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UNHINGING THE MYTH OF ENLIGHTENMENT: ALLEN GINSBERG AND THE AMERICAN COUNTER-CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

For the epigraph of "*Howl and Other Poems*", Allen Ginsberg quotes the call of Walt Whitman to "Unscrew the locks from the doors!/Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (Ginsberg: 1956: 01) In retrospect, one can in fact, justify the aptness of this invocation. His first collection, *Howl and Other Poems* stands for a radical transformation in the manner in which art, literature and the American society would be viewed by the succeeding generations of the world. The poems were written during a period of intense cultural suffocation when the United States was emerging from the Second World War. With the two World Wars, the aspirations of the European Enlightenment were crashing to the ground. The blueprint of the perfectibility of mankind was turning out to be an illusion and the Rationality, for which the western civilization took much pride, was becoming an agency of oppression on both sides of the Pacific. This paper analyses the work of Allen Ginsberg in the light of counter-enlightenment epistemology in the context of mechanization of the modern civilization in the twentieth century.

Keywords- Eighteenth century Enlightenment, Empiricism, Simplification, Clockwork model, Counter-culture, Beat Generation, Authoritarianism.

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As predecessors, Allen Ginsberg and other writers of the Beat Generation had poets and artists who have been suspicious of the whole Enlightenment scene. The unchallenged reign of rationality had seemed absurd to the nineteenth century English Romantics, the French Symbolists, the American Transcendentalists and more recently the entire twentieth century schools of philosophers and avant-garde artists like the Existentialists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and so on. Rooted in this tradition of suspicion of the tyranny of Reason, Ginsberg exclaims in "New Democracy Wish List":

Hyper-rationalism reduces natural complexity of nature through narrow thought abstraction; Hyper- rationalization,

hyper-industrialization & Hyper- technology create chaos. (Ginsberg: 2006: 1063)

These lines point at the epistemological stand of Ginsberg regarding the appropriateness (rather the lack of it) of science, rationality, empiricism etc. as exclusive paths to Truth or Knowledge.

Around the eighteenth century the zeitgeist of the European academia was changing for a more scientific approach towards explaining the systems of the universe. The discoveries of Newton in the fields of optics, motion and gravity opened up a new era of understanding nature where the universe was seen as a great machine. Along with the developments in science, the philosophical writings of Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes etc. were appealing for

a more rationalistic approach in epistemology. The deceptively simple proclamation of Descartes regarding the presence of the conscious self in thought as a proof of the very existence of that self, places the cerebral processes ahead of the mystical metaphysics of the previous centuries. Unfortunately, such terse utterances of philosophy in the form of reductive epigrams and the uncluttered equations of Newtonian science lead to the development of a tendency that started to gratuitously incorporate such clean reductionism to all non-scientific discourses. In her book *The Myths We Live By*, Mary Midgley explains the incorrect application of Newtonian methods as: "Newton's representation of the universe as a vast clock was an early case of this. That image appealed so powerfully to all sorts of thinkers that they often hoped to produce equal neatness in their own awkward provinces by imitating its simplicity."(Midgley: xv) Soon the scientific community itself began to move away from the clockwork image as it left no space for the complex ideas like those of evolution and quantum mechanics. As Midgley states further:

In the case of clockwork, Descartes, Newton, and the eighteenth-century mechanists managed to shape a powerful vision that displayed the whole material world as one vast clock, claiming that the right way to understand any part of it was simply to find its 'mechanism', that is, the part of the machine that drove it. The cogs of this machinery were supposed to work always by direct physical impact. That imagery was so strong that, when physicists themselves began to move away from it at the end of the nineteenth century, their attempt raised deep distress in the profession. (Midgley:167)

Even though science eventually moved away from such simplification, by the end of the nineteenth century the habit of reductive tendency had seeped into non-scientific discourses like sociology, political science, public-administration and so on. Herbert Spencer, a noted proponent of incorporation of pseudo-science into sociology and economics explained socio-economic behavior of people and

the dynamics of the capitalist market using the theories of Darwinian evolution, a practice which Darwin himself never approved of. Pretending to be scientific, Spencer's theory of Social Darwinism unsurprisingly falls short in explaining the very notions of free market capitalism that it sets out to explain.

Darwin himself actually rejected Spencer's metaphysical approach. The trouble lay, as Darwin saw, in the quick transit between the vast principles and the particular cases. If we ask why Spencer and his converts were so sure that their principle of heterogeneity demanded specially *commercial freedom*- rather than (say) the freedom of workers to control their working conditions or of citizens to protect their environment- the principle itself supplies no answers. (Midgley: 114)

Midgley claims that Enlightenment, though has taken us towards a more rationalistic world view, it has also generated its own set of myth, the myths of rationalism which does more harm than good in understanding the world in all its nuanced complexities. Resonating with the lines of Ginsberg in "New Democracy Wish List", Midgley writes: "What the Enlightenment did was to develop its own set of myths, striking pictures whose attraction usually centres on the lure of Reduction- the pleasure of claiming that things are much simpler than they seem."(Midgley: xiii). This desire for reductionism and clean organization has eventually led to political application of this Enlightenment myth into "scientific" political theories and have resulted in most oppressive forms of governments and political ideologies both on the left and the right. This paper traces the evolution of the enlightenment myth into dictatorial ideologies and the stance of Allen Ginsberg against such principles of "rationality".

Shortly after the end of the nineteenth century that saw an unprecedented rise in bourgeois wealth in Europe and the United States, the world tumbled into political chaos. While the First World War was still raging, Russia underwent the revolution of the proletariat under the leadership of Lenin with the writings of Marx as the guiding

principle. Marxism itself claims to be a 'scientific' method of wealth distribution in the society thus solving most of the problems of human beings resulting from inequality generated by the system of private property. The catch in this case is that being 'scientific' it attempts to quantify and tie down human motivations and behaviour entirely to materialistic causes. This oversimplification of classical Marxism has though been dealt with by the Neo-Marxists but back in the days of the U.S.S.R. the plan was somewhat simple. Marx in his works (especially in *Das Capital*) has pointed out numerous processes of wealth distribution that create a society of class division to systematically oppress a majority of the global population. He suggests to simply get rid of these processes to unveil the true spirit of mankind in the world of communism, albeit thorough a violent revolution. Unfortunately, for Stalin though, human beings did not turn out to be simple creatures of basic needs and aspirations that solely depend on the economic base. The solution was a strictly regimented social system in Soviet Russia that pushed the country under the dictatorship of the party. The key was to create a "system" that would work mechanically in the society to yield results of a "scientific" body of governance. The trick was to standardize, equalize and crush dissent and aberrations in the perfect social model. Pointing out at the limitation of Marxism and by continuation, a Marxist form of governance, Midgley writes:

Though this seemed like large-scale thinking, it had, as usual, a local bias.... More seriously, the Marxist account entirely ignored factors outside the human species, and indeed most factors outside Europe. Marx was not concerned about the exploitation of natural resources. He thought those resources were infinite, a belief that was widely accepted in countries which adopted his views. He saw capitalist imperialism simply as the oppression of one set of humans by another, not as a source of ecological disaster. And of course, even within human affairs, his theory grossly oversimplified the problem. Marx was very astute in diagnosing many evils of

capitalism, but he was mistaken in supposing that it was about to cure those evils by collapsing.(Midgley: 111)

The problem of oversimplification of human beings was a problem in the politics of the right-wing as well. The twentieth century saw the meteoric rise of right-wing nationalistic governments across Europe and right-wing political ideologies of hyper-nationalism and religious/racial bigotry in the west as a whole. The right wing also claimed to have solved the riddles of human misery. The solution was herd mentality of the mainstream and systemic elimination of the racial or religious other. The governance was systemized in Hitler's Germany to the point that every citizen was either a pure blue eyed healthy Aryan nationalist or an evil, scheming, unpatriotic Jew who needed to be sent off to concentration camps to be gassed to death by the millions. Hitler's Germany saw the rise of the idea of the New Man, something that was present in the communist Russia as well- the New Man who fitted into the political scheme of the party in power. The chords of over-simplification screech out through the schemes of right-wing politics as well when the Nazis declared the mass murders of the Jewish people as the scientific sounding- the Final Solution. And all this over-simplification both on the left and the right can be traced back into the myth of the Enlightenment which is in fact a travesty of rational thinking as explained by Kant. Immanuel Kant has explained Enlightenment in his essay on the same topic as:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. (Kant: 1)

In the twentieth century the astute call for the maturity of Human Reason, through its misinterpretation, dilution, wrongful application in certain areas of social discourse turns into a Myth of Rationality and scientific temperament, terms which can in this context be interchanged with Modernity, Progress, Development etc. In his book *Critique and*

Crisis – Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society, Reinhart Koselleck writes,

... an attempt to examine the historical preconditions of German National Socialism, whose loss of reality and Utopian self-exaltation had resulted in hitherto unprecedented crimes. There was also the context of the cold war. Here, too, I was trying to enquire into its Utopian roots which, it seemed, prevented the two super-powers from simply recognizing each other as opponents...It was in the Enlightenment, to which both liberal-democratic America and socialist Russia rightly retraced themselves, that I began to look for the common roots of their claims to exclusiveness... (Koselleck: 1)

The utopian view of the twentieth century first world governments is the fad of exclusivity and simplicity that emerges from the times of the enlightenment in the eighteenth century as Koselleck writes further:

My starting-point was therefore to explain the Utopian ideas of the twentieth century by looking at their origins in the eighteenth... This hypothesis argues that the Enlightenment itself became Utopian and even hypocritical because- as far as continental Europe was concerned- it saw itself excluded from political power-sharing...The Enlightenment succumbed to a Utopian image which, while deceptively propelling it, helped to produce contradictions which could not be resolved in practice and prepared the way for the Terror and for dictatorship. Here was an ideal-type framework which time and again made its reappearance in the subsequent history of the modern world. (Koselleck:1-2)

Enlightenment is the source from which both kinds of dictatorship on the left and right have emerged, something that Ginsberg critiques through his writings as they will be examined further.

The Enlightenment replaces the older myths with its myth of supremacy of rationality, something that Ginsberg and his predecessors had

learned to see through. As a reaction against such propagation of the myth of rationality, Ginsberg wants to reinstate the older myths of mankind and laments their demise. In the second section of "Howl" he writes while equating the modern capitalistic civilization with the Biblical demon god Moloch:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!
Moloch whose blood is running
money! Moloch whose fingers are ten
armies! Moloch whose breast
is a cannibal dynamo!...
Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles!
ecstasies! Gone down the American
river!
Dreams! adorations! illuminations!
religions! The whole boatload of sensitive
bullshit!
Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and
crucifixions! gone down the flood!

(Ginsberg: 2006:140)

In a society founded on the principles of Enlightenment, everything needs to be quantified and administered. Even madness which in the middle-ages was treated not as a moral issue, in the nineteenth century, as Foucault explains in *Madness and Civilization*, was began to be treated as a matter of morality and correction. The General Hospital was more like a prison house than a sanitarium. The normal is defined in strict terms with pretensions of objectivity and any discourse which may be revolutionary, or intuitive, or mystical, or anything that cannot be accounted for by the science of the time is quarantined as mad. Madness plays a great role in Ginsberg's work, considering that his mother has severe bouts of paranoid-schizophrenia. Madness becomes a tool in the work of Ginsberg to challenge the normalcy of the mainstream discourses of society and epistemology. Rational versus the irrational is a deep zone of conflict in the times governed by the principles of Enlightenment. Foucault defines madness in the terms of materialism and bourgeois culture that takes the thrust away from the individual's 'sanity' to the rules of the mainstream society. According to Foucault, a mad person is called mad after the eighteenth century because "he crosses the frontiers of

bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of ethics". (Foucault: 58) Ginsberg casts similar doubts in the way normalcy is structured in the mainstream society through his writings and even by his own lifestyle. Ginsberg belongs to the group of writers who are more interested in understanding the wisdom hidden in what the world calls mad. Jack Kerouac declares in *On the Road*:

...the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars... (Kerouac: 6)

Ginsberg himself writes of his mother Naomi's delusions in "Kaddish". The delusions of persecution suffered by Naomi in the hands of Hitler, Roosevelt and Trotsky are used by Ginsberg as a motif to underscore the zeitgeist of global politics in that age which was a direct result of the enlightenment project that persecutes anything that it does not consider normal. Ginsberg writes:

The telephone rang at 2A.M.- Emergency- she'd gone mad Naomi hiding under the bed screaming bugs of Mussolini- Help! Louis!

Buba! Fascists! Death! ...

... The enemies approach- what poisons? Tape recorders? FBI? Zhdanov hiding behind the counter? Trotsky mixing rat bacteria in the back of the store? Uncle Sam in Newark, plotting deathly perfumes in the Negro district? Uncle Ephraim, drunk with murder in the politicians's bar, scheming of Hague? (Ginsberg: 2006: 223-224)

In addition to Kaddish, Ginsberg raises the question of insanity/sanity in most of his works, most notably in Howl where he describes the lives, suffering and death of the social misfits like him. While addressing Carl Solomon he says:

Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland
Where you're madder than I am
I'm with you in Rockland

Where you must feel very strange...

...I'm with you in Rockland

Where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and

Immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse. (Ginsberg:2006: 140-141)

The political ideologies emerging the Enlightenment places a mechanized and regimented human order above the organic nature of human existence with its natural surrounding. The nature is considered as only an infinite resource of raw materials at the disposal of scientific modernization of human civilization. On the other side it homogenizes the population to make them more manageable with excuse of scientific and 'developed' way of life. Nature and also human nature was imprisoned in the Moral code of Reason. The mundane city was attempted to be turned into Heaven, a false Heaven with false Gods. Ginsberg takes a definitive stand against this mechanization which resonates with Blake and Wordsworth. He writes in "The Sunflower Sutra":

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you

Look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a locomotive? The spectre and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?

You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!

And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not! (Ginsberg:2006: 147)

As a figure of the counter-culture movement of the fifties and sixties America, Ginsberg's criticism of the modern western civilization opened up new vistas of perception. The famous Blake hallucination of Ginsberg has been a major driving force in his career and life. When he was in India, spiritual gurus Srimata Krishnaji and Bankey Bihari had advised him to "Take Blake as your Guru" (Ginsberg: 1996:3) and in the tradition of William Blake, Ginsberg never gave up on knowledge through revelation. His refusal to give in to the hegemony of so called rationalistic approach is a big part of his social dissent. He had seen through the game of global politics where rationality was used as a tool to

oppress and marginalize individuals who did not obey the social norms. He was also aware of the politics of the cold war where America and Russia were only mirror images of each other. Through he thought he was a communist when he was young, later in life Ginsberg gave up on any uncritical adherence to any political ideology and declared in "Kraj Majales" :

and when Communist and Capitalist assholes tangle the Just man is arrested or robbed or had his head cut off, but not like Kabir, and the cigarette cough of the Just man above the clouds in the bright sunshine is a salute to the health of the blue sky. (Ginsberg: 2006: 361)

Ginsberg advises his readers to rise above the bickering of political ideologies, for all of them emanate from pretenses of knowledge and justice, and live in the higher plane of righteousness and spirituality. With his adherence to the spiritual discourses of the east he rejects the rules and taboos of modern western civilization. In "C'mon Pigs of Western Civilization Eat More Grease" he writes:

Africans Latins with rice beans & calabash can Stay thin & crowd in apartments for working Class foodfreaks-
Not like western cuisine rich in protein
Cancer heart attack hypertension sweat
Bloated liver & spleen magaly
Diabetes and stroke- monuments to
carnivorous
Civilizations presently murdering Belfast
Bosnia Cypress Ngorno Karabach Georgia
(Ginsberg: 2006: 1072)

Eventually what Ginsberg was up against, has also worried Midgley as she sums up the argument against the corrupting influence of blanket application of the principles of Enlightenment as:

We need to stop treating 'science' as if it were a single monolithic entity, a solid kingdom embattled against rival kingdoms. On the one hand, the various sciences differ hugely. Ecology and anthropology are not at all like physics, nor indeed is biology, and this is not disastrous because they don't

have to be like it. and on the other hand we need to stop treating this entity called 'science' as an expanding empire, destined one day to take over the whole intellectual world. (Midgley: 33)

In order to challenge the unscrupulous application of the myth of "rationality" Allen Ginsberg tries to revoke the possibility of the alternative myths of visions, the alternative forms of knowledge and spirituality. His activities are against the big governments of America, Russia and Europe who push the enlightenment myth to secure their profits. The excuse of rationality and scientific temperament which are actually myth of the enlightenment project enables power centres of the world to use control and coercion to homogenize the population using mass media and consent manufacture. Similar ideas are expressed by the Frankfurt school as they examine the role of the mass media in modern times to control people on the three dimensions of economy, politics and culture. Ginsberg hits at the base of the assumptions of the enlightenment by exploring the alternative forms of epistemology in the tradition of the Romantics, the Transcendentalists and the eastern spiritual systems like Hinduism and Buddhism. Indeed his life and work resonates with the call of Whitman – he unhinges the basic assumption of the hegemony of rationality from the social discourse of mainstream America when it becomes an agency of oppression and alienation.

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