

John Cage's harmony of noise

## Leaving It To Chance

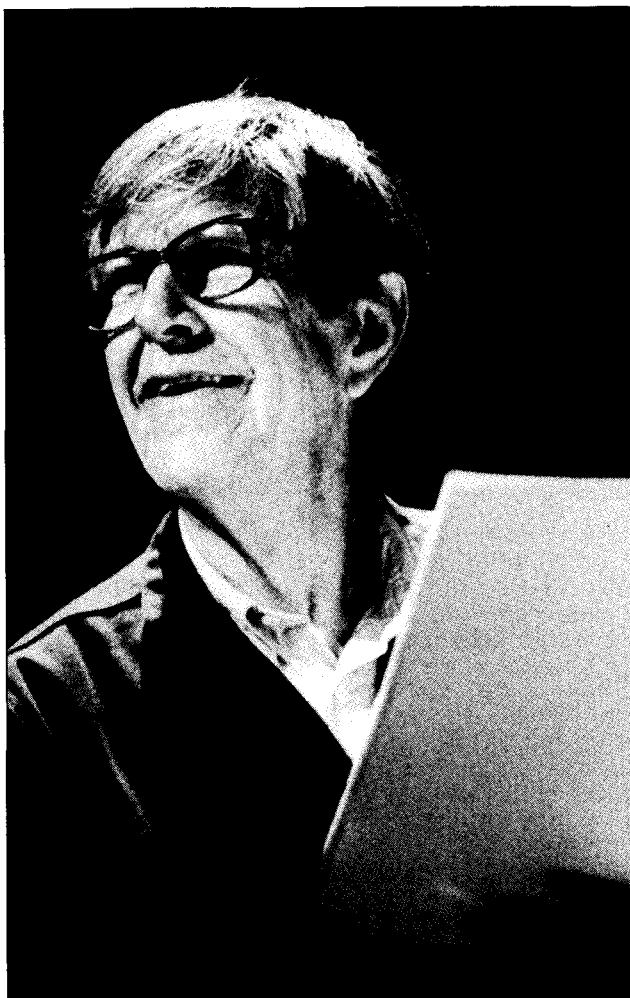
**John Cage, composer of random music, talks to Chris Granlund about the way reading has influenced his life.**

My mother came from a family in which the only two books that were permitted were *The Bible* and *Shakespeare*. Other books were considered potentially sinful. As a child, she had to hide books under her mattress. It's hard to believe now, but if they were found she would be punished. My parents used to read to each other before going to sleep. They read the Tarzan books by Edgar Rice Burroughs and a lot of Dickens. I read those books myself later on as well.

I didn't get along well with other children and used to be attacked by bullies, so I persuaded mother and dad to let me go to a school in another neighbourhood. That involved travelling for three hours every day. The Los Angeles public library was at the point where I used to change streetcars, so I could take new books out all the time. I remember reading *Quo Vadis*, then Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Besides *The Idiot* and, of course, *Crime And Punishment*, I also enjoyed *The Raw Youth*. They are quite amazing novels.

My interest in music began when I was in sixth grade, when I noticed a sign for piano lessons and begged mother and dad to let me learn. Later, they bought me a baby grand. When it arrived, I was playing it before its legs were screwed on. My aunt Phoebe was my piano teacher, she taught me to sight read well enough for me to explore the sheet music in the public library. I didn't so much like the finger exercises but I liked sight-reading and exploring.

Every Sunday we went to the Methodist Episcopal Church. I would now prefer to think of myself as some kind of a Buddhist, although I wouldn't like my aunt Lucille to know that! It seems to me to be the most anarchic of religions. My interest in Buddhism started after I read Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* and after I had spent



a year reading *The Gospel Of The Sri Ramakrishna*.

They gave me the idea that all of the churches are basically saying the same thing. When I was in my 30s, having studied some of these ideas, I chose Buddhism: the flavour I preferred. It struck me as being on the one hand intransigent and uncompromising, yet on the other, humorous and with a smile. That's exactly how I feel myself.

I think *Finnegan's Wake* says everything about our civilisation. I read excerpts from it before it was published in full in the States. I found them entrancing and read them to friends. When the book was published in 1938 I bought a copy, but it was only later when I was asked to write about it that I read through it a number of times. It is without doubt what I would call 'a source of the present'.

It describes exactly what it

is that we're living in: a state of over-population in the most amazing sense. We don't really know what population is doing to us, but for one thing there is more communication, more mail, more telephone calls. It's difficult to know how to behave. How do you deal with it all? Do you learn to say 'no' and then spend your life saying that?

I have never been very good about reading newspapers. This week I'm supposed to give a lecture and I've prepared something of an interesting mix. It's a newspaper report which is made up of sentences from the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Through chance operations, I move from one newspaper to the other and make an entirely new report. The awful thing is that it sounds just as reasonable as the original reports.

Like population, all of the things we deal with are pres-

ent in greater numbers than ever before. Chance operations are a marvellous way of dealing with a huge amount of material that you can't possibly deal with thoroughly and honestly. Performing such chance operations is a way of deciding which route you're prepared to enter into out of a multiplicity of possibilities. It's endlessly useful.

I'm committed to so many things that I don't really have time to read unless it is to do with my work. I don't read any fiction these days. To relax I play chess or I take care of my plants, I have 200 in my loft in New York. Because of my macrobiotic diet, I also do a lot of shopping. Henry Thoreau wrote that we don't need any distraction and relaxation because preparing food is sufficient — supplying our own food can take us away from ourselves.

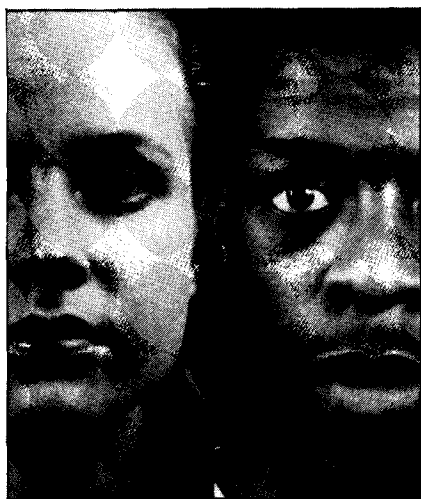
I'm at a marvellous point in my life. Until recently, I thought that I had no feeling for harmony but I've finally discovered that I have just as much as anybody else. It's just that my harmony doesn't have the rules that academic harmony has. I realise now that noises are harmonious too. It's a beautiful thing when you realise that noises are not less musical than musical tones. It's a larger perception. It's about being more inclusive.

In November last year, I was asked to go to Japan to perform 4'33", a piece that I wrote in the 50s. I asked myself how I would go about writing such a piece now, whether I would still have people listen to four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. What I decided to do was to have the sound of the air brought up to the level of feed-back as I went up on to the stage so that we knew we were in a dangerous situation. Then I went and sat in the audience. I stayed there until I felt that the piece was over. The feed-back went down when I went back to the stage and bowed. That's what we're living in now, a period of urgency and anxiety where we may no longer have silence. ●

Bhikhu Parekh on identity beyond the masses

## World Of Difference

Marxism is in a poor state. Capitalism has survived its worst post-second world war crises and remains economically viable though morally and spiritually bankrupt. As the struggle for existence has become somewhat relaxed for a sizeable section of the population, the long-suppressed differences have come to the surface. New groups are asserting their independent identities, the economic identity is no longer accepted as primary and privileged, and human individuals who rightly see



themselves as bearers of multiple and not always compatible identities demand recognition.

Has marxism anything to say to these concerns? Does it have a theory of a socially situated but unique self? A theory of the class that can accommodate differences of gender, race, state, nationality and generation? A theory of the state that can accommodate communities and ethnicity? A theory of revolution that can take account of the way modern society functions and changes?

Any book claiming to belong to the marxist tradition will have to be judged from now onwards by its capacity to answer these and other related questions. The collection **Identity: Community, Culture, Difference** edited by Jonathan Rutherford (*Lawrence and Wishart*, £10.95) only partially comes near to answering some of them. Al-

though the essays are uneven and written at different levels, they share a common concern, to deconstruct or rather to open up the large abstract categories that have hitherto been the stock-in-trade of marxism.

Jonathan Rutherford stresses the need to develop a new moral and political consensus based on a full recognition of autonomous groups and their distinct concerns. Andrea Stuart and Pratibha Parmar distinguish different forms of feminism and trace their distinct genealogies and political linkages. Kobena Mercer attacks the essentialist and one-dimensional views of racism and anti-racism, Jeffrey Weeks explores the implications of a pluralist view of truth and Simon Watney analyses the politics of identity in the context of Aids.

Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall go deeper and raise important theoretical issues. In an occasionally dense but perceptive essay Bhabha rightly challenges the essentialist view of identity and the Left's 'timid traditionalism', and analyses identity as an inherently open and fluid process of self-conscious identification with groups and movements. Stuart Hall, whose presence shadows almost all the earlier pieces, explores the agony and the dilemmas involved in the Afro-Caribbean attempt to repair and reappropriate their fractured past in the presence of the hostile 'other', and to create a vibrant national culture.

The ease and speed with which the communist states in Eastern Europe have crumbled, apparently without lasting gains to their credit even after 40 years of unquestioned political and ideological power, makes all but a fanatic wonder if the noble marxist vision does not contain a fatal flaw, and raises agonising questions about the marxist capacity to comprehend, conceptualise and cope with the complexity of human affairs. The fact that not even the Leftist radicals in these societies thought of turning to Marx for guidance and inspiration also raises

questions about the capacity of the marxist tradition to rejuvenate itself.

Marxists have, of course, long been aware of the limitations of their tradition. Their criticism, however, has remained largely confined to showing that the 'material' or economic factors did not work in quite the way that the master had thought and that the political, cultural and other institutions enjoyed relative autonomy and had their own histories.

Though this area of inquiry is important and has yielded valuable results, it does not go deep enough. It is about time we did to Marx what he did to Hegel, namely grasp his thought as a whole, expose his basic limitations, and find ways of retaining his undoubted insights in a more satisfactory framework.

Take three neglected areas where marxism is profoundly weak. In its fundamental assumptions it remains tied to capitalism. It uncritically took over such central ideas of the latter as Promethean humanism, anthropocentrism, excessive emphasis on the economic process, obsession with the development of the productive forces and an intense suspicion of natural differences and of communal especially ethnic identities.

Marxism not only could not attack capitalism so long as the latter continued to develop the productive forces, but became its ally against those who challenged its mindless technologism and pseudo-universalism. Furthermore it remained negative, aiming to replace capitalism after it had 'exhausted' its historical potential, that is, collapsed or was on the verge of collapsing and confronted with a radically disillusioned populace. Since capitalism kept developing ingenious strategies of survival, marxists felt baffled and cheated by history, and were reduced to cursing the devious capitalists and the benighted masses.

Second, despite all its emphasis on history, marxism remains ahistorical at a deeper level. The pre-capitalist past, that is, two thousand years of European history and

an even longer non-European history, meant little to it except as a story of technologically backward societies.

Unlike the conservatives and even the liberals who cherished the rich Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, marxism has treated earlier thinkers with a mixture of indifference and disdain. Hardly any marxist thinker has thought it necessary to link up marxism with the earlier traditions, or to learn from the profound insights of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes or Toqueville into the nature and complexity of human existence.

Marxism stood defiantly alone, confident that it could take on the world single-handed. As a result it lacked historical legitimacy and depth. It remained moderately successful so long as its indigenous resources connected with the needs and problems of the age. Once the latter changed and its resources proved inadequate, it had nowhere to turn for new sources of self-criticism and eventual self-regeneration.

Third, for a variety of reasons which we cannot here reconsider, marxism remains heavily distorted by the dubious elements in its Hegelian heritage, and displays a recurrent tendency towards historicism, essentialism and a totalising view of man and society. Unlike Hegel, who had sought to accommodate particularity and self-differentiated identity, marxism remains intensely uneasy with differences. It defines the human individual as a producer and divides the process of production into two stateless, genderless, colourless, solid and internally undifferentiated classes.

Not surprisingly, marxism has always found it difficult to cope with non-economic identities and differences. Almost all the essays in *Identities* are articulated at the political level and contain valuable insights. But most of them remain tentative in the absence of a radically reconstituted marxist philosophy capable of answering such fundamental ontological, moral and epistemological questions. ●