

Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement

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Foreworld: Out of the Future

The untraceable

One of the best films about class conflict is a 10 minute sharp and biting shot, taken on June 10th 1968 outside the gates of the Wonder factory – a battery-maker – on the outskirts of Paris. Most of the workers were unskilled, low paid, looked down on women, often handling dirty chemicals. They'd been on strike since May 13th and were just about to go back in. What concessions they'd snatched from the boss were a lot in terms of better work conditions, and little compared to the energy put into the struggle. In the middle of the arguing group is a woman in her twenties, half shouting half crying, who won't be talked into returning:

“No, I'm not going back. I'll never set foot there again! Go and see for yourself what a shithole it is... what filth we work in...”

In 1996, a documentary interviewed people involved in that strike: men and women workers, foremen, a trotskyist typist, shop stewards, union activists, the local Communist Party leader who tried to convince the young woman to resume work. She, however, is untraceable. Few remember her well. She left the factory soon after the events and nobody knows what became of her, or even her full name, only the first one: Jocelyne.

We're left with one decisive question unanswered, the question posed by Jocelyne's reaction: in “normal” peaceful life, habits and guidelines weigh upon us, and it is practically inevitable to submit. But when millions of strikers build up collective strength, render the State helpless and media words worthless, bring a whole country to the verge of overall change, and realize they're given pay rises which will soon be eaten up by inflation, why is it that they step back into what they know amounts to dire or soft misery for the next thirty years?

Some will reply that Jocelyne and her workmates had not been enlightened, or had not met the true light, some will assert workers suffered from an absence of organisation, others that they lacked spontaneity, while wise guys will explain May 68 was bound to fail because capitalist evolution had not yet created the prerequisites of...

The following essays do not solve the problem – this is no maths exercise or riddle where you have to find the right clue – they merely ask this first and foremost question.

In fact, one of the texts, *The Class Struggle and Its Most Characteristic Aspects in Recent Years*, was first conceived not long after the Wonder plant, like many others, returned to work. Leninism and the Ultra-Left goes back to 1969. Capitalism and Communism came out in 1972 at the request of a number of workers who circulated it, at Renault for example.

Wall Street v. Berlin Wall

All three essays aimed at reasserting communism against an ideology named “marxism” – official, academic, or leftist.

Why call ourselves communist?

The more a lexical item means, the more likely it is to be put into hard labour by the ruling order. Like “freedom”, “autonomy”, “human” and a host of others, the word communism has been twisted, turned upside down, and is now currently a synonym of life under a benevolent/dictatorial totalitarian State. Only a free, autonomous, human, communist awakening will make these words meaningful again.

Although common wisdom proclaims that radical thought is obsolete, the last 25 years offer ample proof of its relevance.

What obsolescence?!

Class struggle? No need to read 2000 pages by Marx to realize that those dispossessed of the means of production have fought (and usually been defeated by) those who control them.

Value defined by the average social time necessary to manufacture goods? It's plain our civilization has an obsession with shortening time! Computerization, electronic highways and cell phones on every street corner speed up circulation. Work, shopping and leisure alike treat every act of life as though it has to be turned into an ever faster flow. Paul Virilio describes how economy does not produce just objects but speed, and indeed objects only as far as they produce speed. Though Virilio does not claim to be a marxist, he points at a world that prides itself on reducing the time needed to achieve everything, i.e. a world run by minimal time — by value.

Profit making as the driving force of this world? Anyone who has lost his job in a firm he gave 20 years of his life to, can see that a company is accumulated value looking to constantly increase itself, and crushing whatever hinders it.

The decreasing numbers of Western factory workers, the coming down of the Berlin Wall, and the withering away of extreme-left groups mean the final downfall of communism to those who portrayed blue collars as the salt of the earth, equated socialism with planned economy, and enjoyed marching in the street under a North Vietnam flag.

The collapse of so-called socialist countries showed how economy rules. East and West have both gone through accumulation crises. Trying to regain profitability required a new system of production in Cleveland, a new political regime in the Kremlin. State capitalism did not fail because people got fed up with totalitarianism, but when it was no longer able to support itself and give substance to its oppression.

Centralized economic planning was just about all right for developing capital goods industries; and bureaucratic power rested on a compromise with the peasants on the one hand, and the workers on the other (job for life plus minimal social security, in exchange for political submission: even periodic purges contributed to social promotion and thus to workers' support for the bureaucrats). This may have been OK for Russia in 1930, but not in 1980, let alone for East Germany or Czechoslovakia in 1980. Capitalism needs some forms of competition between conflicting poles of accumulated value confronting each other, and therefore a certain amount of political and economic competition.

The breaking up of the USSR is not the definitive refutation of Marx, but the verification of *Das Kapital*. The Politburo could fiddle its own internal market but not evade world trade pressures. The same market forces that were laying off thousands in Liverpool were busy smashing the bureaucratic dykes that blocked the streams of money and commodities in Moscow. The spectre still haunts us, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote in 1991, in reference to the 1848 Manifesto: “Marx's analysis can be applied to the amazing disintegration of communist regimes built on the foundations of his thought but unfaithful to his prescriptions.”

1968 and all that

There had been workers' uprisings before, openly confronting both the State and the institutionalized labour movement, and many far more violent, after WW I for example. But around 1970, the upheaval had something more global and deeper about it. Contrary to 1871, 1917–21 or 1936–37, in industrialized countries capital had penetrated the whole of life, turned more and more everyday acts and relationships into commodities, and unified society under its dominion. Politics as opposed political programs was on the way out. In '68, French unions and labor parties were able to stifle a 4 or 5-million 3-week strike, but could no longer put forward a platform alternative to that of the "bourgeois" parties. Those who were to take part in the general strike did not expect much more from a possible Left government than a bit more welfare. Mixed economy was the order of the day, with an emphasis on State intervention when the Left was in power, on market forces when votes swung to the Right.

Commodity relationships mediated the simplest human needs. The American dream is yours if you're rich enough to buy it. But even so, the only attractive car is never the one you've just bought, but the next one on the TV commercial. Goods are always at their best on posters. Just when a Russian style workers' paradise was no longer valid, the consumer heaven appeared out of reach — by nature. So no future could be found through the factory, neither the nightmare the other side of the Iron Curtain, nor the soft dreamland this side of the screen. As a result, the workplace declined as a place where to start building a better world. Although the Situationist International's book, *Society of the Spectacle*, had few readers at the time, its publication in 1967 was a forerunner of critiques to come. True, that period also meant unionization for many downtrodden poorly paid workers who finally got into the XXth century, and only a minority of the working class voiced a refusal of society, rebels with a cause on the fringe of the labour force, the young especially. But the worldwide strike and riot wave remains incomprehensible without its underlying characteristic: mass disaffection for factory and office life. "Who wants to work?", *Newsweek* asked in the mid-70s.

Still, nearly all sit-downs occupied the workplace and went no further. Of all transgressing gestures (take over of gas and transport services by Polish strikers in 1971, Italian self-reduction, squatting, "social" strikes by bus drivers, hospital staff and supermarket cashiers providing transport, health care and food free of charge, electricity workers cutting off supplies to bureaucrats or firms, and a thousand other instances) hardly any turned into a beginning of communization. The disruption of work and the trespassing of commodity did not merge into an attack on work-as-commodity, i.e. wage labour as such. From prison to child education, everything came under fire, yet the assault remained mainly negative.

The lack of creative attempts to transform society gave the impetus back to capitalism.

Historical upheavals have no date of birth or death, but surely Fiat was more than a symbol — a landmark. For years the Turin firm had been plagued by permanent stoppages of assembly lines, mass absenteeism and meetings on the premises. However, organized disorder did not transcend negation into something positive. Thus the management was able to break a (fairly large) minority, with the passive help of a weary majority fearing for their jobs. Radicals had disrupted a social logic, not shifted into a new one. Violent (even armed) actions gradually disconnected from the shop floor. In 1980, the company laid off 23,000 out of 140,000: the factory went on strike for 35 days, at the end of which 40,000 Fiat workers took to the streets against the strike. Then the unions signed a compromise whereby the 23,000 got State compensation money, and

later many more thousands were sacked through rationalization. On such turning points was the social surge of the 60s-70s reversed.

Working man's blues

Since then, the defeats of the working class have been due to its defensive position against a constantly mobile opponent. However deeply entrenched in mines or workshops, workers' militancy could not resist restructuring. Labour is strong as long as it's necessary to capital. Otherwise, it can delay redundancy, sometimes for years with support from the rest of the working community, but it can't stay on for ever as an unprofitable labour force. In the 70s and 80s workers had number and organization, but they lost because the economy deprived them of their function, which is their social weapon. Nothing will force capital to hire labour that is not useful to it.

At the same time, those autonomous "action committees", "base groups", etc., which had been the organs of rank-and-file activity within the workplace and outside, faded away. When fresh coordinating bodies emerged, as in the railway (1986) and nurses' (1988) strikes in France, they did not survive their function, and dissolved, (very few transfused their energy into newly formed, "rank-and-filist" breakaway unions and were thus integrated into capital).

For years, assembly line workers had rejected being treated like robots, while a minority turned away from work and the consumer society. Capital replied by installing real robots, suppressing millions of jobs and revamping, intensifying, densifying what was left of unskilled labor. At the same time, a widespread desire for freedom was converted into freedom to buy. In 1960, who imagined that one day a 12 year old could get cash out of a dispenser with her own plastic card? Her money — her freedom... The famous slogans of 68: Never work! and Ask for the impossible! were mocked when people were forced out of secure jobs and offered ever more plentiful and frustrating goods to buy.

Many compare the situation today to the 20s and 30s — fascist threat included. But unlike the insurrections and armed counter-revolution that took place between 1917 and WW II, the present proletarian setback has been a protracted and gradual absorption of vast sections of the working class into joblessness and casualization. If there's hope, it's in the proles, Winston says in 1984. It's as though a lot of the proles of the real 1984 had risen a few years before that date, taken the world into their hands and refused either to accept or change it. Decades earlier, their grandfathers had locked themselves behind factory gates (Italy, 1920) often with guns; they had fought and died, but the premises always ended up again with the boss. This time only a handful got their guns (and even less with the advent of unemployment: one does not shoot at a closing plant). So, more a failure than a defeat, actually. Like a player stepping aside from a fixed game: he can't or won't smash the place, and lets the fixers win.

That game's lost, there's no use denying it. Capitalism triumphs, more fluid and immaterial than 25 years ago, universalizing everything but in an abstract, passive, screenwise, negative way. A 60s commercial pictured an auto worker looking at a photo of a new car and wondering: "Who makes this model?" Forcibly part-time or flexible, the year 2000 car worker will watch Crash on TV while his kid plays a video game that uses chips which could one day "downsize" his father or himself. Never before has humankind been so unified and divided. Billions watch the same pictures and live ever more separate lives. Goods are at the same time mass produced

and unavailable. In 1930, millions were out of work because of a huge economic breakdown. Now they're on the dole at a time of growth, because even a recovering economy can't make profits out of them as it did 30 years ago. In many ways, we're out of the profitability crisis of the 70s, and most of the business community is better off than before. The paradox is, labour productivity has risen so much that capital often does not need to hire more labour to valorize itself.

High hopes...

The workers' movement that existed in 1900, or still in 1936, was neither crushed by fascist repression nor bought off by transistors or fridges: it destroyed itself as a force of change because it aimed at preserving the proletarian condition, not superseding it. At best it got a better life for the toiling masses, at worst it pushed them into world wars. It all belongs to the past now, and the popularity of films about workers' culture is a sure sign of its passing from reality into memories and museums. Stalinists turn social-democrat and social-democracy goes centre-left. Everybody shifts to the right and soon trotskyists will name themselves radical democrats. What once was a revolutionary milieu is filled with helplessness and nostalgia. As for us, we won't feel sorry for a time when Brezhnev was called a communist and thousands of young people paraded the streets singing the International when they were in fact supporting groups trying to be the extreme-left of the left.

The purpose of the old labour movement was to take over the same world and manage it in a new way: putting the idle to work, developing production, introducing workers' democracy (in principle, at least). Only a tiny minority, "anarchist" as well as "marxist", held that a different society meant the destruction of State, commodity and wage labour, although it rarely defined this as a process, rather as a programme to put into practice after the seizure of power, often after a fairly long transition period. These revolutionaries failed to grasp communism as a social movement whose action would undermine the foundations of class and State power, and misunderstood the subversive potential of fraternal, open, communistic relationships that kept re-emerging in every deep insurrection (Russia 1917-19, Catalonia 1936-37...).

There is no need to create the capitalist preconditions of communism any more. Capitalism is everywhere, yet much less visible than 100 or 50 years ago when class distinctions ostensibly showed up. The manual worker identified the factory owner at one glance, knew or thought he knew his enemy, and felt he'd be better off the day he and his mates got rid of the boss. Today classes still exist, but manifested through infinite degrees in consumption, and no one expects a better world from public ownership of industry. The "enemy" is an impalpable social relationship, abstract yet real, all-pervading yet no monster beyond our reach: because the proletarians are the ones that produce and reproduce the world, they can disrupt and revolutionize it. The aim is immediate communization, not fully completed before a generation or more, but to be started from the beginning. Capital has invaded life, and determines how we feed our cat, how we visit or bury friends, to such an extent that our objective can only be the social fabric, invisible, all-encompassing, impersonal. (Although capital is quite good at hiring personnel to defend it, social inertia is a greater conservative force than media or police.) A human community is at hand: its basis is present, a lot more so than a century ago. Passivity prevents its emergence. Our most vital need: others, seems so close and so far at the same time. Mercantile ties are both strong and fragile.

The 1991 Los Angeles riots went further than those of Watts in 1965. The succession of riots on estates shows a significant fraction of youth cannot be integrated. Here and there, in spite of mass unemployment, workers won't be blackmailed into accepting lower wages as barter against job creation. Koreans have proved the "World Company" spreads factory restlessness at the same time as profits, and "backward" Albania gave birth to a modern rising. When a sizeable minority fed up with virtual reality starts making possibilities real, revolution will rise again, terrible and anonymous.

This is dedicated to Jocelyne, the unknown worker.

1997

Chapter 1. Capitalism and Communism

Communism is not a programme one puts into practice or makes others put into practice, but a social movement. Those who develop and defend theoretical communism do not have any advantages over others except a clearer understanding and a more rigorous expression; like all others who are not especially concerned by theory, they feel the practical need for communism. They have no privilege whatsoever; they do not carry the knowledge that will set the revolution in motion; but, on the other hand, they have no fear of becoming “leaders” by explaining their positions. The communist revolution, like every other revolution, is the product of real needs and living conditions. The problem is to shed light on an existing historical movement.

Communism is not an ideal to be realized: it already exists, not as a society, but as an effort, a task to prepare for. It is the movement which tries to abolish the conditions of life determined by wage-labour, and it will abolish them by revolution. The discussion of communism is not academic. It is not a debate about what will be done tomorrow. It is an integral part of a whole series of immediate and distant tasks, among which discussion is only one aspect, an attempt to achieve theoretical understanding. Inversely, the tasks can be carried out more easily and efficiently if one can answer the question: where are we going?

We will not refute the CPs, the various brands of socialists, the extreme-left, etc., whose programmes merely modernize and democratize all existing features of the present world. The point isn't that these programmes are not communist, but that they are capitalist.

The explanations in this text do not originate in a desire to explain. They would not exist in this form, and a number of people would not have gathered to elaborate and publish them, if the contradictions and the practical social struggles which tear contemporary society apart did not show the new society taking form in the womb of the old, forcing people to be conscious of it.

A) Wage-Labour as a Social Relation

If one looks at modern society, it is obvious that in order to live, the great majority of people are forced to sell their labour power. All the physical and intellectual capacities existing in human beings, in their very personalities, which must be set in motion to produce useful things, can only be used if they are sold in exchange for wages. Labour power is a commodity like all other goods. The existence of exchange and wage-labour seems normal, inevitable. Yet the introduction of wage-labour required violence and was accompanied by social conflicts. The separation of the worker from the means of production, which has become a fact of life, accepted as such, was actually the result of a long evolution, and could only be accomplished by force.

In England, in the Netherlands, in France, from the 16th century on, economic and political violence expropriated craftsmen and peasants, repressed indigence and vagrancy, imposed wage-labour on the poor. In the 20th century, between 1930 and 1950, Russia had to decree a labour code which included capital punishment in order to organize the passage of millions of peasants to industrial wage-labour in a few decades. Seemingly normal facts: that an individual has nothing

but his labour power, that he must sell it to an enterprise to be able to live, that everything is a commodity, that social relations revolve around exchange, are the result of a long and violent process.

By means of its school system and its ideological and political life, contemporary society hides the past and present violence on which this situation rests. It hides both its origin and the mechanism which enables it to function. Everything appears to be the result of a free contract in which the individual, as a seller of labour power, encounters the factory, the shop, or the office. The existence of the commodity seems to be an obvious and natural phenomenon. Yet it causes periodic major and minor disasters: goods are destroyed to maintain their prices, existing capacities are not used, while elementary needs are not fulfilled. The two pillars of modern society, exchange and wage-labour, are not only the source of periodic and constant disasters, but have also created the conditions which make another society possible. Most importantly, they compel a large section of the present world to revolt against them, and to realize this possibility: communism.

By definition, all human activity is social. Human life only exists in groups, through numerous forms of association. The reproduction of living conditions is a collective activity from the start: both the reproduction of the human beings themselves and the reproduction of their means of existence. Indeed, what characterizes human society is the fact that it produces and reproduces the material conditions of its existence. Some animals use tools, but only man makes his tools. Between the individual or group and the fulfilment of needs comes the mediation of production, of work, which continually modifies the ways to act in and transform the environment. Other forms of life — bees, for example — make their own material conditions, but, at least as far as man can study them, their evolution seems at a standstill. Work, by contrast, is a continually changing appropriation and assimilation of man's environment. The relation of men to "nature" is also a relation among men and depends on their relations of production, just as the ideas they produce, the way they conceive the world, depend on their production relations.

The transformation of activity accompanies the transformation of the social context in which it takes place, i.e., the relations among people. Production relations into which people enter are independent of their will: each generation confronts technical and social conditions left by previous generations. But it can alter them, up to the limits allowed by the level of the material productive forces. What people call "history" does not achieve anything: history is made by people, but only to the extent that given possibilities allow. This is not to say that each important change in productive forces is automatically and immediately accompanied by a corresponding change in production relations. If this were true, there would be no revolutions. The new society bred by the old can only appear and triumph through a revolution, by destroying the entire political and ideological structure which until then allowed the survival of obsolete production relations.

Wage-labour was once a form of development, but it no longer is; for a long time it has been nothing but a hindrance, even a threat to the very existence of mankind.

What must be exposed, behind the material objects, the machines, the factories, the labourers who work there every day, the things they produce, is the social relation that regulates them, as well as its necessary and possible evolution.

B) Community and the Destruction of Community

Mankind first lived in relatively autonomous and scattered groups, in families (in the broadest sense: the family grouping all those of the same

blood), in tribes. Production consisted essentially of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Goods were not produced to be consumed after exchange, after being placed on a market. Production was directly social, without the mediation of exchange. The community distributed what it produced according to simple rules, and everyone directly got what it gave him. There was no individual production, i.e., no separation among individuals who are re-united only after production by an intermediate link, exchange, namely by comparing the various goods produced individually. Activities were decided (actually imposed on the group by necessity) and achieved in common, and their results were shared in common.

Many a “primitive” community could have accumulated surpluses and simply did not bother. As M. Sahlins pointed out, the age of scarcity often meant abundance, with lots of idle time — though that “time” has little relevance to ours. Explorers and anthropologists observed that food search and storing took a rather small portion of the day. “Productive” activity was part of a global relationship to the group and its environment.

Most of humankind, as we know, moved from hunting-gathering into agriculture and ended up developing surpluses, which communities started swapping.

This circulation could only be achieved by exchange, i.e., by taking into account, not in the mind, but in reality, what is common to the various goods which are to be transferred from one place to another. The products of human activity have one thing in common: they are all the result of a certain amount of energy, both individual and social. This is the abstract character of labour, which not only produces a useful thing, but also consumes energy, social energy. The value of a product, independently of its use, is the quantity of abstract labour it contains, i.e., the quantity of social energy necessary to reproduce it. Since this quantity can only be measured in terms of time, the value of a product is the time socially necessary to produce it, namely the average for a given society at a given moment in its history.

With the growth of its activities and needs, the community produces not only goods, but also commodities, goods which have a use value as well as an exchange value. Commerce first appears between communities, then penetrates inside communities, giving rise to specialized activities, trades, socially divided labour. The very nature of labour changes. With the exchange relation, labour becomes double labour, producing both use value and exchange value. Work is no longer integrated into the totality of social activity but becomes a specialized field, separated from the rest of the individual’s life. What the individual makes for himself and for the group is separate from what he makes for the purpose of exchange with goods from other communities. The second part of his activity means sacrifice, constraint, waste of time. Society becomes diversified, it separates into various members engaged in different trades, and into workers and non-workers. At this stage the community no longer exists.

The community needs the exchange relation to develop and to satisfy its growing needs. But the exchange relation destroys the community. It makes people see each other, and themselves, only as suppliers of goods. The use of the product I make for exchange no longer interests me; I am only interested in the use of the product I will get in exchange. But for the man who sells it to

¹ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*(New York: International Publishers, 1964).

me, this second use does not matter, for he is only interested in the use value of what I produced. What is use value for the one is only exchange value for the other, and vice versa.¹ The community disappeared on the day when its (former) members became interested in each other only to the extent that they had a material interest in each other. Not that altruism was the driving force of the primitive community, or should be the driving force of communism. But in one case the movement of interests drives individuals together and makes them act in common, whereas in the other it individualizes them and forces them to fight against one another. With the birth of exchange in the community, labour is no longer the realization of needs by the collectivity, but the means to obtain from others the satisfaction of one's needs.

While it developed exchange, the community tried to restrain it. It attempted to control or destroy surpluses or to establish strict rules to control the circulation of goods. But exchange triumphed in the end. Wherever it did not, the society ceased to be active, and was eventually crushed by the invasion of merchant society.

As long as goods are not produced separately, as long as there is no division of labour, one cannot compare the respective values of two goods, since they are produced and distributed in common. The moment of exchange, during which the labour times of two products are measured and the products are then exchanged accordingly, does not yet exist. The abstract character of labour appears only when social relations require it. This can only happen when, with technical progress, it becomes necessary for the development of productive forces that men specialize in trades and exchange their products with each other and also with other groups, who have become States. With these two prerequisites value, average labour time, becomes the instrument of measure. At the root of this phenomenon are practical relations among people whose real needs are developing.

Value does not appear because it is a convenient measure. When the social relations of the primitive community are replaced by enlarged and more diversified relations, value appears as an indispensable mediation of human activities. It is not surprising that the average socially necessary labour time should be used as a measure since at this stage labour is the essential element in the production of wealth: it is the one element different tasks have in common: they all have the property of consuming a certain quantity of human labour power, regardless of the particular way in which this power is used. Corresponding to the abstract character of labour, value represents its abstraction, its general and social character, apart from all differences in nature between the objects the labour can produce.

C) Commodities

Economic and social progress improves the efficiency of human organization and its capacity to associate the components of the labour process — first of all labour power. Then appears the difference (and the opposition) between workers and non-workers, between those who organize work and those who work. The first towns and great irrigation projects are born out of this increase of productive efficiency. Commerce appears as a special activity: now there are men who do not make a living by producing, but by mediating between the various activities of the separate units of production. A large proportion of goods is nothing but commodities. To be used, to put into practice their use value, their ability to fulfil a need, they must be bought, they must fulfil their exchange value. Otherwise, although they exist as material and concrete objects, they

do not exist from the point of view of society. One has no right to use them. This fact proves that the commodity is not just a thing, but first and foremost a social relation ruled by a definite logic, the logic of exchange, and not of the fulfilment of needs. Use value is now just the support of value. Production becomes a sphere distinct from consumption; work becomes a sphere distinct from non-work. Ownership is the legal framework of the separation between activities, between men, between units of production. The slave is a commodity for his owner, who buys a man to make him work.

The existence of a mediation on the level of the organization of production (exchange) is accompanied by the existence of a mediation on the level of the organization of people: the State is indispensable as a force gathering the elements of society, in the interests of the ruling class. Unification is made necessary by the destruction of the coherence of the primitive community. Society is forced to maintain its cohesion by creating an institution which is nourished by it.

Exchange becomes visible and concrete with the birth of money. The abstraction, value, is materialized in money, becomes a commodity, and shows its tendency to become independent, to detach itself from what it comes from and represents: use values, real goods. Compared to simple exchange: x quantity of product A against y quantity of product B, money permits a universalization, where anything can be obtained for a quantity of abstract labour-time crystallized in money. Money is labour-time abstracted from labour and solidified in a durable, measurable, transportable form. Money is the visible, even tangible, manifestation of the common element in all commodities — not two or several commodities, but all possible commodities. Money allows its owner to command the work of others, at any time and anywhere in the world. With money it is possible to escape from the limits of time and space. A tendency towards a universal economy is at work around some great centres from ancient times to the Middle Ages, but it fails to reach its aim. The retreats of the empires, and their destruction, illustrate this succession of failures. Only capitalism creates, from the 16th century on, but mainly in the 19th and 20th centuries, the necessary basis for a durable universal economy.

D) Capital

Capital is a production relation which establishes a completely new and extremely efficient bond between living labour and past labour (accumulated by previous generations). But as with the birth of exchange, the rise of capital is not the result of a decision or a plan, but a consequence of real social relations which lead to a qualitatively new development in certain Western European countries after the Middle Ages.

Merchants had accumulated large sums of money, in various forms, and perfected systems of banking and credit. It was possible to use these sums: the first machines (textile) were invented, and thousands of poor people (former peasants or craftsmen) had lost their instruments of production and were forced to accept the new production relation: wage-labour. The prerequisite was accumulated, stored-up labour in the form of machines (and later, factories). This past labour was to be set in motion by the living labour of those who had not been able to realize such an accumulation of raw materials and means of production. Until then, exchange was neither the motive nor the regulator of production. Commerce alone, simple commodity production (as opposed to capitalist commodity production) could not provide the stability, the durability required by the socialization and unification of the world. This was accomplished by capitalist commodity

production, and the means with which it accomplished this consisted of the production which it took over.

The slave did not sell his labour power: his owner bought the slave himself, and put him to work. In capitalism, living labour is bought by the means of production which it sets into motion. The role of the capitalist is not negligible, but quite secondary: “the capitalist as such is only a function of capital,” the leader of social production. What is important is the development of past labour by living labour. To invest, to accumulate — these are the mottos of capital (the priority given to heavy industry in all the so-called socialist countries is nothing other than the sign of the development of capitalism). But the aim of capital is not to accumulate use values. Capital only multiplies factories, railways, etc., to accumulate value. Capital is first of all a sum of value, of abstract labour crystallized in the form of money, finance capital, shares, bonds, etc., which tries to increase. A sum x of value must give $x + \text{profit}$ at the end of the cycle. To valorize itself, value buys labour power.

This commodity is quite special, as its consumption furnishes work, hence new value; whereas means of production yield no more than their own value. Therefore the use of labour power furnishes a supplementary value. The origin of bourgeois wealth is to be found in this surplus value, in this difference between the value created by the wage-labourer in his work, and the value necessary for the reproduction of his labour-power. Wages only cover the expenses of that reproduction (the means of subsistence of the worker and his family).

It is easy to see from this analysis that the essential fact is not the appropriation of surplus-value by the capitalist as an individual. Communism has nothing to do with the idea that workers have to partially or totally recover the surplus value for themselves, for a simple and obvious reason: some of the resources must be used for the renewal of equipment, for new production, etc. The point is not that a handful of people take a disproportionately large share of the surplus-value. If these people were eliminated, while the rest of the system remained the same, part of the surplus-value would be given to the workers and the rest would be invested in collective and social equipment, welfare, etc.: this is in fact the programme of the left, including the official CPs. Actually the logic of the system of value would always result in the development of production for a maximal valorization. As long as the basis of society is a mechanism mingling two processes, a process of real work, and a process of valorization, value dominates society. The change brought about by capital is to have conquered production, and thus to have socialized the world since the 19th century, with industrial plants, means of transportation, storage, and quick transmission of information. But in the capitalist cycle the fulfilment of needs is only a by-product, and not the driving force of the mechanism. Valorization is the aim: fulfilment of needs is at best a means, since what has been produced must be sold.

The enterprise is the location and the centre of capitalist production; each industrial or agricultural enterprise works as a rallying point for a sum of value looking for an increase. The enterprise must make profits. Here again the law of profit has nothing to do with the action of a few “big” capitalists, and communism does not mean getting rid of fat cigar smokers wearing top hats at horse shows. What matters is not the individual profits made by capitalists, but the constraint, the orientation imposed upon production and society by this system which dictates how to work and what to consume. The whole demagogy about the rich and the poor confuses the issue. Communism does not mean taking money from the rich, nor revolutionaries distributing it to the poor.

E) Competition

Competition takes place among the various enterprises: each fights against the others on the market, each fights to corner the market. We have shown how the various aspects of human activity got separated. The exchange relation increases the division of society into trades, which in turn helps the development of the commodity system. However, as can still be seen nowadays, even in advanced countries, in the countryside for instance, there is no real competition among activities which are separate but stably divided among the baker, the shoemaker, etc. Capitalism is not only a division of society into various trades, but above all a permanent struggle between the various components of industry. Each sum of value exists only against the others. What ideology calls selfishness and the struggle of all against all, is the indispensable complement of a world where one has to fight to be able to sell. Thus economic violence, and armed violence as its consequence, are integral parts of the capitalist system.

Competition had positive effects in the past: it broke the limits of feudal regulations and corporative constraints, and allowed capital to invade the world. It has now become a source of waste, leading both to the development of useless or destructive production the valorization of which is quicker, or to hinder important production, if supply and demand conflict with each other.

Competition is the separation of productive systems into autonomous centres which are rival poles (punkte), each seeking to increase its respective sum of value. Neither "organization" nor "planning" nor any sort of control can bring this to an end. State power and "people's power" are equally incapable of solving this problem. The motive force of competition is not the freedom of individuals, nor even of the capitalists, but the freedom of capital. It can only live by devouring itself. The form destroys its content to survive as a form. It destroys its material components (living labour and past labour) to survive as a sum of value valorizing itself.

Each of the various competing capitals has a particular profit rate. But capitals move from one branch to another, looking for the highest possible rate of profit. They move to the most profitable branch and neglect the others. When this branch is saturated with capital, its profitability decreases and capitals move to another branch (this dynamic is modified, but not abolished, by the establishment of monopolies). This constant process results in the stabilisation of the profit rate around an average rate, in a given society at a definite moment. Each capital tends to be rewarded, not according to the profit rate it realizes in its own enterprise, but according to the average social rate, in proportion to the sum of value invested in the enterprise. So each capital does not exploit its own workers, but the whole capital exploits the whole working class. In the movement of capitals, capital acts and reveals itself as a social power, dominating all society, and thus acquires coherence in spite of the competition which opposes it to itself. It gets unified and becomes a social force. It is a relatively homogeneous totality in its conflicts with the proletariat or with other capitalist (national) units. It organizes the relations and needs of the whole society according to its interests. This mechanism exists in every country: capital constitutes the State and the nation against other national capitals, but also against the proletariat. The opposition of capitalist states turns war into the ultimate means of resolving problems of competition among national capitals.

Nothing changes so long as there are production units trying to increase their respective amounts of value. What happens if the State ("democratic," "workers'," "proletarian," etc.) takes

² Engels, Selected Writings, pp.217–218: "The modern State ...is...the ideal personification of the total national

all enterprises under its control, while keeping them as enterprises? Either State enterprises obey the law of profit and value, and nothing changes. Or they do not obey it without destroying it, and then everything goes wrong.²

Inside the enterprise, organization is rational: capital imposes its despotism on the workers. Outside, on the market, where each enterprise meets the others, order exists only as the permanent and periodical suppression of disorder, accompanied by crises and destruction. Only communism can destroy this organized anarchy, by suppressing the enterprise as a separate entity.

F) Crisis

On the one hand capital has socialized the world. All production tends to be the result of the activity of all mankind. On the other hand, the world remains divided into competing enterprises, which try to produce what is profitable, and produce to sell as much as possible. Each enterprise tries to valorize its capital in the best possible conditions. Each tends to produce more than the market can absorb, intends to sell all of it, and hopes that only its competitors will suffer from overproduction.³

What results is the development of activities devoted to the promotion of sales. Unproductive workers, manual or intellectual, who circulate value, increase in relation to manual or intellectual workers who produce value. The circulation in question is not the physical movement of goods. The transportation industry produces real value, since the simple fact of moving goods from one place to another adds value to them, corresponds to a real change of their use value: the result is that goods are available in a different place from the one where they were manufactured, which of course increases their utility. Circulation refers to value, not to physical displacement. A thing does not actually move, for instance, if its owner changes while it remains in the same warehouse. By this operation, it has been bought and sold, but its use value has not been changed, increased. It is different in the case of transport.

The problems caused by buying and selling, by the realization of the value of the product on the market, create a complex mechanism, including credit, banking, insurance and advertisement. Capital becomes a sort of parasite absorbing a huge and growing part of society's total resources in the costs of the management of value. Bookkeeping, which is a necessary function in any developed social organization, has now become a ruinous and bureaucratic machine overwhelming society and real needs instead of helping to fulfil them. At the same time capital grows more concentrated and centralized: monopolies lessen overproduction problems while further aggravating them. Capital can only get out of this situation through periodic crises, which temporarily solve the problem by re-adjusting supply to demand (only solvent demand, since capitalism only knows one way of circulating products: buying and selling; it does not care if real demand (needs) is not fulfilled; in fact, capital generates underproduction in relation to the real needs it does not fulfil).

Capitalist crises are more than crises of commodities. They are crises which link production to value in such a way that production is governed by value. One can understand this by comparing

capital.”

³ Mattick's Marx and Keynes (Porter Sargent, 1969) gives an excellent analysis of capitalist crises, although it fails to grasp the dynamics of communism (See below, “Leninism and the Ultra-Left”).

them with some pre-capitalist crisis, before the 19th century. A decrease of agricultural production resulted from bad harvests. The peasants bought fewer industrial goods such as clothes, and industry, which was still very weak, was in trouble. These crises were based on a natural (climatic) phenomenon. But merchants speculated on corn and kept it in storage to drive its price up. Eventually there were famines here and there. The very existence of commodities and money is the condition for crises: there is a separation (materialized in time) between the two operations of buying and selling. From the standpoint of the merchant and of the money trying to increase its volume, buying and selling corn are two distinct matters: the period of time between them is determined only by the amount and rate of the expected profit. People died during the period that separates production and consumption. But in this case the mercantile system only acted as an aggravating factor in a crisis caused by natural conditions. In such cases, the social context is pre-capitalist, or that of a weak capitalism, as in countries like present-day China and Russia where bad harvests still have a strong influence on the economy.

The capitalist crisis, on the other hand, is the product of the forced union of value and production. Take a car maker. Competition forces him to raise productivity and get a maximum value output through a minimal input. A crisis arises when accumulation does not go with a sufficient decrease in the costs of production. Thousands of cars may come off the assembly lines every day, and even find buyers, but manufacturing and selling them does not valorize this capital enough compared to others. So the company streamlines production, invests more, makes up profit loss with the number of cars sold, resorts to credit, mergers, government intervention, etc., eventually produces as if demand was to expand for ever, and loses more and more. Crises lie neither in the exhaustion of markets, nor in overgenerous pay rises, but in falling profits (to which workers' militancy contribute): as a sum of value, capital finds it increasingly hard to valorize itself at the average rate.

Crises do not only show how the link between use value and exchange value, between the utility and the exchangeability of a product, bursts into pieces. They do not only prove that the logic of this world is the need of enterprises to increase the amount of value, and not the fulfilment of people's needs — nor the enrichment of capitalists, as the vulgar critics of capitalism say. The important thing is the difference with pre-capitalist crises. These originated from an unavoidable necessity (a bad harvest, for instance) which mercantile relations only aggravated. Modern crises show that they have no unavoidable rational basis. Their cause is no longer natural; it is social. All the elements of industrial activity are present: raw materials, machines, workers, but they are not used — or only partially used. They are not just things, material objects, but a social relationship. Actually they only exist in this society if value unites them. This phenomenon is not "industrial"; it does not come from the technical requirements of production. It is a social relation, through which the whole productive complex, and in fact the entire social structure (in so far as production has conquered society) are ruled by mercantile logic. Communism's only goal is to destroy this commodity relation, and thus to reorganize and transform the entire society (see below).

The network of enterprises — as centres and instruments of value — becomes a power above society. People's needs of all kinds (lodging, food, "culture") only exist after being subjected to this system, and even shaped by it.⁴ Production is not determined by needs, but needs are determined by production — for valorization. Offices are built more readily than needed lodgings. And many

⁴ F. Perlman, *The Reproduction of Daily Life*, Black & Red, 1969.

houses as well as thousands of flats remain empty for 10 months out of 12 because the owners or tenants who bought the dwelling or paid the rent are the only ones who can occupy them. Agriculture is largely neglected by capital, on a worldwide scale, and only developed where it allows valorization, while hundreds of millions of people starve. The automobile industry is a branch developed beyond people's needs in advanced countries, because its profitability keeps it growing in spite of all its incoherence. Poorly developed countries can only build factories which will yield an average rate of profit. The tendency to over-production requires a permanent war economy in nearly all advanced countries; these destructive forces are made operative when necessary, as wars are still another means of counteracting the tendency to crisis.

Wage-labour itself has been an absurdity for several decades. It forces one part of the workers to engage in exhausting factory work; another part, which is very numerous in countries like the US, works in the unproductive sector; the function of this sector is to make sales easier, and to absorb workers rejected by mechanisation and automation, thus providing a mass of consumers, and being another aspect of "crisis management". Capital takes possession of all the sciences and techniques: in the productive field, it orients research toward the study of what will bring a maximum profit; in the unproductive field, it develops management and marketing. Thus mankind tends to be divided into three groups:

- productive workers, often physically destroyed by their work;
- unproductive workers, the vast majority of whom are only a source of waste;
- and the mass of non-wage earners, some of them in the developed countries, but most of them in poor countries: capital cannot integrate them in any way, and hundreds of thousands of them are periodically destroyed in wars directly or indirectly caused by the capitalist-imperialist organization of the world economy.

The development of some backward countries, like Brazil, is quite real, but can only be achieved through the partial or total destruction of former ways of life. The introduction of the commodity economy deprives poor peasants of their means of subsistence and drives them to the misery of the overcrowded towns. Only a minority of the population is "lucky" enough to be able to work in factories and offices; the rest is under-employed or unemployed.

G) Proletariat and Revolution

Capital creates a network of enterprises which exist only for and through profit and are protected by States which are no more than anti-communist organizations, and simultaneously creates the mass of individuals who are forced to rise against capital itself. This mass is not homogeneous, but it will forge its unity in the communist revolution, although its components will not play the same role.

A revolution is the result of real needs; it originates in material living conditions which have become unbearable. This also applies to the proletariat, which is brought into existence by capital. A large part of the world's population must sell its labour power in order to live, since it has no means of production. Some sell their labour and are productive. Others sell it and are unproductive. Still others cannot sell it: capital only buys living labour if it can hope to valorize itself at a reasonable rate (the average rate of profit); they are excluded from production.

If one identifies proletarian with factory worker (or even worse: with manual labourer), or with the poor, then one cannot see what is subversive in the proletarian condition. The proletariat is

the negation of this society. It is not the collection of the poor, but of those who are desperate, those who have no reserves (les sans-réserves in French, or senza riserve in Italian),⁵ who have nothing to lose but their chains; those who are nothing, have nothing, and cannot liberate themselves without destroying the whole social order. The proletariat is the dissolution of present society, because this society deprives it of nearly all its positive aspects. Thus the proletariat is also its own destruction. All theories (either bourgeois, fascist, stalinist, left-wing or “gauchistes”) which in any way glorify and praise the proletariat as it is and claim for it the positive role of defending values and regenerating society, are counter-revolutionary. Worship of the proletariat has become one of the most efficient and dangerous weapons of capital. Most proles are low paid, and a lot work in production, yet their emergence as the proletariat derives not from being low paid producers, but from being “cut off”, alienated, with no control either over their lives or the meaning of what they have to do to earn a living.

Defining the proletariat has little to do with sociology. Without the possibility of communism, theories of “the proletariat” would be tantamount to metaphysics. Our only vindication is that whenever it autonomously interfered with the running of society, the proletariat has repeatedly acted as negation of the existing order of things, has offered it no positive values or role, and has groped for something else.

Being what produces value and can do away with a world based on value, the proletariat includes for instance the unemployed and many housewives, since capitalism hires and fires the former, and utilizes the labour of the latter to increase the total mass of extracted value.

The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, are ruling class not because they’re rich and the rest of the population aren’t. Being bourgeois brings them riches, not the other way round. They are ruling class because they control the economy — employees as well as machines. Ownership strictly speaking is only a form of class power that appears in particular variants of capitalism.

The proletariat is not the working class, rather the class of the critique of work. It is the ever-present destruction of the old world, but only potentially; it becomes real only in a moment of social tension and upheaval, when it is compelled by capital to be the agent of communism. It only becomes the subversion of established society when it unifies itself, and organizes itself, not in order to make itself the dominant class, like the bourgeoisie in its time, but in order to destroy the society of classes; at that point there is only one social agent: mankind. But apart from such a period of conflict and the period which precedes it, the proletariat is reduced to the status of an element of capital, a wheel within a mechanism (and of course this is precisely the aspect glorified by capital, which worships the worker only as a part of the existing social system).

Although not devoid of “ouvriérisme” and labourism (the other side of intellectualism), radical thinking did not eulogize the working class nor regard manual work as infinite bliss. It gave productive workers a decisive (but not exclusive) part because their place in production puts them in a better situation to revolutionize it. Only in this sense does the blue collar (often wearing white overalls, and possibly a tie) keep a central role, in so far as his/her social function enables him/her to carry out different tasks from others. Yet with the spread of unemployment, casual labour, longer schooling, training periods at any time of life, temp and part-time jobs, forced early retirement, and the odd mixture of welfare and workfare whereby people move out of misery into

⁵ The concept of those who have “no reserves” was formulated by the Italian communist, Amadeo Bordiga, in the years following World War II. Bordiga’s purpose was not to create a new definition of the proletariat, but to go back to the general definition. What Capital describes can and must be understood together with earlier analyses of the proletariat, for instance, the Contribution to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Law: Introduction(1843).

work and then again into poverty and moonlighting, when dole money sometimes equals low pay, it is getting harder to tell work from non-work.

We may well soon be entering a phase similar to the dissolution Marx's early writings refer to. In every period of strong historical disturbances (the 1840s as after 1917), the proletariat reflects the loosening of social boundaries (sections of both working and middle classes slip down the social ladder or fear they might) and the weakening of traditional values (culture is no longer a unifier). The conditions of life of the old society are already negated in those of the proles. Not hippies or punks, but modern capitalism makes a sham of the work ethic. Property, family, nation, morals, politics in the bourgeois sense, tend to decay within the proletarian condition.

H) Formation of the Human Community

The primitive community is too poor and weak to take advantage of the potentialities of labour. It only knows work in its immediate form. Labour is not crystallized, accumulated in instruments; little past labour is stored. When this becomes more common, exchange is necessary: production can be measured only by abstract labour, by average labour time, in order to circulate. Living labour is the essential element of activity, and labour time is the necessary measure. Labour time is materialized in money. Hence the exploitation of classes by other classes, the aggravation of natural catastrophes (see above, on pre-capitalist crises). Hence the rise and fall of States and sometimes empires which can grow only by fighting against one another. Sometimes exchange relations come to an end between the various parts of the civilized (i.e., mercantile) world, after the death of one or several empires. Such an interruption in the development may last for centuries, during which the economy seems to go backwards, towards a subsistence economy.

In this period mankind does not have a productive apparatus capable of making the exploitation of human labour useless and even ruinous. The role of capitalism is precisely to accumulate past labour. The existence of the entire industrial complex, of all fixed capital, proves that the social character of human activity has finally been materialized in an instrument capable of creating, not a new paradise on earth, but a development making the best possible use of available resources to fulfil needs, and producing new resources in response to needs. If this industrial complex has turned into the essential element of production, then the role of value as a regulator, a role which corresponded to the stage when living labour was the main productive factor, is deprived of all meaning; value becomes unnecessary to production. Its survival is now catastrophic. Value, concretized in money in all its forms, from the simplest to the most elaborate, results from the general character of labour, from the energy (both individual and social) which is produced and consumed by labour. Value remains the necessary mediator as long as that energy has not created a unified productive system throughout the world: it then becomes a hindrance.⁶

Communism means the end of a series of mediations which were previously necessary (in spite of the misery they entailed) to accumulate enough past labour to enable men to do without these mediations. Value is such a mediation: it is now useless to have an element external to social activities to connect and stimulate them. The accumulated productive infrastructure only needs to be transformed and developed. Communism compares use values to decide to develop a given production rather than another one. It does not reduce the components of social life to a common denominator (the average labour time contained in them). Communism organizes its

⁶ See Marx's manuscripts of 1857–1858, often referred to by their German title: *The Grundrisse*, Pelican, 1973.

material life on the basis of the confrontation and interplay of needs — which does not exclude conflicts and even some form of violence. Men will not turn into angels: why should they?

Communism is also the end of any element necessary for the unification of society: it is the end of politics. It is neither democratic nor dictatorial. Of course it is “democratic” if this word means that everyone will be in charge of all social activities. This will not be so because of people’s will to manage society, or because of a democratic principle, but because the organization of activities can only be carried out by those taking part in them. However, as opposed to what the democrats say, this will be possible only through communism, where all the elements of life are part of the community, when all separate activity and all isolated production are abolished. This can only be achieved through the destruction of value. Exchange among enterprises excludes all possibilities for the collectivity to be in charge of its life (and first of all its material life). The aim of exchange and value is radically opposed to that of people — General Motors, Woolworth’s or nuclear power stations will never be democratically run. The enterprise tries to valorize itself and accepts no leadership but that which allows it to reach its aim (this is why capitalists are only the officials of capital). The enterprise manages its managers. The elimination of the limits of the enterprise, the destruction of the commodity relation which compels every individual to regard and treat all others as means to earn his living, are the only conditions for self-organization. Management problems are secondary, and it is absurd to want everyone to have a turn managing society. Bookkeeping and administrative work will become activities similar to all others, without privilege; anyone can take part in them or not take part in them.

“Democracy is a contradiction in terms, a lie and indeed sheer hypocrisy... In my opinion, this applies to all forms of government. Political freedom is a farce and the worst possible slavery; such a fictitious freedom is the worst enslavement. So is political equality: this is why democracy must be torn to pieces as well as any other form of government. Such a hypocritical form cannot go on. Its inherent contradiction must be exposed in broad daylight: either it means true slavery, which implies open despotism; or it means real freedom and real equality, which implies communism.”⁷

In communism, an external force which unifies individuals is useless. Utopian socialists never understood this. Nearly all their imaginary societies, whatever their merits or their visionary power, need very strict planning and quasi totalitarian organization. These socialists sought to create a link which is created in practice whenever people associate in groups. In order to avoid exploitation and anarchy at the same time, Utopian socialists organized social life in advance. Others, from the anarchist standpoint, refuse such authoritarianism and want society to be a permanent creation. But the problem lies elsewhere: only determined social relations based on a given level of development of material production make harmony among individuals both possible and necessary (which includes conflicts). Then individuals can fulfil their needs, but only through automatic participation in the functioning of the group, without being mere tools of the group. Communism has no need to unify what used to be separate but no longer is.

This is also true on a world and even universal scale. States and nations, which were necessary instruments of development, are now purely reactionary organizations, and the divisions they maintain are an obstacle to development: the only possible dimension is that of mankind.

The opposition between manual and intellectual, between nature and culture, used to make sense. Separation between the one who worked and the one who organized work increased the

⁷ Engels, “Progress of Social Reform on the Continent,” *The New Moral World*, 4-11-1843.

efficiency of labour. The current level of development no longer needs this, and this division is nothing but a hindrance which exhibits its absurdity in all aspects of professional, “cultural,” and school life. Communism destroys the division between workers crippled by manual labour and workers made useless in offices.

This also applies to the opposition between man and his environment. In former times man could only socialize the world by fighting against the domination of “nature.” Nowadays he is a threat to nature. Communism is the reconciliation of man and nature.

Communism is the end of the economy as a separate and privileged field on which everything else depends while despising and fearing it. Man produces and reproduces his conditions of existence: ever since the disintegration of the primitive community, but in the purest form under capitalism, work, i.e., the activity through which man appropriates his environment, has become a compulsion, opposed to relaxation, to leisure, to “real” life. This stage was historically necessary to create the past labour which makes possible the elimination of this enslavement. With capital, production (= production for valorization) becomes the ruler of the world. It is a dictatorship of production relations over society. When one produces, one sacrifices one’s life-time in order to enjoy life afterwards; this enjoyment is usually disconnected from the nature of the work, which is just a means of supporting one’s life. Communism dissolves production relations and combines them with social relations. It does not know any separate activity, any work opposed to play. The obligation of doing the same work for a lifetime, of being a manual or an intellectual worker, disappears. The fact that accumulated labour includes and integrates all science and technique makes it possible for research and work, reflection and action, teaching and working, to become a single activity. Some tasks can be taken in charge by everyone, and the generalisation of automation profoundly transforms productive activity. Communism supports neither play against work, nor non-work against work. These limited and partial notions are still capitalist realities. Activity as the production-reproduction of the conditions of life (material, affective, cultural, etc.) is the very nature of humanity.

Man collectively creates the means of his existence, and transforms them. He cannot receive them from machines: in that case mankind would be reduced to the situation of a child, who receives toys without knowing where they originate. Their origin does not even exist for him: the toys are simply there. Likewise communism does not turn work into something perpetually pleasant and joyous. Human life is effort and pleasure. Even the activity of the poet includes painful moments. Communism can only abolish the separation between effort and enjoyment, creation and recreation, work and play.

I) Communization

Communism is mankind’s appropriation of its wealth, and implies an inevitable and complete transformation of this wealth. This requires the destruction of enterprises as separate units and therefore of the law of value: not in order to socialize profit, but to circulate goods between industrial centres without the mediation of value. This does not mean that communism will make use of the productive system as it is left by capitalism. The problem is not to get rid of the “bad” side of capital (valorization) while keeping the “good” side (production). As we have seen, value and the logic of profit impose a certain type of production, develop some branches and neglect others, and praise of productivity and growth is singing hymns to the glory of capital.

On the other hand, to revolutionize production, to destroy enterprises as such, the communist revolution is bound to make use of production. This is its essential “lever,” at least during one phase. The aim is not to take over the factories only to remain there to manage them, but to get out of them, to connect them to each other without exchange, which destroys them as enterprises. Such a movement almost automatically begins by reducing and then suppressing the opposition between town and country and the dissociation between industry and other activities. Today industry is stifled within its own limits while it stifles other sectors.

Capital lives to accumulate value: it fixes this value in the form of stored labour, past labour. Accumulation and production become ends in themselves. Everything is subordinated to them: capital feeds its investments with human labour. At the same time it develops unproductive labour, as has been shown. The communist revolution is a rebellion against this absurdity. It is also a dis-accumulation, not so as to return to forms of life which are now gone forever, but to put things right: up to now man has been sacrificed to investment; nowadays the reverse is possible. Communism is opposed to productivism, and equally to the illusion of ecological development within the existing economic framework. “Zero growth” is still growth. The official spokespersons of ecology never voice a critique of economy as value-measuring, they just want to wisely keep money-led quantities under control.

Communism is not a continuation of capitalism in a more rational, more efficient, more modern, and less unequal, less anarchic form. It does not take the old material bases as it finds them: it overthrows them.

Communism is not a set of measures to be put into practice after the seizure of power. It is a movement which already exists, not as a mode of production (there can be no communist island within capitalist society), but as a tendency which originates in real needs. Communism does not even know what value is. The point is not that one fine day a large number of people start to destroy value and profit. All past revolutionary movements were able to bring society to a standstill, and waited for something to come out of this universal stoppage. Communization, on the contrary, will circulate goods without money, open the gate isolating a factory from its neighbourhood, close down another factory where the work process is too alienating to be technically improved, do away with school as a specialized place which cuts off learning from doing for 15 odd years, pull down walls that force people to imprison themselves in 3-room family units — in short, it will tend to break all separations.

The mechanism of the communist revolution is a product of struggles. Their development leads to a time when society forces all individuals whom it leaves with no other perspective to establish new social relations. If a number of social struggles now seem to come to nothing, it is because their only possible continuation would be communism, whatever those who take part in them may now think. Even when workers are just making demands they often come to a point when there is no other solution but a violent clash with the State and its assistants, the unions. In that case, armed struggle and insurrection imply the application of a social programme, and the use of the economy as a weapon (see above, on the proletariat). The military aspect, as important as it may be, depends on the social content of the struggle. To be able to defeat its enemies on a military level, the proletariat — whatever its consciousness — transforms society in a communist way.

⁸ Engels, Conditions and Prospects of a War of the Holy Alliance against a Revolutionary France in 1852.

“Modern strategy means the emancipation of the bourgeoisie and the peasantry: it is the military expression of that emancipation. The emancipation of the proletariat will also have a particular military expression and a new specific warfare. That is clear. We can even analyse such a strategy from the material conditions of the proletariat.”⁸

Up to now struggles have not reached the stage when their military development would have made necessary the appearance of the new society. In the most important social conflicts, in Germany between 1919 and 1921, the proletariat, in spite of the violence of the civil war, did not reach this stage. Yet the communist perspective was present underneath these encounters, which are meaningless if one does not take it into account. The bourgeoisie was able to use the weapon of the economy in its own interests by dividing the working class through unemployment, for instance. The proletariat was unable to use the economy in its own interests, and struggled mainly by military means; it went so far as to create a Red Army in the Ruhr in 1920, yet never used the weapon which its own social function gives it.

In a different context, some riots in the US began a social transformation, but only on the level of the commodity, and not of capital itself. These people were only one part of the proletariat, and often had no possibility of using the “lever” of production because they were excluded from it. They were outside the factories. However, the communist revolution implies an action from the enterprise, to destroy it as such. The rebellions in the US remained on the level of consumption and distribution.⁹ Communism cannot develop without attacking the heart of the matter, the centre where surplus-value is produced: production. But it only uses this lever to destroy it.

Those who have no reserves make the revolution: they are forced to establish the social relations which jut out of the existing society. This break implies a crisis, which can be very different from that of 1929, when a large part of the economy came to a standstill. If the various elements rebelling against wage labour are to be unified, society will have to be in such trouble that it will not be able to isolate each struggle from the others. The communist revolution is neither the sum of the present day movements, nor their transformation through the intervention of a “vanguard.” Of course such a mechanism can only take place on a world-wide scale, and first of all in several advanced countries.

The main question is not the seizure of power by the workers. It is absurd to advocate the dictatorship of the working class as it is now. The workers as they are now are incapable of managing anything: they are just a part of the valorization mechanism, and are subjected to the dictatorship of capital. The dictatorship of the existing working class cannot be anything but the dictatorship of its representatives, i.e., the leaders of the unions and workers’ parties. This is the state of affairs in the “socialist” countries, and it is the programme of the democratic left in the rest of the world.

Revolution has, but is not a problem of organization. All theories of “workers’ government” or “workers’ power” only propose alternative solutions to the crisis of capital. Revolution is first of all a transformation of society, i.e., of what constitutes relations among people, and between people and their means of life. Organizational problems and “leaders” are secondary: they depend on what the revolution achieves. This applies as much to the start of the communist revolution as to the functioning of the society which arises out of it. Revolution will not happen on the day when 51% of the workers become revolutionary; and it will not begin by setting up a decision-making apparatus. It is precisely capitalism that perpetually deals with problems of management

⁹ See *The Rise and Fall of the Spectacular Commodity Economy*(1965).

and leadership. The organizational form of the communist revolution, as of any social movement, depends on its content. The way the party, the organization of the revolution, constitutes itself and acts, depends on the tasks to be realized.

In the 19th century, and even at the time of the first world war, the material conditions of communism were still to be created, at least in some countries (France, Italy, Russia, etc.). A communist revolution would first have had to develop productive forces, to put the petite bourgeoisie to work, to generalize industrial labour, with the rule: no work, no food (of course this only applied to those able to work). But the revolution did not come, and its German stronghold was crushed. Its tasks have since been fulfilled by capitalist economic growth. The material basis of communism now exists. There is no longer any need to send unproductive workers to the factory; the problem is to create the basis of another “industry,” totally different from the present one. Many factories will have to be closed and compulsory labour is now out of the question: what we want is the abolition of work as an activity separate from the rest of life. It would be pointless to put an end to garbage collection as a job some have to do for years, if the whole process and logic of garbage creation and disposal did not change at the same time.

Underdeveloped countries — to use a dated but not inadequate phrase — will not have to go through industrialization. In many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, capital oppresses labour but has not subjugated it to “real” domination. Old forms of social communal life still exist. Communism would regenerate a lot of them — as Marx thought of the Russian peasant commune — with the help of some “western” technology applied in a different way. In many respects, such areas may prove easier to communize than the huge motorcar-adapted and screen-addicted “civilized” conurbations. In other words, a worldwide process of dis-accumulation.

J) States and How to Get Rid of Them

The State was born out of human beings’ inability to manage their lives. It is the unity — symbolic and material — of the disunited. As soon as proletarians appropriate their means of existence, this mediation begins to lose its function, but destroying it is not an automatic process. It will not disappear little by little as the non-mercantile sphere gets bigger and bigger. Actually, such a sphere would be fragile if it let the central governmental machinery go on, as in Spain 1936–37. No State structure will wither away on its own.

Communizing is therefore more than an addition of direct piecemeal actions. Capital will be sapped by general subversion through which people take their relationships with the world into their own hands. But nothing decisive will be achieved as long as the State retains some power. Society is not just a capillary network: relationships are centralized in a force which concentrates the power to preserve this society. Capitalism would be too happy to see us change our lives

¹⁰ Marx (notably in the 1844 article *The King of Prussia and social reform*, and other early works) developed a critique of politics, and opposed “political” to “social” revolution: the former rearranged links between individuals and groups without much change in what they actually do, the latter acted upon how people reproduce their means of existence, their way of life, their real condition, thus at the same time transforming how they relate to each other.

One of the very first rebellious gestures is to revolt against control over our lives from above, by a teacher, a boss, a policeman, a social worker, a union leader, a statesman... Then politics walks in and reduces aspirations and desires to a problem of power — be it handed to a party, or shared by everyone. But what we lack is the power to produce our life. A world where all electricity comes to us from mammoth (coal, fuel-oil or nuclear) power stations, will always remain out of our reach. Only the political mind thinks revolution is primarily a question of power seizure and/or redistribution.

locally while it carries on on a global scale. As a central force, the State has to be destroyed by central action, as well as its power dissolved everywhere. The communist movement is anti-political, not a-political.¹⁰

K) Communism as a Present Social Movement

Communism is not only a social system, a mode of production, which will exist in the future, after “the revolution.” This revolution is in fact an encounter between two worlds:

1) on the one hand, all those who are rejected, excluded from all real enjoyment, whose very existence is sometimes threatened, who are nevertheless united by the necessity of coming into contact with one another, to act, to live, to survive;

2) on the other hand, a socialized economy on a world-wide scale, unified on a technical level, but divided into units forced to oppose each other to obey the logic of value which unifies them and which will destroy anything to survive as such.

The world of commodities and value, which is the present framework of productive forces, is activated by a life of its own; it has constituted itself into an autonomous force, and the world of real needs submits to its laws. The communist revolution is the destruction of this submission. Communism is the struggle against this submission and has opposed it since the early days of capitalism, and even before, with no chance of success.

Mankind first attributed to its ideas, its conceptions of the world, an origin external to itself, and thought the nature of man was to be found, not in his social relations, but in his link with an element outside of the real world (god), of which man was only the product. Likewise mankind, in its effort to appropriate and adapt to the surrounding world, first had to create a material world, a network of productive forces, an economy, a world of objects which crushes and dominates it, before it could appropriate this world, adapting and transforming it according to its needs.

The communist revolution is the continuation as well as the surpassing of present social movements. Discussions of communism usually start from an erroneous standpoint: they deal with the question of what people will do after the revolution. They never connect communism with what is going on at the moment when the discussion is going on. There is a complete rupture: first one makes the revolution, then communism. In fact communism is the continuation of real needs which are now already at work, but which cannot lead anywhere, which cannot be satisfied, because the present situation forbids it. Today there are numerous communist gestures and attitudes which express not only a refusal of the present world, but most of all an effort to build a new one. In so far as these do not succeed, one sees only their limits, only the tendency and not its possible continuation (the function of “extremist” groups is precisely to present these limits as the aims of the movement, and to strengthen them). In the refusal of assembly-line work, in the struggles of squatters, the communist perspective is present as an effort to create “something else,” not on the basis of a mere rejection of the modern world (hippy), but through the use and transformation of what is produced and wasted. In such conflicts people spontaneously try to appropriate goods without obeying the logic of exchange; therefore they treat these goods as use values. Their relations to these things, and the relations they establish among themselves to perform such acts, are subversive. People even change themselves in such events. The “something else” that these actions reach for is present in the actions only potentially, whatever those who organize them may think and want, and whatever the extremists who take part in them and the-

orize about them may do and say. Such movements will be forced to become conscious of their acts, to understand what they are doing, in order to do it better.

Those who already feel the need for communism, and discuss it, cannot interfere in these struggles to bring the communist gospel, to propose to these limited actions that they direct themselves towards “real” communist activity. What is needed is not slogans, but an explanation of the background and mechanism of these struggles. One must only show what they will be forced to do.

Chapter 2. The Class Struggle and its Most Characteristic Aspects in Recent Years

This essay was started soon after May 68 and completed in 72 by a friend who'd worked years before in an Algerian shoe-making factory under(State-controlled) "self-management", where he experienced how a spontaneous desire to get a grip on one's fate could end in institutionalized self-organization of wage labour.

If this text was written today, historical data would be different. Though it still retains strongholds, the French CP has declined, partly through de-industrialization of traditional working class areas. Besides, as in other countries, one can no longer speak of "stalinism". CPs were stalinist not out of love for Russia, but because State capitalism was a possible solution for capital... usually with Red Army troops around and help from "socialist" brother countries. With the downfall of the USSR, there is no use for this backward form of capitalism, and CPs are evolving into social-democratic parties. The adaptable Italian one has already gone this way for quite a while. After long resistance, the die-hard French CP is now following suit. The 60-year old sinister stalinist farce has been sent to the dustbins of history, not by the proletariat, but by the overwhelming drive of commodities. The credit card is mightier than the jackboot.

(1997 note, G.D.)

The original purpose of this text was to try to show the fundamental reasons why the revolutionary movement of the first half of the century took various forms (parties, trade and industrial unions, workers' councils) which now not only belong to the past, but also hinder the re-formation of the revolutionary movement. But only part of the project was carried out. This task still has to be realized. But it would be a mistake to wait for a complete theoretical construction before moving on. The following text gives certain elements which are useful for an understanding of new forms of the communist "party". Recent events (mainly strikes in the U.S., in Britain, in France, and Italy) clearly show that we are entering a new historical period. For example, the French Communist Party (P.C.F.) still dominates the working class, but it is under strong attack. While for a long period of time the revolutionary movement's opposition to capital was deflected by the P.C.F., today this mediation tends to disappear: the opposition between workers and capitalism is going to assert itself more and more directly, and on the level of real facts and actions, as opposed to the situation when the ideology of the P.C.F. was prominent among workers and the revolutionary movement had to fight against the P.C.F. mainly on a theoretical level.

Today revolutionaries will be forced to oppose capital practically. This is why new theoretical tasks are necessary. It is not enough to agree on the level of ideas; one must take positive action, and first of all intervene in present struggles to support one's views. Communists do not have to build a separate party from the one which asserts itself in practice in our society; yet they will increasingly have to support their positions so that the real movement does not waste its time in

useless and false struggles. Organic links (theoretical work for practical activity) will have to be established among those who think we are moving towards a conflict between the proletariat and capital. The present text tries to determine how the communist movement is going to reappear, and to define the tasks of the communists.

A) May, 1968, in France

The general strike of May, 1968, was one of the biggest strikes in capitalist history. Yet it is probably the first time in contemporary society that such a powerful working class movement did not create for itself organs capable of expressing it. More than four years of workers' struggles prove this fact. Nowhere can we see organizations going beyond a local and temporary contact. Unions and parties have been able to step into this void and negotiate with the bosses and the State. In 1968 a number of short-lived Action Committees were the only form of workers' organization which acted outside the unions and the parties; the Action Committees opposed what they felt to be treason on the part of the unions.

Either at the beginning of the strike, or in the process of the sit-downs, or later, in the struggle against the resumption of work, many thousands of workers organized themselves in one way or another outside and against the will of the unions. But in every case these workers' organizations fizzled out with the end of the movement and did not turn into a new type of organization.

The only exception was the "Inter-Enterprise" Committee, which had existed since the beginning of the strike at the Censier building of the "Faculté des Lettres" in Paris. It gathered together workers – individuals and groups – from several dozen factories in the Paris area. Its function was to coordinate actions against the undermining of the strike by the P.C.F.-controlled union, the C.G.T. It was in fact the only workers' organ which in practice went beyond the narrow limits of the factory by putting into practice the solidarity between workers from different firms. As is the case with all revolutionary activities of the proletariat, this Committee did not publicize its action.¹

The Committee continued to organize meetings after the strike and disappeared after its members realized its uselessness. Of course the hundreds of workers who had taken part in its activity soon stopped coming to its meetings. Many of them continued seeing each other. But while the purpose of the Committee during the strike had been to strengthen the fight against union and party manoeuvres, it later turned into a discussion group studying the results of the strike and trying to learn its lessons for the future. These discussions often dealt with communism and its importance.

This Committee gathered a minority. Yet its daily "general assemblies" at Censier, as well as its smaller meetings, allowed several thousand workers to meet. It remained limited to the Paris area. We have heard of no such experiment in other regions, organized outside all unions (including "left wing" unions: the town of Nantes, in the west of France, was more or less taken over by the unions during the strike).

¹ If it had, people would know about it as they do about the situationist-influenced Council for the Maintenance of Occupations (CMDO), active from May 10th and located in another university building ten minutes walk from either the Sorbonne or Censier. In its history of 68, the SI dismisses the Censier committee as too dusty to be of real interest. The CMDO certainly had posters and leaflets widely circulated, in France and abroad, whereas Censier was more connected to workplaces, but the truth is, both were among the best radical aspects of 68. Described by the SI as "a link, not a power", the CMDO decided to break up on June 15th. (1997 note, G.D.)

One must add that a handful of people sharing communist ideas (a dozen at most) were deeply involved in its action and functioning. The result of this was to limit the influence of the C.G.T., the Trotskyists, and the Maoists, to a minimum. The fact that the Committee was outside all traditional union and party organizations, including the extremist ones, and that it tried to go beyond the limit of the factory, foreshadowed what has been happening since 1968. Its disappearance after the fulfilment of its tasks also foreshadowed the fading away of organizations that have appeared since then, in the most characteristic struggles of recent years.

This shows the great difference between the present situation and what happened in the 1930's. In 1936, in France, the working class fought behind the "workers'" organizations and for the reforms they professed. So the forty-hour week and two weeks of paid vacation were regarded as a real victory of the workers, whose essential demand was to get the same conditions and position as salaried groups. These demands were imposed on the ruling class. Today the working class is not asking for the improvement of its conditions of life. The reform programmes presented by unions and parties closely resemble those put forward by the State. It was DeGaulle who proposed "participation" as a remedy for what he called the "mechanical" society.

It seems that only a fraction of the ruling class realized the extent of the crisis, which it called a "crisis of civilization" (A. Malraux). Since then all organizations, all unions and parties, without any exceptions, rallied to the great reform programme in one way or another. The P.C.F. itself includes "real participation" in its governmental programme. The other large union, the C.F.D.T., advocates self-management, which is also supported by ultra-left groups who are in favour of "workers' councils." The Trotskyists propose "workers' control" as a minimum programme for a "workers' government".

What lies at the heart of all this concern is an attempt to end the separation between the worker and the product of his work. This is an expression of a "utopian" view of capital, and has nothing to do with communism. The capitalist "utopia" tries to do away with the bad side of exploitation. The communist movement cannot express itself in a formal criticism of capital. It does not aim to change the conditions of work, but the function of work: it wants to replace the production of exchange values with the production of use values. Whereas unions and parties carry on their debates within the context of one and the same programme, the programme of capital, the proletariat has a non-constructive attitude. Apart from its practical political activities, it does not "participate" in the debate organized about its case. It does not try to do theoretical research about its own tasks. This is the time of the great silence of the proletariat. The paradox is that the ruling class tries to express the aspirations of the workers, in its own way. A fraction of the ruling class understands that the present conditions of appropriation of surplus-value are a hindrance to the total functioning of the economy. Its perspective is to share the cake, hoping that a working class "profiting" from capital and "participating" in it will produce more surplus-value. We are reaching the stage when capital dreams of its own survival.² To achieve this survival, it would have to get rid of its own parasitical sectors, i.e., the fractions of capital which no longer produce enough surplus-value.

Whereas in 1936 the workers tried to reach the same level as other sectors of society, nowadays capital itself imposes on the privileged salaried sectors the same general conditions of life as those of the workers. The concept of participation implies equality in the face of exploitation imposed by the needs of value formation. Thus participation is a "socialism" of misery. Capitalism must

² Hence the M.I.T. report and the debate on "zero growth".

reduce the enormous cost of the sectors which are necessary to its survival but which do not directly produce value.

In the course of their struggles workers realize that the possibility of improving their material conditions is limited and on the whole already planned by capital. The working class can no longer intervene on the basis of a programme which would really alter its living conditions within capitalism. The great workers' struggles of the first half of the century, struggles for the eight-hour day, the forty-hour week, paid holidays, industrial unionism, job security, showed that the relationship between the working class and capital allowed the workers a certain range of "capitalist" action. Nowadays capital itself imposes the reforms and generalizes the equality of all in the face of wage-labour. Therefore no important section of the working class is willing to fight for intermediate objectives as was the case at the beginning of the century or in the 1930's. But it should also be obvious that as long as the communist perspective is not clear there can be no formation of workers' organizations on a communist basis. This is not to say that the communist objectives will suddenly become clear to everybody. The fact that the working class is the only class which produces surplus-value is what places it at the centre of the crisis of value, i.e., at the very heart of the crisis of capitalism, and forces it to destroy all other classes as such, and to form the organs of its self-destruction as a part of capital, as a class within capitalism. The communist organization will only appear in the practical process of destruction of the bourgeois economy, and in the creation of a human community without exchange.

The communist movement has asserted itself continually since the very beginning of capitalism. This is why capital is forced to maintain constant surveillance and continual violence over everything dangerous to its normal functioning. Ever since the secret conspiracy of Babeuf in 1795, the workers' movement has experienced increasingly violent and longer struggles, which have shown capitalism to be, not the culmination of humanity, but its negation.

Although the May 68 strike had hardly any immediate positive results, its real strength was that it did not give birth to durable illusions. The May "failure" is the failure of reformism, and the end of reformism breeds a struggle on a totally different level, a struggle against capital itself, not against its effects. In 1968 everyone was thinking of some "other" society. What people said rarely went beyond the notion of general self-management. Apart from the communist struggle which can develop only if the centre, the class which produces surplus-value, leads it, other classes can only act and think within the capitalist sphere, and their expression can only be that of capital — even of capital reforming itself. Yet behind these partial criticisms and alienated expressions we can see the beginning of the crisis of value which is characteristic of the historical period we are now entering.

These ideas do not come from nowhere; they always appear because the symptoms of a real human community exist emotionally in every one of us. Whenever the false community of wage-labour is questioned, there appears a tendency towards a form of social life in which relationships are no longer mediated by the needs of capital.

Since May 68, the activity of the communist movement has tended to be increasingly concrete.

B) Strikes and Workers' Struggles Since 1968

Whereas in the years after World War II strikes — even important ones — were kept under control and were not followed by constant political and monetary crises, the past few years have

seen a renewal of industrial riots and even insurrections in France, Italy, Britain, Belgium, West Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland. In Poland the workers attacked the headquarters of the C.P. while singing the International. The process was the same in nearly every case. A minority starts a movement with its own objectives; soon the movement spreads to other categories of workers in the same firm; people get organized (strike pickets, workers' committees in the shops, on the assembly lines); the unions manage to be the only ones capable of negotiating with the management; they finally get the workers to resume work, after proposing unitary slogans which no one likes but everyone accepts because of the inability to formulate anything else. The only movement which went beyond the stage of the strike as it now exists was the movement of riots and strikes in Poland in December 1970-January 1971.

What happened in a brutal way in Poland exists only as a tendency in the rest of the industrial world. In Poland there is no mechanism of "countervailing" power capable of keeping social crises in check. The ruling class had to attack the working class directly in order to maintain the process of value formation in normal conditions. The Polish events prove that the crisis of value tends to spread to all industrial areas, and demonstrate the behaviour of the working class as the centre of such a crisis.

The origin of the movement was the need to defend the average selling price of labour power. But the movement found itself immediately on another field: it had to face capitalist society itself. At once the workers were forced to attack the organs of oppression. Party and union officials were assaulted and the party building was stormed. In some towns the railway stations were guarded in case they might be used to bring troops. The movement was strong enough to give itself an organ of negotiation: a workers' committee for the town. The very fact that Gierek had to go to the shipyards in person must be regarded as a victory of the working class as a whole. A year later Fidel Castro had to go to Chile in person to ask the tin miners to cooperate with the ("socialist") government. In Poland the workers did not send delegates to the central power to propose their demands: the government had to come to the workers to negotiate... the inevitable surrender of the workers.

Facing the violence of the State, the working class formed its own organs of violence. No leaders had anticipated the organization of the revolt: it was the product of the nature of the society the revolt tried to destroy. Yet leaders (the workers' committee for the town) only appeared after the movement had reached the highest point which the situation allowed. The negotiation organ is an expression of nothing more than the realization by both sides that there is only one solution left. The characteristic of such a negotiation organ is that it implies no delegation of power. It rather represents the outer limit of a movement which cannot go beyond negotiation in the present situation. Reforms, once again, are proposed by capital, whereas the working class expresses itself in practical refusal; it must accept the proposals of the central power so long as its practical activity is not yet strong enough to destroy the basis of that power.

Workers' struggles tend to directly oppose their own dictatorship to that of capital, to organize on a different basis from that of capital, and thus to pose the question of the transformation of society by acts. When the existing conditions are unfavourable to a general attack, or when this attack fails, the forms of dictatorship disintegrate, capital triumphs again, reorganizes the working class according to its logic, diverts the violence from its original aims, and separates the formal aspect of the struggle from its real content. We must get rid of the old opposition between "dictatorship" and "democracy." To the proletariat, "democracy" does not mean organizing itself as a parliament in the bourgeois way; for it, "democracy" is an act of violence by means of which

it destroys all the social forces which prevent it from expressing itself and maintain it as a class within capitalism. “Democracy” cannot be anything but a dictatorship. This is visible in every strike: the form of its destruction is precisely “democracy.” As soon as there is a separation between a decision-making organ and an action organ, the movement is no longer in the offensive phase. It is being diverted to the ground of capital. Opposing workers’ “democracy” to the union’s “bureaucracy” means attacking a superficial aspect and hiding the real content of workers’ struggles, which have a totally different basis. Democracy is now the slogan of capital: it proposes the self-management of one’s own negation. All those who accept this programme spread the illusion that society can be changed by a general discussion followed by a vote (formal or informal) which would decide what is to be done. By maintaining the separation between decision and action, capital tries to maintain the existence of classes. If one criticizes such a separation only from a formal point of view, without going to its roots, one merely perpetuates the division. It is hard to imagine a revolution which begins when voters raise their hands. Revolution is an act of violence, a process through which social relations are transformed.³

We will not try to give a description of the strikes which have taken place since 1968. We lack too much information, and a large number of books and pamphlets have been written about them. We would only like to see what they have in common, and in what way they are the sign of a period in which communist prospects will appear more and more concretely.

We do not divide industrial society into different sectors – “developing” and “backward” sectors. It is true that some differences can be observed, but these can no longer hide from us the nature of the strikes, in which one cannot see real differences between “vanguard” and “rear-guard” struggles. The process of the strikes is less and less determined by local factors, and more and more by the international conditions of capitalism. Thus the Polish strikes and riots were the product of an international context; the relationship between East and West was at the root of these events where people sang the International and not the national anthem. Western and eastern capital have a common interest in securing the exploitation of their respective workers. And the relatively under-developed “socialist” capitalisms must maintain a strict capitalist efficiency to be able to compete with their more modern western neighbours.

The communist struggle starts in a given place, but its existence does not depend on purely local factors. It does not act according to the limits of its original birthplace. Local factors become secondary to the objectives of the movement. As soon as a struggle limits itself to local condi-

³ Here’s an example from the engine drivers’ strike at Paris-Nord, 1986. A meeting had just voted against blocking the tracks to prevent trains from running. But when the strikers saw the first train come out of the station, driven by middle managers under police protection, they rushed to the tracks to stop it, undoing by spontaneous action hours of democratic discussion.

Communism is of course the movement of a vast majority at long last able to take actions into their own hands. To that extent, communism is “democratic”, but it does not uphold democracy as a principle. Politicians, bosses and bureaucrats take advantage either of a minority or a majority when it suits them: so does the proletariat. Workers’ militancy often stems from a handful. Communism is neither the rule of the most numerous, nor of the few. To debate and/or start acting, people obviously have to gather somewhere, and such common ground has been called a soviet, committee, council, etc. It turns into an institution, however, when the moment and machinery of decision-making prevail over actions. This separation is the essence of parliamentarism.

True, people must decide for themselves. But any decision, revolutionary or not, depends on what has happened before and what is still going on outside the formal deciding structure. Whoever organizes the meeting sets the agenda; whoever asks the question determines the answer; whoever calls the vote carries the decision. Revolution does not put forward a different form of organization, but a different solution from that of capital and reformism. As principles, democracy and dictatorship are equally wrong: they isolate a special and seemingly privileged moment.

tions, it is immediately swallowed up by capitalism. The level reached by workers' struggles is not determined by local factors, but by the global situation of capitalism. As soon as the class which concentrates in itself the revolutionary interests of society rises, it immediately finds, in its situation, and without any mediation, the content and object of its revolutionary activity: to crush its enemies and take the decisions imposed by the needs of the struggle; the consequences of its own actions force it to move further.

We shall not deal with all strikes here. There is still a capitalist society in which the working class is just a class of capitalism, a part of capital, when it is not revolutionary. Party and union machines still manage to control and lead considerable sections of the working class for the sake of capitalist objectives (such as the right to retire at 60 in France). General elections and many strikes are organized by unions for limited demands. However, it is increasingly obvious that in most large strikes the initiative does not come from the unions, and these are the strikes we are talking about here. Industrial society has not been divided into sectors, nor has the working class been divided up into the young, the old, the natives, the immigrants, the foreigners, the skilled and the unskilled. We do not oppose all sociological descriptions; these can be useful, but they are not our aim here.

We shall try to study how the proletariat breaks away from capitalist society. Such a process has a definite centre. We do not accept the sociological view of the working class because we do not analyse the working class from a static point of view, but in terms of its opposition to value. The rupture from capital abolishes exchange value, i.e., the existence of labour as a commodity. The centre of this movement, and therefore its leadership, must be the part of society which produces value. Otherwise it would mean that exchange value no longer exists, and that we are already beyond the capitalist stage. Actually the profound meaning of the essential movement is partially hidden by the struggles on the periphery, on the outskirts of the production of value. This was the case in May 1968, when students masked the real struggle, which took place elsewhere.

In fact the struggles on the outskirts (the new middle classes) are only a sign of a much deeper crisis which appearances still hide from us. The renewal of the crisis of value implies, for capital, the need to rationalize, and therefore to attack, the backward sectors which are least capable of protecting themselves; this increases unemployment and the number of those who have no reserves. But their intervention must not make one forget the essential role played by production workers in destroying exchange value.

C) The Two Most Characteristic Aspects of the Strikes

On one hand, the initiative of the strike comes from self-organized workers; on the other, the initiative to end the strike comes from the fraction of the workers organized in unions. These initiatives are contradictory since they express two movements which are opposed to one another. Nothing is more alien to a strike than its end. The end of a strike is a moment of endless talks when the notion of reality is overcome by illusions; many meetings are organized where union officials have a monopoly of speech; general assemblies attract fewer and fewer people and finally

Demand for democracy was at its height in France, 1968. From shop-assistants to firefighters and schoolkids, every group wanted to get together and freely manage its own world, hoping this would result in global change. Even the situationists remained within the scope of democracy, in a councilist way of course, i.e. anti-statist and going beyond commodity and profit, but still separating means from ends. The SI was the most adequate expression of May 68. (1997 note, G.D.)

vote to resume work. The end of a strike is a time when the working class again falls under the control of capital, is again reduced to atoms, individual components, destroyed as a class capable of opposing capital. The end of a strike means negotiation, the control of the movement, or what is left of it, by “responsible” organizations, the unions. The beginning of a strike means just the opposite: then the action of the working class has nothing to do with formalism. All those who do not support the movement are pushed aside, whether they are executives, foremen, workers, managers, shop-stewards or union officials. Managers are locked up, union buildings attacked by thousands of workers, depending on local conditions. During the strike in Limbourg (Belgium, Winter 1970), the union headquarters were stormed by the workers. Everything acting as a hindrance to the movement tends to be destroyed. There is no place for “democracy”: on the contrary, everything is obvious, and all enemies must be defeated without wasting time on discussions. A considerable amount of energy appears during the offensive phase, and it seems that nothing is able to stop it.

At this stage we cannot avoid stating an obvious fact: the energy at the beginning of the strike seems to disappear totally by the time of the negotiations. What is more important, this energy seems to have no relation to the official reasons given for the strike. If several dozens of men bring about a strike of thousands of workers on the basis of their own demands, they do not succeed just because of some sort of solidarity, but because of an immediate community in practice. We must add the most important point, that the movement does not put forward any particular demand. The question the proletariat will ask in practice is already present in its silence. In its own movements the proletariat does not put forward any particular demand: this is why these movements are the first communist activities in our time.

What is important in the process of breaking away from capitalism is that the working class no longer asks for partial and particular reforms. Thus the working class ceases to be a class, since it does not defend its particular class interests. This process is different according to the conditions. The movement which went the farthest, in Poland, showed that the first step of the process is the disintegration of the capitalist organs of repression within the working class (mainly the unions); the working class must next organize to protect itself against the organs of repression outside the working class (armed forces, police, militia), and start destroying them.

The specific conditions in Poland, where the unions are part of the State apparatus, forced the working class to make no distinction between the unions and the State, since there was none. The fusion between unions and State only made obvious an evolution which does not appear as clearly in other countries, such as France and Italy. In many cases the unions still play the role of a buffer between the workers and the State. But a radical struggle will increasingly attack the unions and the sections of the working class dominated by the unions. The time is gone when workers form unions to defend their qualifications and their right to work.

The conditions of modern society compel the working class not to put forward any particular demand. The only community organized and tolerated by capital is the community of wage-labour: capital tends to forbid everything else. Capital now dominates the totality of the relations men have with one another. It becomes increasingly obvious that every partial struggle which is limited to a particular relation is forced to insert itself into a general struggle against the entire system of relations among people: capital. Otherwise it is integrated or destroyed.

In a strike of the Paris bus and subway workers (R.A.T.P.) at the end of 1971, the resolute attitude of the subway drivers turned the strike into a movement quite different from the strike of one category of workers. The content of the movement does not depend on what people think.

The attitude of the drivers transformed their relation to the management of the R.A.T.P. and the unions, and clearly revealed the true nature of the conflict. The State itself had to intervene to force the drivers back under the pressure of the unions. Whether the drivers believed it or not, the strike was no longer theirs; it had turned into a public trial where the unions were officially recognized as necessary organs of coercion against the workers, organs charged with the task of restoring the normal order of things. It is impossible to understand the importance of the “silence” of the working class unless one first understands the powerful development of capitalism until now. It is nowadays considered normal that the end of strikes should be controlled by unions. This does not imply any weakness on the part of the revolutionary movement. On the contrary, in a situation which does not allow partial demands to be achieved, it is normal that no organ should be created to end the strike. Thus we do not see the creation of workers’ organizations gathering fractions of the working class outside the unions on a programme of specific demands. Sometimes workers’ groups are formed during the struggle, and they oppose their demands to those of the unions, but their chances are destroyed by the situation itself, which does not allow them to exist very long.

If these groups want to maintain their existence, they must act outside the limits of the factory, or they will be destroyed by capital in one way or another. The disappearance of these groups is one of the signs of the radical nature of the movement. If they went on existing as organizations, they would lose their radical character. So they will always disappear and later come to life again in a more radical way. The idea that workers’ groups will finally succeed, after many experiments and failures, in forming a powerful organization capable of overthrowing capitalism, is similar to the bourgeois idea that a partial critique will gradually turn into a radical one. The activity of the working class does not proceed from experiences and has no other “memory” than the general conditions of capital which compel it to act according to its nature. It does not study its experiences; the failure of a movement is itself an adequate demonstration of its limitations.

The communist organization will grow out of the practical need to transform capitalism into communism. Communist organization is the organization of the transition towards communism. Here lies the fundamental difference between our time and the former period. In the struggles which took place between 1917 and 1920 in Russia and Germany, the objective was to organize a pre-communist society. In Russia the radical sections of the working class tried to win over other sections of workers, and even the poor peasants. The isolation of the radical elements and the general conditions of capitalism made it impossible for them to envisage the practical transformation of the entire society without a programme uniting all the exploited classes. These radical elements were eventually crushed.

The difference between our time and the past comes from the vast development of the productive forces on nearly all continents, and the quantitative and qualitative development of the proletariat. The working class is now much more numerous⁴ and uses highly developed means of production. Today the conditions of communism have been developed by capital itself. The task of the proletariat is no longer to support progressive sections of capitalists against reactionary ones. The need for a transitional period between the destruction of capitalist power and the triumph of

⁴ This 1972 statement may sound odd 25 years later, still we hold it to be true. Growing unemployment goes together with a rise in the number of wage earners, not only in the US, but in France, and even more so on a world scale, where millions of people have been forced into the hardship of modern labour in the last decades, as in China.

Needless to say, “work” has very different meanings. An African wage-labourer provides money for up to 20 people, whereas a West European one supports 2 or 3. (1997 note, G.D.)

communism, during which the revolutionary power creates the conditions of communism, has also vanished. Therefore there is no place for a communist organization as a mediation between the radical and non-radical sections of the working class. The fact that an organization supporting the communist programme fails to emerge during the period between major struggles is the product of a new class relationship in capitalism.

For instance, in France in 1936, the resistance of capital was so strong that a change of government was necessary before the workers could get what they wanted. Today governments themselves initiate the reforms. Capitalist governments try to create situations where the workers organize themselves to achieve what are in fact necessities of production (participation, self-management). Contemporary economy entails more and more planning. Everything outside the plan is a menace to social harmony. Every activity outside this planning is regarded as non-social and must be destroyed. We should keep this in mind when analysing certain activities of workers during periods when there are no mass struggles like strikes or attempted insurrections. The unions must (a) take advantage of workers' struggles and control them, and (b) oppose a number of actions such as sabotage and "downtime" (stopping the line), if they want to stay within the limits of the plan (productivity deals, wage agreements, etc.).

D) Forms of Action Which Cannot Be Recuperated: Sabotage and "Downtiming"

Sabotage has been practised in the U.S. for many years and is now developing in Italy and France. In 1971, during a railway strike in France, the C.G.T. officially denounced sabotage and "irresponsible" elements. Several engines had been put out of order and a few damaged. Later, in the Renault strike in the Spring of 1971, several acts of sabotage had damaged vehicles which were being assembled. Sabotage is becoming extremely widespread. Stopping the line ("downtiming"), which has always existed as a latent phenomenon, is now becoming a common practice. It has been considerably increased by the arrival of young workers to the labour market, and by automation. It is accompanied by a rate of absenteeism which causes serious trouble to some firms.

These events are not new in the history of capitalism. What is new is the context in which they take place. They are indeed the superficial symptoms of a profound social movement, the signs of a process of breaking away from the existing society. At the beginning of the century, sabotage was used as a means of exerting pressure on the bosses to force them to accept the existence of unions. The French revolutionary unionist Pouget studied this in a pamphlet called Sabotage. He quotes the speech of a worker at a workers' congress in 1895:

"The bosses have no right to rely on our charity. If they refuse even to discuss our demands, then we can just put into practice the 'Go Canny' tactics, until they decide to listen to us."

Pouget adds: "Here is a clear definition of 'Go Canny' tactics, of 'sabotage': BAD PAY, BAD WORK."

"This line of action, used by our English friends, can be applied in France, as our social position is similar to that of our English brothers."

Sabotage was used by workers against the boss so that he would admit their existence. It was a way of getting freedom of speech. Sabotage took place in a movement trying to turn the working class into a class which had its place in capitalist society. "Downtiming" was an attempt to im-

prove the conditions of work. Sabotage did not appear as a blunt and direct refusal of society as a whole. “Downtiming” is a fight against the effects of capitalism. Another study will be necessary to examine the limits of such struggles and the conditions in which capital could absorb them. The social importance of these struggles makes it possible to regard them as the basis of “modern reformism”. The word “reformism” can be used to the extent that these actions could in theory be completely absorbed by the capitalist system. Whereas today they are a nuisance to the normal activity of production, tomorrow they might well be linked to production. An “ideal” capitalism could tolerate the self-management of the conditions of production: as long as a normal profit is made by the firm, the organization of the work can be left to the workers.

Capitalism has already carried out some concrete experiments in this direction, particularly in Italy, in the U.S., in Sweden (Volvo).⁵ In France, one may regard left-wing “liberal” organizations such as the P.S.U., the C.F.D.T. and the left of the Socialist Party as the expression of this capitalist tendency. For the time being, this movement can be defined neither as exclusively reformist nor as anti-capitalist. It should be noted that this “modern reformism” has often been directed against the unions. It is still difficult to describe its consequences on capitalist production. All we can see so far is that these struggles attract groups of workers who feel the need to act outside the traditional boundaries imposed by the unions.

Although the “downtiming movement” can be defined as we have just done, sabotage is different. There are two kinds of sabotage: (a) sabotage which destroys the product of the work or the machine, (b) sabotage which partially damages the product so that it can no longer be consumed. Sabotage as it exists today can in no way be kept in check by the unions, nor can it be absorbed by production. Yet capital can prevent it by improving and transforming its system of supervision. For this reason sabotage cannot become the form of struggle against capital. On the other hand, sabotage is a reflex of the individual: he submits to it, as to a passion. Although the individual must sell his labour power, he goes “mad”, i.e., irrational compared to what is “rational” (selling one’s labour power and working accordingly). This “madness” consists of the refusal to give up the labour power, to be a commodity. The individual hates himself as an alienated creature split into two; he tries, through destruction, through violence, to re-unify his being, which only exists through capital.

Since these acts are outside the boundaries of all economic planning, they are also outside the boundaries of “reason”. Newspapers have repeatedly defined them as “anti-social” and “mad”: the danger appears important enough for society to try to suppress it.⁶ Christian ideology admitted the suffering and social inequality of the workers; today capitalist ideology imposes equality in the face of wage-labour, but does not tolerate anything opposed to wage-labour. The need felt by the isolated individual to oppose physically his practical transformation into a being totally subjected to capital, shows that this submission is more and more intolerable. Destructive acts are part of an attempt to destroy the mediation of wage labour as the only form of social community. In the silence of the proletariat, sabotage appears as the first stammer of human speech.

Both activities: “downtiming” and sabotage, require a certain amount of agreement among the people working where these activities take place. This shows that, although no formal or official organization appears, there exists an underground network of relations with an anti-capitalist

⁵ This passage refers to the transformation of the Taylor system. The assembly line has already partly disappeared in some factories.

⁶ Official CP leader statement, 1970: “There are workers we’ll never defend: those who smash machines or cars they manufacture.” (1997 note, G.D.)

basis. Such a network is more or less dense according to the importance of the activity, and it disappears with the end of the anti-capitalist action. It is normal that, apart from the “subversive” practical (and therefore theoretical) action, the groups gathered around these subversive tasks should dissolve. Often the need to maintain an illusion of “social community” results in an activity which is secondarily anti-capitalist but primarily illusory. In most cases these groups end up by gathering around some political axis. In France nuclei of workers gather around such organizations as “Lutte Ouvrière,” a number of C.F.D.T. union branches, or Maoist groups. This does not mean that some minorities with Trotskyist, Maoist or C.F.D.T. ideas are gaining ground among the workers, but simply that some workers’ minorities are trying to break their isolation, which is quite normal. In all cases, the dissolution of the anti-capitalist network and activity means the re-organization of the working class by capital, as a part of capital.

In short, apart from its practical activities, the communist movement does not exist. The dissolution of a social disorder with a communist content is accompanied by the dissolution of the entire system of relations which it organized. Democracy, division of struggles into “economic” and “political” struggles, formation of a vanguard with a socialist “consciousness”, are the illusions of days gone by. These illusions are no longer possible to the extent that a new period is beginning. The dissolution of the organizational forms which are created by the movement, and which disappear when the movement ends, does not reflect the weakness of the movement, but rather its strength. The time of false battles is over. The only conflict that appears real is the one that leads to the destruction of capitalism.

E) Activity of Parties and Unions in the Face of the Communist Perspective

1) On the labour market, unions increasingly become monopolies which buy and sell labour power. When it unified itself, capital unified the conditions of the sale of labour power. In modern conditions of production, the individual owner of labour power is not only forced to sell it to be able to live, but must also associate with other owners in order to be able to sell it. In return for social peace, the unions got the right to control the hiring of labour. In modern society workers are increasingly compelled to join the union if they want to sell their labour power.

At the beginning of this century, unions were the product of gatherings of workers who formed coalitions to defend the average selling price of their commodity. The unions were not at all revolutionary, as was shown by their attitude in World War I, when they supported the war both directly and indirectly. In so far as the workers were fighting for their existence as a class within capitalist society, the unions had no revolutionary function. In Germany, during the revolutionary upheaval of 1919–1920, the union members went to organizations which defended their economic rights in the general context of the struggle against capitalism.⁷ Outside of a revolutionary period, the working class is nothing but a fraction of capital represented by the unions. While other fractions of capital (industrial and financial capital) were forming monopolies, the working class as variable capital also formed a monopoly, of which the unions are the trustees.

2) The unions developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century as organizations defending qualified labour power. This was particularly clear with the rise of the A.F. of

⁷ Such as the Shop Stewards’ Movement, the French Revolutionary Syndicalist Committees, and the German General Workers’ Association (AAUD).

L. in the US. Until World War II (or until the birth of the C.I.O. in the 1930's in the U.S.) unions grew by supporting the relatively privileged sections of the working class. This is not to say that they had no influence on the most exploited strata, but this influence was only possible if it was consistent with the interests of the qualified strata. With the development of modern and automated industry, highly qualified workers tend to be replaced by technicians. These technicians also have the function of controlling and supervising masses of unqualified workers. Therefore the unions, while losing important sections of workers whose qualifications fade away, try to recruit this new stratum of technicians.

3) The unions represent labour power which has become capital. This forces them to appear as institutions capable of valorizing capital. The unions have to associate their own development programme with that of industrial and finance capital if they want to keep "their" labour power under control. The representatives of variable capital, of capital in the form of labour power, sooner or later have to associate with the representatives of fractions of capital who are now in power. Government coalitions consisting of liberal bourgeoisie, technocrats, left political groups, and unions, appear as a necessity in the evolution of capitalism. Capital itself requires strong unions capable of proposing economic measures which can valorize variable capital. The unions are not "traitors" in the sense that they betray the programme of the working class: they are quite consistent with themselves, and with the working class when it accepts its capitalist nature.

4) This is how we can understand the relationship between the working class and the unions. When the process of breaking away from capitalist society begins, the unions are immediately seen through and treated in terms of what they are; but as soon as the process ends, the working class cannot help being re-organized by capital, namely by the unions. One may say that there are no "unionist" illusions in the working class. There is only a capitalist, namely "unionist", organization of the working class.

5) The development of the current relationships between unions and bosses in Italy illustrates what has been said. The evolution of Italian unions should be closely watched. It is normal that in relatively backward areas (from an economic point of view) such as France and Italy (compared to the U.S.), the effects of the modernization of the economy are accompanied by the most modern tendencies of capital. What happens in Italy is in many ways a sign of what is maturing in other countries.

The Italian situation helps us understand the French one. In France the C.G.T. and the P.C.F. put up a reactionary resistance in the face of workers' struggles, whereas in Italy the C.G.I.L. and the P.C.I. have been able to re-shape themselves in terms of the new situation. This is one of the reasons for the difference between the French "May" and the Italian "May". In France, May 1968 happened suddenly and could be easily misunderstood. The Italian situation proceeds more slowly and ultimately reveals its tendencies.

The first phase lasted from 1968 to the winter of 1971. The main element was the birth of workers' struggles independent of the influence of unions and political organizations. Workers' action committees were formed as in France, with one essential difference: the French ones were quickly driven out of the factories by the power of the unions, which in practice compelled them to have no illusions about the boundaries of the factory. In so far as the general situation did not allow them to go any further, they disappeared. In Italy, on the other hand, workers' committees were at first able to organize themselves inside the factories. Neither the bosses nor the unions could really oppose them. Many committees were formed in the factories, in isolation from each other, and they all began to question the speed of the line and to organize sabotage.

This was in fact an alienated form of critique of wage-labour. Throughout the Italian movement the activity of extreme left groups (gauchistes) was particularly noteworthy. Their entire activity consisted of limiting the movement to its formal aspects without ever showing its real content. They bred the illusion that the “autonomy” of workers’ organizations was in itself revolutionary enough to be supported and maintained. They glorified all the formal aspects. But since they are not communists, they were not able to express the idea that behind the struggle against the rhythm of the line and the working conditions lay the struggle against wage-labour.

The workers’ struggle itself met no resistance. This was in fact what disarmed it. It could do nothing but adapt to the conditions of capitalist society. The unions, for their part, altered their structures in order to control the workers’ movement. As Trentin, one of the leaders of the C.G.I.L. said, they decided to organize “a thoroughgoing transformation of the union and a new type of rank-and-file democracy”. They reshaped their factory organizations according to the pattern of the “autonomous” committees which appeared in recent struggles. The ability of the unions to control industrial strife made them appear as the only force capable of making the workers resume work. There were negotiations in some large concerns like Fiat. The result of these negotiations was to give the union the right to interfere in the organization of the work (time and motion, work measurement, etc.). The management of Fiat now deducts the union dues from the workers’ pay, which was already the case in Belgium. At the same time, serious efforts are being made to reach an agreement on a merger between the biggest unions: U.I.L. (Socialist), C.I.S.L. (Christian-Democrat), C.G.I.L. (P.C.I.).

NOTE: The Italian example clearly shows the tendency of unions to become monopolies which discuss the conditions of production of surplus-value with other fractions of capital. Here are quotations from Petrilli, president of the State-owned I.R. (State Holding Company), and Trentin:

Trentin: “... Job enrichment and the admission of a higher degree of autonomy in decision-making by the workers’ group concerned (in each factory) are already possible. .. Even when, because of the failure of the union, workers’ protests lead to irrational and illusory demands, the workers express their refusal to produce without thinking, to work without deciding; they express their need for power.”

Petrilli: “In my opinion it is obvious that the system of the assembly line implies a real waste of human capacities and produces a very understandable feeling of frustration in the worker. The resulting social tensions must be realistically understood as structural rather than conjunctural facts... Greater participation of the workers in the elaboration of production objectives poses a series of problems having to do less with the organization of work than with the definition of the power balance within the firm.”

The programmes are identical and the aims are the same: increased productivity. The only remaining problem is the sharing of power, which is at the root of the political crisis in many industrial countries. It is likely that the end of the political crisis will be accompanied by the

⁸ Like the SI at about the same time, this text regarded Italy as a research lab of proletarian action and capitalist counter-offensive. In the following years, Italy was to display a rich variety of workers’ autonomy: indiscipline, absenteeism, meetings on the shop-floor without notice, demos on the premises to call for a strike, wildcat picketing, blockade of goods... A permanent feature was the rejection of hierarchy: equal pay rise, no privileged category, free speech... Another aspect was the attempt to go beyond the distinction between representation and action (parliament/government: see above, note 3) in the working of the rank-and-file committees. Such self-organization was essential as a means of collective action, but when it failed as an organ of social change that did not come about, it disappeared with the rest of the proletarian surge.

It was no accident that the big factory committees of northern Italy were only loosely connected: resisting the boss

birth of “workers’ power” as the power of wage-labour, under various forms: self-management, “popular” coalitions, Socialist-Communist Parties, left-wing governments with right-wing programmes, right-wing governments with left-wing programmes.⁸

can be a local matter, whereas reorganizing production and social life means going out of one’s workplace — out of the factory gates, and out of the company as accumulated value one belongs to. (1997 note, G.D.)

Chapter 3. Leninism and the Ultra-Left

Introduction

The invaluable merit of the German Left and a myriad of ultra-leftist grouplets has been to hammer in the primacy of workers' spontaneity. The potentialities of communism lie in proletarian experience and nowhere else. The ultra-left therefore consistently appealed to the essence of the proletariat against its numerous mistaken forms of existence. From the 20s down to the 70s, it stood against all mediations, whether State, party or union, including splinter groups and anarchist unions. If Lenin can be summed up in one word: "party", a single phrase defines the ultra-left: the workers themselves... Fine, but the question remains: which workers' "self" is meant?

This issue must be faced, all the more so since council communism, through the Situationist International, has been quite influential.

The French version of this text originated from a group with ultra-left roots, but which came to question them. A first draft was submitted to a convention organized by the ICO (Informations Correspondance Ouvrières), held near Paris, June 1969.¹ The enlarged English version was meant to start a discussion with Paul Mattick.

* * *

What is the ultra-left? It is both the product and one of the aspects of the revolutionary movement which followed the first world war and shook capitalist Europe without destroying it from 1917 to 1921 or 1923. Ultra-left ideas are rooted in that movement of the twenties, which was the expression of hundreds of thousands of revolutionary workers in Europe. That movement remained a minority in the Communist International and opposed the general line of the international communist movement. The term suggests the character of the ultra-left. There is the right (the social-patriots, Noske...), the centre (Kautsky...), the left (Lenin and the Communist International), and the ultra-left. The ultra-left is primarily an opposition: an opposition within and against the German Communist Party (K.P.D.), within and against the Communist International. It asserts itself through a critique of the prevailing ideas of the communist movement, i.e., through a critique of Leninism.

The ultra-left was far from being a monolithic movement. Furthermore, its various components modified their conceptions. For instance, Gorter's open letter to Lenin expresses a theory of the party which the ultra-left no longer accepts. On the two main points ("organization" and the content of socialism) we shall only study the ideas which the ultra-left has retained throughout its development. The French group I.C.O. is one of the best examples of a present-day ultra-left group.

¹ ICO now exists in the form of Echanges & Mouvements.

A) The Problem of Organization

Ultra-left ideas are the product of a practical experience (mainly the workers' struggles in Germany) and of a theoretical critique (the critique of Leninism). For Lenin, the main revolutionary problem was to forge a "leadership" capable of leading the workers to victory. When ultra-leftists tried to give a theoretical explanation of the rise of factory organizations in Germany, they said the working class does not need a party in order to be revolutionary. Revolution would be made by the masses organized in workers' councils and not by a proletariat "led" by professional revolutionaries. The German Communist Workers' Party (K.A.P.D.), whose activity is expressed theoretically by Gorter in his "Reply to Lenin", regarded itself as a vanguard whose task was to enlighten the masses, not to lead them, as in Leninist theory. This conception was rejected by many ultra-leftists, who opposed the dual existence of the factory organizations and the party: revolutionaries must not try to organize themselves in a body distinct from the masses. That discussion led to the creation, in 1920, of the A.A.U.D.-E. (General Union of German Workers-Unitary Organization), which reproached the A.A.U.D. (General Labour Union of Germany) with being controlled by the K.A.P.D. (German Communist Workers' Party). The majority of the ultra-left movement adopted the same view as the A.A.U.D.-E. In France, I.C.O.'s present activity is based on the same principle: any revolutionary organization coexisting with the organs created by the workers themselves, and trying to elaborate a coherent theory and political line, must in the end attempt to lead the workers. Therefore revolutionaries do not organize themselves outside the organs "spontaneously" created by the workers: they merely exchange and circulate information and establish contacts with other revolutionaries; they never try to define a general theory or strategy.

To understand this conception, we must go back to Leninism. The Leninist theory of the party is based on a distinction which can be found in all the great socialist thinkers of the period: "labour movement" and "socialism" (revolutionary ideas, the doctrine, Scientific Socialism, Marxism, etc. — it can be given many different names) are two things which are fundamentally different and separate. There are workers and their daily struggles on the one hand, and there are the revolutionaries on the other. Lenin proceeds to state that revolutionary ideas must be "introduced" into the working class. The labour movement and the revolutionary movement are severed from each other: they must be united through the leadership of the revolutionaries over the workers. Therefore revolutionaries must be organized and must act on the working class "from the outside." Lenin's analysis, situating the revolutionaries outside the labour movement, seems to be based on fact: it appears that revolutionaries live in a totally different world from that of workers. Yet Lenin does not see that this is an illusion. Marx's analysis and his scientific socialism as a whole are not the product of "bourgeois intellectuals", but of the class struggle on all its levels under capitalism. "Socialism" is the expression of the struggle of the proletariat. It was elaborated by "bourgeois intellectuals" (and by highly educated workers: J. Dietzgen) because only revolutionaries coming from the bourgeoisie were able to elaborate it, but it was the product of the class struggle.

The revolutionary movement, the dynamic that leads toward communism, is a result of capitalism. Let us examine Marx's conception of the party. The word, party, appears frequently in Marx's writings. We must make a distinction between Marx's principles on this question and his analyses of many aspects of the labour movement of his time. Many of those analyses were wrong (for example his view of the future of trade unionism). Moreover we cannot find a text

where Marx summed up his ideas on the party, but only a number of scattered remarks and comments. Yet we believe that a general point of view emerges from all these texts. Capitalist society itself produces a communist party, which is nothing more than the organization of the objective movement (this implies that Kautsky's and Lenin's conception of a "socialist consciousness" which must be "brought" to the workers is meaningless) that pushes society toward communism. Lenin saw a reformist proletariat and said that something had to be done ("socialist consciousness" had to be introduced) in order to turn it into a revolutionary proletariat. Thus Lenin showed that he totally misunderstood class struggle. In a non-revolutionary period the proletariat cannot change capitalist production relations. It therefore tries to change capitalist distribution relations through its demand for higher wages. Of course the workers do not "know" that they are changing the distribution relations when they ask for higher wages. Yet they do try, "unconsciously", to act upon the capitalist system. Kautsky and Lenin do not see the process, the revolutionary movement created by capitalism; they only see one of its aspects. Kautsky's and Lenin's theory of class consciousness breaks up a process and considers only one of its transitory moments: for them the proletariat "by its own resources alone" can only be reformist, whereas the revolutionaries stand outside of the labour movement. In actual fact the revolutionaries and their ideas and theories originate in the workers' struggles.

In a non-revolutionary period, revolutionary workers, isolated in their factories, do their best to expose the real nature of capitalism and the institutions which support it (unions, "workers" parties). They usually do this with little success, which is quite normal. And there are revolutionaries (workers and non-workers) who read and write, who do their best to provide a critique of the whole system. They usually do this with little success, which is also quite normal. This division is produced by capitalism: one of the characteristics of capitalist society is the division between manual and intellectual work. This division exists in all the spheres of our society; it also exists in the revolutionary movement. It would be idealistic to expect the revolutionary movement to be "pure," as if it were not a product of our society. Inevitably the revolutionary movement under capitalism, that is communism, bears the stigma of capitalism.

Only the complete success of revolution can destroy this division. Until then we must fight against it; it characterizes our movement as much as it characterizes the rest of our society. It is inevitable that numerous revolutionaries are not greatly inclined to reading and are not interested in theory. This is a fact, a transitory fact. But "revolutionary workers" and "revolutionary theoreticians" are two aspects of the same process. It is wrong to say that the "theoreticians" must lead the "workers". But it is equally wrong to say, as I.C.O. says, that collectively organized theory is dangerous because it will result in leadership over the workers. I.C.O. merely takes a position symmetrical to Lenin's. The revolutionary process is an organic process, and although its components may be separate from each other for a certain time, the emergence of any revolutionary (or even pseudo-revolutionary) situation shows the profound unity of the various elements of the revolutionary movement

What happened in May, 1968, in the worker-student action committees at the Censier centre in Paris? Some (ultra-left) communists, who before these events had devoted most of their revolutionary activity to theory, worked with a minority of revolutionary workers. Before May, 1968 (and since then), they were no more separate from the workers than every worker is separate from other workers in a "normal", non-revolutionary situation in capitalist society. Marx was not separate from the workers when he was writing *Capital*, nor when he was working in the

Communist League or the International. When he worked in these organizations he felt neither the need (as Lenin), nor the fear (as I.C.O.), to become the leader of the workers.

Marx's conception of the party as a historical product of capitalist society taking different forms according to the stage and the evolution of that society enables us to go beyond the dilemma: need of the party/fear of the party. The communist party is the spontaneous (i.e., totally determined by social evolution) organization of the revolutionary movement created by capitalism. The party is a spontaneous offspring, born on the historical soil of modern society. Both the will and the fear to "create" the party are illusions. It does not need to be created or not created: it is a mere historical product. Therefore revolutionaries have no need either to build it or fear to build it.

Lenin had a theory of the party. Marx had another theory of the party, which was quite different from Lenin's. Lenin's theory was an element in the defeat of the Russian revolution. The ultra-left rejected all theories of the party as dangerous and counter-revolutionary. Yet Lenin's theory was not at the root of the defeat of the Russian revolution. Lenin's theory only prevailed because the Russian revolution failed (mainly because of the absence of revolution in the West). One must not discard all theories of the party because one of them (Lenin's) was a counter-revolutionary instrument. Unfortunately, the ultra-left merely adopted a conception which is the exact opposite of Lenin's. Lenin had wanted to build a party; the ultra-left refused to build one. The ultra-left thus gave a different answer to the same wrong question: for or against the construction of the party. The ultra-left remained on the same ground as Lenin. We, on the contrary, do not want merely to reverse Lenin's view; we want to abandon it altogether.

Modern Leninist groups (Trotskyist groups, for instance) try to organize the workers. Modern ultra-left groups (I.C.O., for instance) only circulate information without trying to adopt a collective position on a problem. As opposed to this, we believe it necessary to formulate a theoretical critique of present society. Such a critique implies collective work. We also think that any permanent group of revolutionary workers must try to find a theoretical basis for its action. Theoretical clarification is an element of, and a necessary condition for, practical unification.

B) Managing What?

The Russian revolution died because it ended up developing capitalism in Russia. To create an efficient body of managers became its motto. The ultra-left quickly concluded that bureaucratic management could not be socialism and they advocated workers' management. A coherent ultra-left theory was created, with workers' councils at its centre: the councils act as the fighting organs of the workers under capitalism and as the instruments of workers' management under socialism. Thus the councils play the same central role in the ultra-left theory as the party in the Leninist theory.

The theory of workers' management analyses capitalism in terms of its management. But is capitalism first of all a mode of management? The revolutionary analysis of capitalism started by Marx does not lay the stress on the question: who manages capital? On the contrary: Marx describes both capitalists and workers as mere functions of capital: "the capitalist as such is only a function of capital, the labourer a function of labour power." The Russian leaders do not "lead" the economy; they are led by it, and the entire development of the Russian economy obeys the objective laws of capitalist accumulation. In other words, the manager is at the service of definite

and compelling production relations. Capitalism is not a mode of MANAGEMENT but a mode of PRODUCTION based on given PRODUCTION RELATIONS. Revolution must aim at these relations; we will try to analyse them briefly. The revolutionary analysis of capitalism emphasises the role of capital, whose objective laws are obeyed by the “managers” of the economy, both in Russia and in America.

C) The Law of Value

Capitalism is based on exchange: it first presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities.” But though it could not exist without exchange, capitalism is not merely the production of commodities; it grows and develops even by fighting against simple commodity production. Capital is fundamentally based on a particular type of exchange, the exchange between living labour and stored labour. The difference between Marx and the classical economists lies primarily in his creation of the concept of labour power: this concept reveals the secret of surplus-value, since it differentiates between necessary-labour and surplus labour.

How do commodities confront each other? By what mechanism can one determine that x quantity of A has the same value as y quantity of B? Marx does not try to find the explanation for $xA = yB$ in the concrete nature of A and B, in their respective qualities, but in a quantitative relation: A and B can only be exchanged in the proportion $xA = yB$ because they both contain a quantity of “something common” to both of them. If we abstract the concrete and useful nature of A and B, they retain only one thing in common: they are both “products of labour”. A and B are exchanged in proportions determined by the respective quantities of labour crystallized in them. The quantities of labour are measured by their duration. The concept of socially necessary labour time, developed by further analysis, is an abstraction: one cannot calculate what an hour of socially necessary labour represents in a given society. But the distinction between abstract and concrete labour allows Marx to understand the mechanism of exchange and to analyse a particular form of exchange: the wage system.

“The best points in my book are: 1) the two-fold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed in use value or exchange value. (All understanding of the facts depends upon this.) It is emphasized immediately, in the first chapter. ...”²

Labour time, in fact, determines the entire social organization of production and distribution. It regulates the proportions in which the productive forces are used for specific purposes at specific places. The law of value “asserts itself as it determines the necessary proportions of social labour, not in the general sense which applies to all societies, but only in the sense required by capitalist society; in other words, it establishes a proportional distribution of the whole social labour according to the specific needs of capitalist production.”³

This is one of the reasons why capital will not be invested in a factory in India even though the production of that factory may be necessary to the survival of the population. Capital always goes where it can multiply quickly. The regulation by labour time compels capitalist society to develop a given production only where the labour time socially necessary for this production is at most equal to the average labour time.

Such is the logic of capital: exchange-value determined by average labour time.

² Marx’s letter to Engels, August 24, 1867.

³ Paul Mattick, “Value and Socialism”.

D) The Contradiction of Labour Time

We mentioned the central role played by surplus labour in the production of surplus value. Marx emphasised the origin, the function and the limit of surplus labour.

“...Only when a certain degree of productivity has already been reached- so that a part of production time is sufficient for immediate production- can an increasingly large part be applied to the production of the means of production. This requires that society be able to wait; that a large part of the wealth already created can be withdrawn both from immediate consumption and from production for immediate consumption, in order to employ this part for labour which is not immediately productive(within the material production process itself)”.⁴

Wage labour is the means for developing the productive forces.

“Real economy – saving – consists of the saving of labour time (minimum (and minimization) of production costs); but this saving [is] identical with development of the productive force.”⁵

Wage labour makes possible the production of surplus value through the appropriation of surplus labour by capital. In that sense the miserable condition which is the lot of the worker is a historical necessity. The worker must be compelled to furnish surplus labour. This is how the productive forces develop and increase the share of surplus labour in the working day:

Capital creates “a large quantity of disposable time... (i.e. room for the development of the individuals’ full productive forces, hence those of society also)”.⁶

The contradictory or “antithetical existence”⁷ of surplus labour is quite clear:

- it creates the “wealth of nations”,
- it brings nothing but misery to the workers who furnish it.

Capital “is thus, despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time, in order to reduce labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone’s time for their own development.”⁸

In communism, the excess of time in relation to necessary labour time will lose the character of surplus labour which the historical limits of the productive forces had bestowed on it under capitalism. Disposable time will cease to be based on the poverty of labour. There will be no need to use misery to create wealth. When the relation between necessary labour and surplus labour is overthrown by the rise of the productive forces, the excess of time beyond labour needed for material existence will lose its transitory form of surplus labour.

“Free time – which is both idle time and time for higher activity – has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject.”⁹

The economy of labour time is an absolute necessity for the development of mankind. It lays the foundation for the possibility of capitalism and, at a higher stage, of communism. The same movement develops capitalism and makes communism both necessary and possible.

The law of value and measurement by average labour time are involved in the same process. The law of value expresses the limit of capitalism and plays a necessary part. As long as the pro-

⁴ Marx, Grundrisse.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

ductive forces are not yet highly developed and immediate labour remains the essential factor of production, measurement by average labour time is an absolute necessity. But with the development of capital, especially of fixed capital, “the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose ‘powerful effectiveness’ is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production.”¹⁰

The misery of the proletariat has been the condition for a considerable growth of fixed capital, in which all the scientific and technical knowledge of mankind is “fixed”. Automation, the effects of which we are now beginning to see, is but one stage in this development. Yet capital continues to regulate production through the measurement of average labour time.

“Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form.”¹¹

The well known contradiction productive forces/production relations cannot be understood if one does not see the link between the following oppositions:

a) contradiction between the function of average labour time as a regulator of “under-developed” productive forces, and the growth of productive forces which tends to destroy the necessity of such a function.

b) contradiction between the necessity of developing to a maximum the surplus labour of the worker in order to produce as much surplus value as possible, and the very growth of surplus labour which makes its suppression possible.

“As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head”.¹²

“Human liberation”, prophesied by all utopian thinkers (past and present), is then possible:

“With that, production based on exchange value breaks down... The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them”.¹³

“Every child knows that a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish. Every child knows, too, that the masses of products corresponding to the different needs require different and quantitatively determined masses of the total labour of society. That this necessity of the distribution of social labour in definite proportions cannot possibly be done away with by a particular form of social production but can only change the mode of its appearance, is self evident. No natural laws can be done away with. What can change in historically different circumstances is only the form in which these laws assert themselves.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marx’s letter to Kugelmann, July 11, 1868.

Marx opposes regulation by socially necessary labour time to regulation by available time. Of course these are not two methods which could be used or rejected, but two historical objective processes involving all social relations. Many people know the pages from the Critique of the Gotha Programme where Marx explains that “within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labour”.¹⁵

“To everybody according to his needs”, in Marx’s view, does not mean that “everything” will exist “in abundance”; the notion of absolute “abundance” is historically irrelevant. There will have to be some sort of calculation and choice, not on the basis of exchange value, but on the basis of use value, of the social utility of the considered product. (Thereby the problem of “undeveloped countries” will be seen and treated in a new way.) Marx was quite clear about this in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

“In a future society, in which class antagonism will have ceased, in which there will no longer be any classes, use will no longer be determined by the minimum time of production; but the time of production devoted to different articles will be determined by the degree of their social utility.”¹⁶

Thus the text on the passage from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom”¹⁷ is elucidated. Freedom is regarded as a relation where man, mastering the process of production of material life, will at last be able to adapt his aspirations to the level reached by the development of the productive forces.¹⁸ The growth of social wealth and the development of every individuality coincide.

“For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time”.¹⁹ Thus Marx is quite right to describe time as the dimension of human liberation.

Furthermore, it is clear that the dynamics analysed by Marx excludes the hypothesis of any gradual way to communism through the progressive destruction of the law of value. On the contrary, the law of value keeps asserting itself violently until the overthrow of capitalism: the law of value never ceases destroying itself — only to reappear at a higher level. We have seen that the movement which gave birth to it tends to destroy its necessity. But it never ceases to exist and to regulate the functioning of the system. A revolution is therefore necessary.

The theory of the management of society through workers’ councils does not take the dynamics of capitalism into account. It retains all the categories and characteristics of capitalism: wage-labour, law of value, exchange. The sort of socialism it proposes is nothing other than capitalism — democratically managed by the workers. If this were put into practice there would be two possibilities: either the workers’ councils would try not to function as in capitalist enterprises, which would be impossible since capitalist production relations would still exist. In this

¹⁵ Marx Critique of the Gotha Programme.

¹⁶ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

¹⁷ *Capital*, Vol.III, last chapter.

¹⁸ “The essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in this, that a priori there is no conscious social regulation of production. The rational and naturally necessary asserts itself only as a blindly working average.” (Marx’s letter to Kugelmann, July 11, 1868)

¹⁹ *Grundrisse*.

case the workers' councils would be destroyed by counter-revolution. Production relations are not man-to-man relations, but the combination of the various elements of the process of labour. The "human" relation leaders/led is only a secondary form of the fundamental relation between wage-labour and capital. Or the workers' councils would consent to functioning as capitalist enterprises. In this case the system of councils would not survive; it would become an illusion, one of the numerous forms of association between Capital and Labour. "Elected" managers would soon become identical to traditional capitalists: the function of capitalist, says Marx, tends to separate from the function of worker. Workers' management would result in capitalism; in other words, capitalism would not have been destroyed.

The Bolshevik bureaucracy took the economy under its control. The ultra-left wants the masses to do this. The ultra-left remains on the same ground as Leninism: it once again gives a different answer to the same question (the management of the economy). We want to replace that question with a different one (the destruction of that economy, which is capitalist). Socialism is not the management, however "democratic" it may be, of capital, but its complete destruction.

E) The Historical Limit of the Ultra-Left

Our examination of the problem of "organization" and of the content of socialism has led us to affirm the existence of a revolutionary dynamic under capitalism. Produced by capitalism, the revolutionary movement assumes new forms in a new situation. Socialism is not merely the management of society by the workers, but the termination of the historical cycle of capital by the proletariat. The proletariat does not only seize the world; it also concludes the movement of capitalism and exchange. This is what distinguishes Marx from all utopian and reformist thinkers; socialism is produced by the objective dynamics which created capital and spread it all over the planet. Marx insists on the content of the movement. Lenin and the ultra-left insisted on its forms: form of organization, form of management of society, while they forgot the content of the revolutionary movement. This, too, was a historical product. The situation of the period prevented revolutionary struggles from having a communist content.

Leninism expressed the impossibility of revolution in his time. Councilism expressed its necessity, but without seeing exactly where its possibility lies. Marx's ideas on the party were abandoned. It was the time of the large reformist organizations, then of the communist parties (which quickly or immediately sank into another form of reformism). The revolutionary movement was not strong enough. Everywhere, in Germany, in Italy, in France, in Great Britain, the beginning of the twenties was marked by the control of the masses by "workers'" leaders. Reacting against this situation, ultra-leftists were driven to the point where they feared to become the new bureaucrats. Instead of understanding the Leninist parties as a product of proletarian defeat, they refused any party, and like Lenin let the Marxist conception of the party remain in oblivion. As for the content of socialism, all social movements, except in Spain for a short time, tried to administer capitalism and not to overthrow it. In such conditions the ultra-left could not make a profound critique of Leninism. They could only take the opposite view, and oppose other forms to Leninism, without seeing the content of revolution. This was all the more natural as that content did not clearly appear. (We must nevertheless remember that the ultra-left provided a remarkable critique of some aspects of capitalism — unionism and "workers'" parties).

These are the reasons why the ultra-left movement only replaced the Leninist fetishism of the party and class-consciousness with the fetishism of workers' councils. The critique of both Leninism and ultra-leftism is now possible because the development of capitalism gives us an idea of the real content of the revolutionary movement.

By holding on to the ultra-left ideas we presented (fear of creating the party, and workers' management), we would turn them into mere ideology. When these ideas first appeared around 1920, they expressed a real revolutionary struggle, and even their "mistakes" played a positive and progressive role in the struggles against social democracy and Leninism. Their limits were the expression of the activity of thousands of revolutionary workers. But things have changed a great deal since 1920. A new revolutionary workers' minority is in a slow process of formation, as was revealed by the 1968 events in France, and by other struggles in several countries.

In a revolutionary period, the revolutionary fights alongside the proletariat without any theoretical or sociological problem. The revolutionary movement gets unified. Theoretical coherence is a permanent objective of the revolutionaries, as it always hastens the practical co-ordination of revolutionary efforts. Revolutionaries never hesitate to act collectively in order to propagate their critique of the existing society.

They do not try to tell the workers what to do; but they do not refrain from intervening under the pretext that "the workers must decide for themselves". For, on the one hand, the workers only decide to do what the general situation compels them to do; and on the other, the revolutionary movement is an organic structure of which theory is an inseparable and indispensable element. Communists represent and defend the general interests of the movement. In all situations, they do not hesitate to express the whole meaning of what is going on, and to make practical proposals. If the expression is right and the proposal appropriate, they are parts of the struggle of the proletariat and contribute to build the "party" of the communist revolution.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Note on Pannekoek and Bordiga

Although both were attacked in Lenin's Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder, Pannekoek regarded Bordiga as a weird brand of Leninist, and Bordiga viewed Pannekoek as a distasteful mixture of marxism and anarcho-syndicalism. In fact, neither took any real interest in the other, and the "German" and "Italian" communist lefts largely ignored each other. One purpose of this note is to show they were wrong to do so.

A few years ago, few had heard of Pannekoek (1873–1960). His ideas and his past are coming back to life only because the present period is re-creating the conditions of his time — but with major differences which force us to correct his views.

Pannekoek was Dutch but most of his activity took place in Germany. He was one of the few socialists in the developed countries who kept alive the pre-1914 revolutionary tradition. But he only came to radical positions during and after the war. His 1920 text *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* is one of the best works of that period. Pannekoek saw that the failure of the Second International was not due to the failure of its strategy, but that the strategy was itself rooted in the function and the form of the Second International. The International was adapted to a precise stage of capitalism, in which workers asked for economic and political reforms. To make the revolution, the proletariat had to build organs of a new type, which would go beyond the old party/union dichotomy. On this he could not avoid a clash with the Communist International. First, because the Russians had never fully understood what the old International had been, and believed in organizing the workers from above, without seeing the connection between Kautsky's "socialist consciousness" introduced into the masses, and Kautsky's counter-revolutionary stand; secondly, because the Russian State wished to have mass parties in Europe, capable of putting pressure on their governments to come to terms with Russia. What Pannekoek stood for was the real communist element in Germany. Soon it was defeated and various large Communist Parties appeared in the West. The communist left was reduced to small groups divided into different factions.

During the early 30's, Pannekoek and others tried to define communism. They had already, as early as the beginning of the 1920's, denounced Russia as capitalist. Now they went back to Marx's analysis of value. They stated that capitalism is production for value accumulation, whereas communism is production for use value, for the fulfilment of people's needs. But there has to be some planning: without the mediation of money, society will have to organize an accurate system of bookkeeping, in order to keep track of the amount of labour-time contained in every produced good. Precise accounting will see to it that nothing is wasted. Pannekoek and his friends were quite right to go back to value and its implications. But they were wrong to look for a rational accounting system in labour-time. What they propose is in fact the rule of value (since value is nothing but the amount of social labour-time necessary to produce a good) without the

¹ In this context the German word for "union" has nothing to do with trade-unions (which are called *Gewerkschaften* in German). The "unions" actually fought the trade-unions.

intervention of money. One may add that this was attacked by Marx in 1857, at the beginning of the Grundrisse. But the German (and Dutch) left communists did at least emphasize the heart of communist theory.

In the German civil war, from 1919 to 1923, the most active workers had created new forms of organization, mainly what they called “unions”,¹ or sometimes “councils”, though the majority of the workers’ councils that existed were reformist. Pannekoek developed the idea that these forms were important, in fact vital to the movement, as opposed to the traditional party form. It was on this point that council communism attacked party communism. Pannekoek went on to develop this aspect more fully, until after the second world war he published *Workers’ Councils*, which elaborates a purely councilist ideology. Revolution is reduced to a mass democratic process, and socialism to workers’ management through a collective system of book-keeping and labour time accounting: in other words, value without its money form. The trouble is, far from being a mere instrument of measure, value is capitalist blood. As for the revolutionaries, they only have to correspond, set forth theory, circulate information, and describe what the workers are doing. But they must not organize in a permanent political group, try to define a strategy, or act accordingly, lest they become the new leaders of the workers and later the new ruling class.

From the analysis of Russia as State-capitalist, Pannekoek turned to the analysis of those who, in western countries, act as the representatives of the workers within capitalism, first of all the unions.

Pannekoek was familiar with the direct forms of resistance of the proletariat against capital, and he understood the triumph of counter-revolution. But he misunderstood the general context of the communist movement: its basis (transformation of the worker into a commodity), its fight (centralized action against the State and the existing workers’ movement), its objective (creation of new social relations where there is no economy as such). He played an important role in the re-formation of the revolutionary movement. We have to see the limits of his contribution, and then integrate it into a general re-formulation of subversive theory.

Bordiga (1889–1970) lived in a different situation. Like Pannekoek, who had fought against reformism before the war and even left the Dutch socialist party to create a new one, Bordiga belonged to the left of his party. But he did not go as far as Pannekoek. At the time of the first world war, the Italian party had a somewhat radical outlook, and there was no possibility of a split. The party even opposed the war, though in a more or less passive way.

When the Italian CP was founded in 1921, it broke with the right of the old party, and also with its centre. This fact displeased the Communist International. Bordiga led the party. He refused to take part in elections, not as a matter of principle but of tactics. Parliamentary activity can be used sometimes, but never when the bourgeoisie may use it to divert the workers from the class struggle. Later Bordiga wrote that he was not opposed to using the parliament as a tribune when this was possible. For instance, at the beginning of fascism, it made sense to try to use it as a tribune. But in 1919, in the midst of a revolutionary movement, when insurrection and its preparation were the order of the day, taking part in elections meant reinforcing bourgeois lies and misconceptions about the possibility of change through parliament. This was an important issue for Bordiga, whose group in the socialist party had been called the “abstentionist faction.” The Communist International disagreed with this. Considering it a matter of tactics and not of strategy, Bordiga decided to obey the CI, because he thought discipline was necessary in such a movement. But he kept his position.

The united front tactics were another bone of contention. It seemed to Bordiga that the very fact of inviting the socialist parties to common action would create confusion among the masses, and hide the irreconcilable opposition of these counter-revolutionary parties to communism. It would also help some communist parties which had not really broken with reformism to develop opportunistic tendencies.

Bordiga opposed the slogan of workers' government, which merely created confusion in theory and in practice. To him, the dictatorship of the proletariat was a necessary part of the revolutionary programme. However, unlike Pannekoek, he refused to explain these positions in terms of the degeneration of the Russian State and party. He felt that the CI was wrong, but that it was still communist.

Unlike the Communist International, Bordiga adopted a clear stand on fascism. He not only regarded fascism as another form of bourgeois rule, like democracy; he also believed one could not choose between them. This issue has been debated frequently. The Italian left's position is usually distorted. Historians often considered Bordiga responsible for Mussolini's rise to power. He is even accused of being unconcerned by the suffering of the people under fascism. In Bordiga's eyes, from the point of view of the revolution, it is not true that fascism is worse than democracy, nor that democracy creates better conditions for the proletarian class struggle. Even if democracy were to be considered a lesser evil than fascism, it would be stupid and useless to support democracy in order to avoid fascism: the Italian (and later, German) experience showed that democracy had not only been powerless in the face of fascism, but had called fascism to its rescue. Afraid of the proletariat, democracy actually bred fascism. The only alternative to fascism was therefore the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another argument was made later by the left — by Trotskyists, for instance — to support the anti-fascist policy. Capital needs fascism: it can no longer be democratic. So if we fight for democracy, we are in fact fighting for socialism. This is how many left-wingers justified their attitude during the second world war. But just as democracy breeds fascism, fascism breeds democracy. History has demonstrated that what Bordiga argued in theory has been realized in practice: capitalism replaces one with the other; democracy and fascism succeed each other. Both forms have been mixed and intermingled since 1945.

Of course the Communist International could not tolerate Bordiga's opposition, and between 1923 and 1926 he lost the control of the Italian Communist Party.² Although he did not quite agree with Trotsky, he took Trotsky's side against Stalin. At the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1926, he attacked the Russian leaders: this was probably the last time someone publicly attacked the CI from within at such a high level. Yet here it is important to note that Bordiga failed to analyse Russia as capitalist and the CI as degenerated. He did not really break with Stalinism until a few years later.

Bordiga was in prison from 1926 to 1930, and during the 1930s he stayed away from the very active politics of the emigration. The 1930s were dominated by anti-fascism and popular fronts, which led to preparations for a new world war. The tiny emigrant Italian left argued that the next war could only be imperialist. The fight against fascism through support of democracy was seen as material and ideological preparation for this war.

After the beginning of the war, there was little opportunity for communist action. The Italian and German left both adopted an internationalist stand, whereas Trotskyism chose to support

² When he still held the majority, he resigned in favour of Gramsci, out of discipline.

the allied powers against the Axis. At that time, Bordiga still refused to define Russia as capitalist, but he never believed — as Trotsky did — in supporting whatever side the Soviet Union would be allied with. He never agreed with the defence of the “Workers’ State”. One must bear in mind that, when Russia together with Germany invaded and partitioned Poland in 1939, Trotsky said this was a positive event, because it would alter Polish social relations in a socialist way!

In 1943, Italy changed sides and the Republic was created, providing opportunities for action. The Italian left created a party. They felt that the end of the war would lead to class struggles similar in nature to those at the end of the first world war. Did Bordiga really believe this? He apparently understood that the situation was completely different. The working class was this time totally under the control of capital, which had succeeded in rallying it around the banner of democracy. As for the losers (Germany and Japan), they were to be occupied and thus controlled by the winners. But Bordiga did not in fact oppose the views of the optimistic section of his group, and he kept this attitude until his death. He tended to keep aloof from the activity (and the activism) of his “party”, and was mostly interested in theoretical understanding and explanation. Thus he helped create and perpetuate illusions with which he disagreed. His party lost most of its members in a few years. At the end of the 1940’s it was reduced to a small group, as it had been before the war.

Most of Bordiga’s work was theoretical. A considerable part of it dealt with Russia. He showed that Russia was capitalist and that its capitalism was not different in nature from the western one. The German left (or ultra-left) was wrong on that question. To Bordiga, the important thing was not the bureaucracy, but the essential economic laws which the bureaucracy had to obey. These laws were the same as the ones described in *Capital*: value accumulation, exchange of commodities, declining rate of profit, etc. True, the Russian economy did not suffer from over-production, but only because of its backwardness. During the Cold War, when many a council communist depicted bureaucratic regimes as a new and possibly future model of capitalist evolution, Bordiga foresaw the US dollar would penetrate Russia, and ultimately crack the Kremlin walls.

The ultra-left believed that Russia had altered the basic laws described by Marx. It insisted on the control of the economy by the bureaucracy, to which it opposed the slogan of workers’ management. Bordiga said there was no need for a new programme; workers’ management is a secondary matter; workers will only be able to manage the economy if market relations are abolished. Of course this debate went beyond the framework of an analysis of Russia.

This conception became clear in the late 50’s. Bordiga wrote several studies on some of Marx’s most important texts. In 1960 he said that the whole of Marx’s work was a description of communism. This is undoubtedly the most profound comment made about Marx. Just as Pannekoek had returned to the analysis of value around 1930, Bordiga returned to it thirty years later. But what Bordiga developed was an overall conception of the development and dynamics of exchange from its origin to its death in communism.

Meanwhile, Bordiga retained his theory of the revolutionary movement, which included a misconception of the inner dynamics of the proletariat. He thought that workers would first gather on the economic level, and alter the nature of the unions; they would then reach the political level, thanks to the intervention of the revolutionary vanguard. It is easy to see here the influence of Lenin. Bordiga’s small party entered unions (i.e., CP-controlled unions) in France and Italy, with no results at all. Although he more or less disapproved of this, he took no public stand against such disastrous activity.

Bordiga kept alive the core of communist theory. But he could not get rid of Lenin's views, that is, the views of the Second International. Therefore his action and his ideas had to be contradictory. But today it is not hard to understand all that was — and still is — valid in his work.

Pannekoek understood and expressed the resistance of the proletariat to counter-revolution on an immediate level. He saw the unions as a monopoly of variable capital, similar to ordinary monopolies which concentrate constant capital. He described the revolution as the taking-over of life by the masses, against the productivist, hierarchic, and nationalist view of Stalinist and social-democratic "socialism" (largely shared by Trotskyism, and now by Maoism). But he failed to grasp the nature of capital, or the nature of the change communism would bring about. In its extreme form, as expressed by Pannekoek at the end of his life, council communism becomes a system of organization where councils play the same role that the "party" plays in the Leninist view. But it would be a serious mistake to identify Pannekoek with his worst period. All the same, one cannot accept the theory of workers' management, especially at a time when capital is looking for new ways of integrating the workers by proposing joint participation in its management.

This is precisely where Bordiga is important: he regarded all of Marx's work as an attempt to describe communism. Communism exists potentially within the proletariat. The proletariat is the negation of this society. It will eventually revolt against commodity production merely to survive, because commodity production is forced to destroy it, even physically. The revolution is neither a matter of consciousness, nor a matter of management. This makes Bordiga very different from the Second International, from Lenin, and from the official Communist International. But he never managed to draw a line between the present and the past. Now we can.

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