French academic slanders surrealism

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4 December 2001

In a special supplement appearing November 21, the French daily *Le Monde* published the views of various intellectuals on the war in Afghanistan. The supplement, *Clear War, Persisting Doubt*, featured a wide range of opinion, not all from French writers. Perhaps the strangest article was a piece entitled *Surrealism and the Demoralisation of the West* by the historian and art critic Jean Clair.

Clair begins by noting the publication in 1929 of a surrealist map of the world. It is not, as he notes, a map that corresponds to geographical reality. It is, rather, a map both of the imagination and of the significance of certain cultural ideals. Only two cities are shown, Paris and Constantinople, although without France and Turkey being outlined. Europe is divided between the tiny Germany and Austro-Hungary and the massive Russia. The British mainland dwindles to nothing compared with the outsized Ireland. Easter Island is larger than Australia and Tierra del Fuego put together. New Guinea is the size of Peru.

Two elements on this map concern Clair. One is that North America is divided between Alaska, Labrador and Mexico (although he erroneously identifies the two distinct former areas as being united into one, Canada). The United States is completely absent. The other is that beside the enormous Russia and China lie only two countries. One, greatly diminished, is India. The other, greatly enlarged, is Afghanistan.

Clair argues that this is no coincidence. “Surrealist ideology never ceased wishing for the death of an America, in its eyes materialist and sterile, and for the triumph of an East, which was the repository of values of the spirit ... the French intelligentsia had thus gone a long way very early to prefiguring what happened on September 11.” He justifies this claim with quotes from Louis Aragon, writing in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1925: “We will ruin this civilisation you hold so dear ... Western world, you are condemned to death. We are the defeatists of Europe ... See how dry this earth is, and how good for fires.” Aragon’s dream, says Clair, has been realised. The surrealists wanted September 11.

The surrealists, particularly in their early anarchist-nihilist phase, said many foolish things. By the late 1920s the best of them turned toward Marxism and eventually, the most advanced of that group, toward Trotsky and the Fourth International.

But no surrealist, in whichever phase, is responsible for the poverty, oppression and violence imposed on the people of Afghanistan and the region by imperialism and its agencies, which is, in the final analysis, the source of support for terrorism. Clair is seeking to witch-hunt imaginary culprits, when the real ones are right there before his self-satisfied face, in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere.

Clair seeks to make the surrealists ideologically responsible for the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. But what did surrealism, at its best, actually want? There is no doubt that a thread of orientialism and glorification of the primitive ran through the writings of the surrealists, and that this is visible in the map. But even in the surrealist movement’s early days, it addressed itself to something quite specific, the need to put an end to the *imperialist* world.

This is from the declaration of the Surrealists in 1925 in reaction to an imperialist incursion by France into Morocco:

“Even more than patriotism—which is a quite commonplace sort of hysteria, though emptier and shorter-lived than most—we are disgusted by the idea of belonging to a country at all, which is the most bestial and least philosophic of the concepts to which we are subjected.... Wherever Western civilization is dominant, all human contact has disappeared, except contact from which money can be made—payment in hard cash.”

The surrealists sought a way out of the dead end that had been reached with Dada. Emerging straight out of the First World War, Dada’s initial energies had been devoted to opposing the sterile nationalism that was being promoted by the literary establishment in France. This was one reason why Paris became such a magnet for disaffected figures from the German avant-garde, and it also hints at one reason for the relative size of Germany on the map. (It is clear from the map that some countries—like Afghanistan—feature because of their place in imperialist history).

However, it rapidly became clear that simply opposing nationalism and the idiocies of capitalism was not sufficient. It was necessary to support something, to fight for something that could overthrow and replace the existing order. Thus many of the leading surrealists gravitated around the French Communist Party (PCF). And so Russia, home of the world’s first socialist revolution, came to occupy such a central place in their map of the imagination. (Clair, pontificating against surrealism’s supposed support for terrorism, fails to mention this).

There is no denying the fact that surrealism had adopted Dada's love of the shocking statement, to shake the complacent attitudes propagated by the ruling class; this sometimes led them to unsustainable political positions. However, at its strongest, surrealism sought to use shock to break the stranglehold the ruling class has over the minds of its subjects. Clair is not wrong when he says, "What they wanted was the radical destruction of everything which gave the West its supremacy."

Clair equates all attempts at the political overthrow of capitalism with terrorism. (Such a conflation highlights why terrorism can only confuse and disorient the broad mass of working people). After all, he goes on, "such appeals to murder [sic] were the commonplaces of all the avant-gardes."

It is at this point that he commits his most disgraceful distortions. To support his argument, he cites the example of the Italian futurists and their support for Mussolini. The authority he seeks to use is no less than Leon Trotsky, a "fine expert ... [who] was the first to recognise that ... futurism had opened the way to fascism." Just in case there were any doubts about the weight of his arguments, Clair throws in Osip Brik and the Russian futurist-communists and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky who "had also prepared spirits for the mass slaughters committed by the [secret police] Cheka and the GPU."

Really, this is too much. Clair is conveniently merging the role of the Italian futurists, many of whom became Mussolini supporters, and the Soviet futurists, who moved to the left. Futurism was a vague term and its "adherents" interpreted in diverse ways. The Soviet futurists broke from the Italian fascist supporters and condemned them.

Trotsky criticized the futurist group in the USSR for its "leftist" excesses, but he also paid tribute to its "achievements in art, especially in poetry" (*Literature and Revolution*). The argument that the Soviet avant-garde, by its revolutionary zeal, opened the door to Stalinism is a calumny advanced by an entire school of reactionary Russian anticommunist art critics and historians. To them, any artist who supported Bolshevism and the cause of world socialism was a traitor and not to be forgiven. They choose to ignore the difference between the language and substance of art in the early days of the regime established by the October Revolution—when the latter had "a seething mass-basis and a prospect for world revolution" and "it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of [artistic] schools" (Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*)—and the period in which the Stalinist bureaucracy was ascendant and eventually triumphant. The left-wing artists were silenced, murdered or driven to suicide by Stalinism.

(For an account of Trotskyist activity in the artistic field, see Aleksandr Voronsky's Art as the Cognition of Life).

Of all this, Clair says nothing. He conflates socialism with fascism, and equates communism with Stalinism, which had as its precondition the suppression and murder of genuine communists. For him, communism equals terrorism: "Words count.... The avant-gardes' words of hate prepared the deaths of individuals."

"The deal struck by the surrealists with communism was longer lasting than that of right-wing intellectuals with fascism.... It was to be the end of 1935 before [André] Breton broke from Stalinism. And what is there to say then about [Paul] Eluard and Aragon?" The fact Clair conveniently ignores is that Breton broke from Stalinism in order to remain associated with the revolutionary communism of Trotsky. Eluard and Aragon accepted Moscow's line on socialist realism—breaking from surrealism to become Stalinist functionaries in the PCF.

Clair denounces surrealism for not embracing the "modern," unlike the Italian futurists, whom he has just pointed out were supporting Mussolini and whose work is filled with skyscrapers and aeroplanes. It is only in the surrealist imagination, according to Clair's incredible reasoning, that the skyscraper and the airplane are first pitted against each other, "prefiguring what the terrorists will accomplish"! Where the surrealists went wrong, he writes, was in praising Freud instead of Heidegger.

Such reactionary and ignorant rantings are perhaps not overly worthy of comment. Clair is not the only art critic bitterly hostile to communism. In appealing to the fascist apologist Heidegger as a force against Marxism, he is not breaking any new ground. But it is his falsification of the possibilities inherent within surrealism that calls for a response to his article.

Jean Clair is no naïf on this subject. He is a director of the Picasso Museum. This is his living, and it requires him to have an extensive knowledge both of surrealism and of the politics of the period. (Picasso, after all, eventually joined the PCF, being recruited by Eluard into one of the most avowedly Stalinist communist parties in Western Europe).

More than anyone, Clair is acutely conscious of the dangers posed to the ruling class by a serious study of a revolutionary art. His cheap and despicable attack comes, as he himself points out, in the context of a current major exhibition of surrealist artworks in London, and a forthcoming one in Paris, which offers a chance for artists to study this movement and draw vital lessons. It is at such a point, when a revolutionary art is needed more than ever, that figures like Clair emerge from their studies to distort the history of artistic movements and try to prevent such a clarification.

The original article in French can be viewed at: Le surréalisme et la démoralisation de l'Occident