CHAPTER 15

The Four *Ethos* of Capitalist Modernity

The four *ethos* of capitalist modernity, according to Echeverría, are born historically out of four ‘distinct epochs of modernity, that is to say, with reference to distinct successive impulses of capitalism – the Mediterranean, the Nordic, the Western, and the Central-European’.293 The first impulse in this historic succession, namely the Mediterranean, is the one that accompanies the baroque *ethos*.294 The last, the Central-European, is the one related to the romantic *ethos*. What Echeverría does not indicate explicitly is whether the classic *ethos* maintains a relation with the Nordic impulse and the realist *ethos* with the Western, or if the opposite is the case. But we can suppose that the first is the case. Their sequence in time would support this view: for Echeverría, the Nordic impulse arrives prior to the Western one, and in art history classicism establishes itself before realism. What again obscures the question, raising the possibility that Echeverría himself is not entirely clear on how to establish this pairing, is his formulation in another passage of a ‘realist North-West’295 in which the realist *ethos* can suddenly enter into relation with both the Nordic and Western ‘impulses’.

a The Realist *Ethos*

*Naïve and militant fascination for the valorisation of value. (Value is acclaimed, without observing that use-value is sacrificed.)*

Echeverría begins his presentation of the four *ethos* of capitalist modernity with the ‘realist *ethos*’, the predominant one on the global scale today, since it predominates above all in those countries which, in turn, are dominant. The contradiction, which is typical of the capitalist mode of production, between the unavoidable necessity of producing and consuming use-values and the tendency toward their destruction by the production of value, is flatly denied in this *ethos*, and not only in theory, but also practically, in a downright fighting spirit. Just as in all other *ethos*, the realist *ethos* is not, then a simple way of

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294 Ibid.
seeing the relationship between use-value and value, but rather the taking of
a position with material implications. Ruling social relations are held in high
esteem, not only due to their ‘insuperable efficiency and goodness’, but also
due to the ‘impossibility’ of an alternative world.296

A first way of converting into immediate and spontaneous the capitalist
fact, is that of the behaviour which develops within an attitude of affirm-
ative and militant identification, with the pretension of creativity that
the accumulation of capital has, with its pretension not only to faithfully
represent the interests of the ‘socio-natural’ process of reproduction –
interests that in reality it represses and deforms – but also of being at the
service of the quantitative and qualitative empowerment of the same.
The valorisation of value and the development of productive forces
would be, within this spontaneous behaviour, more than two coinciding
dynamics, one and the same, unitary and indivisible. This elemental
*ethos* may be called *realist* for its affirmative character of not only the
insuperable efficiency and goodness of the established or ‘actually-exist-
ing’ world, but, above all, of the *impossibility* of an alternative world.297

A brief insertion: here, as is generally the case in his texts, Bolívar Echeverría
speaks neither of the capitalist mode of production nor of capitalist relations
of production, as these are commonly formulated in Marx, but instead of the
‘capitalist fact’ and elsewhere of ‘capitalist reality’;298 or he describes these as
simply ‘the capitalist [thing] [lo capitalista]’.299 This evidently has to do with
his interest in not only relations of production but, generally, in specific quali-
ties of a historic form of the organisation of social life. Regardless, it is worth
asking here why it is that Echeverría does not employ the term (common in
this context) of ‘bourgeois society’.

Another possible explanation for his terminology, which is quite unusual
among Marxists, could be that he wants to avoid a direct identification of his
work with Marxism. Similarly as in the case of other non-dogmatic Marxist
authors, we can ask if this discrepant terminology indicates a degree of caution
so that the generalised rejection of Marx’s work (in these days in which capital-
ist relations of production are celebrated in almost all quarters as insuperable)
might not drag him into the abyss of collective damnation, or if we are dealing
with a conceptual difference with regard to earlier Marxism, which in Mexico