John Berger, radical art critic, 1926-2017

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John Berger, one of the most prominent left-wing figures in the field of English-language art criticism for over 60 years, died January 2 at the age of 90.

Berger authored dozens of books of art criticism and commentary, including, notably, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), *Art and Revolution* (1969), *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which was based on a four-part BBC documentary that brought him to the attention of a broad public, *About Looking* (1980) and *The Shape of a Pocket* (2001). He also devoted works to Albrecht Dürer, Titian, Honoré Daumier and portraiture, among other subjects. In essays, Berger discussed scores of artists and artistic problems. His final collection of pieces, *Landscapes*, was published in 2016. His criticism was among the most influential of his generation and that influence extended beyond the immediate field to the wider art-appreciating public.

Berger was also a social essayist, novelist and screenwriter, publishing, among other works of poetry and fiction, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), *G.* (1972), which won the Man Booker Prize (he contributed half the prize money to the Black Panther Party), and the *Into Their Labours* trilogy (1979-1990). He wrote several screenplays with and for Swiss director Alain Tanner, including *Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Y ear 2000* (1976).

Berger was an engaging and often intriguing writer and commentator. He was unquestionably gifted with considerable powers of observation and developed, through social and intellectual experience, the ability to look beneath the surface of things. He was frequently a debunker of conventional wisdom and, what's more, a genuine opponent of conformism. An encounter with Berger's more pointed and focused pieces is a rewarding and pleasurable experience.

He can write persuasively and elegantly about painters and painting. In "Hals and Bankruptcy" (1966), for example, Berger writes movingly about Frans Hals, the great 17th century Dutch painter, who experienced financial hardship in his later years:

"The turning point occurred in 1645. For several years before that, Hals had received fewer and fewer commissions. The spontaneity of his portraits which had so pleased his contemporaries became unfashionable with the next generation, who already wanted portraits which were more morally reassuring—who demanded in fact the prototypes of that official bourgeois hypocritical portraiture which has gone on ever since.

"In 1645 Hals painted a portrait of a man in black looking over the back of a chair. Probably the sitter was a friend. His expression is another one that Hals was the first to record. It is the look of a man who does not believe in the life he witnesses, yet can see no alternative. He has considered, quite impersonally, the possibility that life may be absurd. He is by no means desperate. He is interested. But his intelligence isolates him from the current purpose of men and the supposed purpose of God. A few years later Hals painted a self-portrait displaying a different character but the same expression."

In a 1978 essay on the French painter Gustave Courbet, Berger theorizes about the function of "darkness" in Courbet's canvases: "The insistence with which he painted—in the *Burial* [*at Ornans*], in *The stonebreakers*, in *The peasants of Flagey* —whatever emerged into the light, insisting on every apparent part as equally valuable, leads me to think that the ground of darkness signified entrenched ignorance. When he said that art 'is the most *complete* expression of an existing thing', he was opposing art to any hierarchical system or to any culture whose function is to diminish or deny the expression of a large part of what exists. He was the only great painter to challenge the chosen ignorance of the cultured."

One has confidence in these and many other similar observations.

Since Berger's death a month ago, numerous "left" media obituaries have recounted the events of his life, explained that he was a political radical and egalitarian in his views, noted both his influences and those he influenced, and pointed out how humane and informed his views were. He was a "non-party" or "contradictory" socialist, an iconoclast, who eschewed fame and fortune, choosing to live for decades in a remote rural part of France. These facts are accurate enough, as far as they go, but the obituaries generally avoid the more complex questions, especially in regard to someone habitually, if mistakenly, referred to as a "Marxist" critic.

Berger was born in London 1926, the son of Miriam and Stanley Berger. His father, a Hungarian émigré, had served as an officer in the First World War, an experience that greatly affected him, and later worked as a public official. His father was eventually awarded the Order of the British Empire for his work on management theory.

Berger was apparently attracted to left-wing politics as a teenager while attending private schools, which he despised. He left one of them at 16 and enrolled at the Central School of Art in London. After two years in the British army, 1944 to 1946, he attended the Chelsea School of Art.

He drew close to the Communist Party in the postwar years, although he never joined. Berger told a *Guardian* interviewer in 1999, "I'm sure people assumed I was [a CP member], particularly when I wrote for the communist press after the war, but I didn't join because I couldn't swallow the official party line about art. This was the thing I thought I actually knew something about and although I was all for a social art, I couldn't accept the rigidity and obvious falseness of their position."

After graduation from art school he taught drawing and continued to pursue a career as a painter until 1952, when he was asked to give a series of talks on art for the BBC. In 1954 he began writing art criticism for the *New Statesman*, where he established a reputation as an honest and no-holds-barred critic. The magazine, on occasion, felt obliged to apologize for him. He was also harassed and attacked at this time by anticommunists for his views.

Some of these essays were collected in the book, *Permanent Red* (1960). In one, "The Ideal Critic and the Fighting Critic," written in 1959, he asked, "Why should an artist's way of looking at the world have any meaning to us?" This was a question that would concern him for the rest of his career and which he answered in various ways, all of them ultimately unsatisfactory from a Marxist point of view.

In the 1959 essay, Berger observed that the specific meaning of a work of art changes as years or centuries pass, and "depends on who is looking at it when." But this lay the groundwork for a historical relativism that he was to embrace and become identified with.

Art and Revolution (1969) graphically revealed some of the unresolved problems in his political outlook. The book is an honest and partisan

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appraisal of the Soviet sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, who died in August 2016, but proves unable to assess the artist in his place and time, or make serious sense of the history and current state of the USSR. *Art and Revolution*, frankly, seriously underestimates the trauma of Soviet history and denies the counter-revolutionary character of the Stalinist regime.

Berger writes, in an ambiguous phrase, that the "example and the existence of the U.S.S.R. has been a crucial factor in the anti-imperialist struggle," before adding that the establishment of the policy of Socialism in One Country in the mid-1920s meant that "the world revolutionary role of the Soviet Union was compromised." The work is dedicated to Isaac Deutscher, and Berger subscribes to the latter's view, which is cited, that Stalinism represented something "barbarous," but historically "progressive."

Art and Revolution is permeated by conceptions current in British intellectual circles at the time. A potpourri of ideas is on hand that has little in common with Marxism. Alfred North Whitehead, Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon and a Guatemalan guerrilla leader are quoted, unhelpfully.

The weaknesses are not merely Berger's. One fact is indicative of the difficult conditions that confronted the Marxist trend, Trotskyism, in this period. Berger, who published articles in the *New Left Review* and the *Black Dwarf*, a leftist journal, expressed personal sympathy for Trotsky's positions. Moreover, he was acquainted with and dedicated *Art and Revolution* to Deutscher, Trotsky's biographer. Yet neither in the work on the Soviet sculptor nor his subsequent *Ways of Seeing*, nor anywhere else, does Berger discuss Trotsky's views on art and literature, to which Deutscher devoted a significant chapter in *The Prophet Unarmed*, the second volume of his biography. Berger either considered Trotsky's views irrelevant, or they cut too close to the bone and, moreover, threatened a good many political and intellectual relationships.

The Stalinist parties, both in the Soviet Union and around the globe, still had millions of members. China under Mao claimed to be guided by "Marxism-Leninism." Guevara and the Cuban regime, along with dozens of "national liberation" movements, presented themselves as adherents of varying national forms of socialism. Berger tilted in that direction and never fully broke from the petty bourgeois circles oriented to Soviet or Chinese Stalinism, or "Third World" movements.

The year 1972 saw the debut of his four-part documentary, *Ways of Seeing*, on BBC television, which brought him to the attention of a broader audience. One of Berger's arguments—in part a response to Sir Kenneth Clark's BBC series *Civilization*, which posited eternal ideals such as truth and beauty as the basis of great art—was that the wealth accumulated by the capitalist class had played the decisive role in the 500-year history of oil painting; the latter depicted the wealth of its bourgeois and noble patrons and itself acquired the status of wealth.

Ways of Seeing, and, in greater detail, the book of that name written later, focused on the historical and social circumstances that gave rise to oil painting. This was and remains a valuable and interesting aspect of the documentary and the book. But Berger went further and reduced the meaning of these paintings almost *exclusively and solely* to the circumstances of the time in which they were painted. *Ways of Seeing* argues that once a work of art was removed from those circumstances, it derived an entirely new meaning, particularly as objects of wealth held by affluent individuals or museums. This, *Ways of Seeing* said, "mystifies" a given work of art.

This process of mystification is greatly accelerated by the invention of photography. The mass reproduction of images completely overturns the original content of a painting (a church, perhaps), and makes the original valuable simply because it is an original. "The meaning of the original work no longer lies uniquely in what it says but in what it uniquely is. It is defined as an object whose value depends on its rarity," Berger says.

He argues further on that the function of a painting, "is nostalgic. It is the final empty claim of the continuing values of an oligarchic, undemocratic culture … in the age of pictorial reproduction, the meaning of paintings is no longer transmitted."

Still later in the book he adds, the "art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class." For Berger, at least in *Ways of Seeing*, the matter more or less ends there. He never even asks why anyone would pin a postcard or a print of a Vermeer or Rubens on his or her wall in the first place, i.e., what value the image being reproduced might have as a representation of life. Why should we look at the art of the past if it merely transmits the "values of an oligarchic, undemocratic culture"?

This view is generally and ignorantly presented as Marxism. One of the numerous superficial obituaries, this one appearing in the publication of the Socialist Party, formerly the "Militant" tendency, in Britain, notes that Berger was a "self-avowed Marxist." His "Marxism" apparently was exemplified by the positions he put forward in *Ways of Seeing*: "He argued that Western art tradition since the Renaissance has been intertwined with the interests of the ruling classes and of capitalism. Capitalist social relations meant oil painting served as a status symbol of power and wealth. The depiction of women in art, in particular, was as objects to be possessed."

For Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, a given work of art is not a means of knowing the world, objectively, truthfully, in the form of images, but merely an expression of the prevalent ideology at the time the painter lived and worked. As a critic and essayist, Berger sometimes contradicted or went beyond this outlook, but as a theorist and an art historian, he did not.

In the famous 1924 discussion, "Class and Art," Trotsky specifically criticized the type of populist-radical argument Berger put forward. The Bolshevik leader rejected the notion that Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example, was valuable "just because it enables us to understand the psychology of a certain class at a certain time. To put the matter that way means simply to strike out the *Divine Comedy*—from the realm of art." He argued that, "as a work of art, the *Divine Comedy* must speak in some way to my feelings and moods." If we approach Dante's epic today as a living art work, Trotsky pointed out, "this happens not because Dante was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the 13th century but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance."

Aleksandr Voronsky, the noted Soviet critic, argued in his essay "On Artistic Truth" in 1928: "A work of art is artistically truthful when the subjective feelings of and thoughts which are filtered through the aesthetically formulated general world conception have the character of an objective portrayal."

These considerations, which correspond to the classical Marxist tradition in aesthetics represented by Trotsky, Voronsky and Georgi Plekhanov in particular, never enter into Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

Although Berger rejected Stalinism in art, he exhibited a certain kinship with the advocates of "proletarian culture" during the period of the New Left. He later eclectically searched around for various "maverick" figures, Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School, the art critic Max Raphael, the Austrian leftist and former Stalinist Ernst Fischer, Victor Serge, etc. The Frankfurt School, along with existentialism and phenomenology, and an assortment of various forms of postwar European pessimism, which urged a turn away from the struggle for socialist leadership in the working class, exercised a far greater influence on Berger's thinking than did Karl Marx.

One does not look to Berger, in other words, for answers to the great problems of artistic and social life in the 20th century. His insights are of another, lesser order of magnitude.

At times, he makes it clear that he senses that his views on art are inadequate. At other moments, he opens a window on the relationship of art to the larger world. In "The Moment of Cubism" (1967), for example, he provided a concise summary of the social conditions that had given rise of cubism 60 years earlier and looked at the relationship of this school of

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art to social life. Whatever else one may say about his judgments on cubism, he attempted to link the style as a new way of understanding the emerging world of mass production, skyscrapers and mass transit.

His fiction tended to focus on intimate situations set against the backdrop of historical events or social processes: the peasant migrating to work in a factory, an exiled left-wing Hungarian artist at the time of the 1956 uprising, a Don Juan on the eve of the first World War. Unsurprisingly, the images he uses in these works are precise and evocative, though the social and historical issues are seen somewhat subjectively and do not take on an objective life of their own. The novels are intelligent, if not inspired.

Berger's attitude toward contemporary events tracked those of a generation of more or less disappointed European leftists. In August 1991 Soviet Stalinist leader Mikhail Gorbachev was his hero, and Berger tells us that, "the free market carries with it the right to dream." As time passed, he remained at odds with a world that he saw as filled with tremendous suffering: in 2005 he affirmed that he was still a Marxist, but he offered only moral and not historical or scientific grounds for this label. He also told an interviewer that he was, in a general way, a believer.

Berger matured and worked during a period of the relative isolation of revolutionary Marxism under the impact of the decades-long protracted degeneration of the Soviet Union and the dominance of various bureaucracies over the working class. Like many artists and thinkers of his time he was sensitive and sympathetic to the strivings of the oppressed, but overwhelmed by the delay of social revolution caused by Stalinism and Social Democracy, which dominated cultural life in postwar Europe. It was a historical interlude, but one that still held powerful sway at the time Berger formed many of his ideas. On the whole, the period had a damaging effect on his understanding of art.

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