide ("Historical Afterword", *PE* 212, *emphasis mine*).

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