THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

by Guy Debord
Table of Contents:

Preface to the Third French Edition

1. Separation Perfected

2. The Commodity as Spectacle

3. Unity and Division Within Appearances

4. The Proletariat as Subject and Representation

5. Time and History

6. Spectacular Time

7. Environmental Planning

8. Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere

9. Ideology in Material Form

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Preface to the Third French Edition

La Societe du spectacle was first published in November 1967 by the Paris publishers Buchet-Chastel. The disturbances of 1968 made the book known. A second edition, strictly unaltered, was issued in 1971 by Editions Champ Libre, a publishing house whose name was changed to Editions Gerard Lebovici in 1984 in the wake of the murder of the publisher. That edition was reprinted regularly until 1991. The text of this third edition is also identical to that of 1967. (Naturally, the same principle will be applied to my other books, all of which are to be republished by Gallimard; I am not someone who revises his work.)

A critical theory of the kind presented here needed no changing - not as long, at any rate, as the general conditions of the long historical period that it was the first to describe accurately were still intact. The continued unfolding of our epoch has merely confirmed and further illustrated the theory of the spectacle. The reiteration of this theory may also be considered historical in a less elevated sense, for it testifies to what was the most extreme position taken up during the confrontations of 1968, and hence to what it was possible to know by then. The biggest dupes of that time have since received a clear object lesson - in the form of their own shattered existences - as to what exactly was meant by the "negation of life become visible," by the "loss of quality" associated with the commodity-form or by the "proletarianization of the world."

I have since -- as called for -- added postscripts on the more striking novelties thrown up by the fundamental movement of the times. In 1979, in the preface to a new Italian translation, I dealt with the effective changes in the nature of industrial production, as in the techniques of government, that began with the deployment of the power of the spectacle. And in 1988 my Comments on the Society of the Spectacle offered irrefutable evidence that the former "worldwide division of spectacular tasks" between the rival realms of the "concentrated" and "diffuse" forms of the spectacle had now given way to a combined form - to an "integrated" spectacle.

This amalgamation might be summed up by slightly revising Thesis 105 of The Society of the Spectacle, which drew a distinction, on the basis of the situation prior to 1967, between two different forms of practice: the Great Schism of class power having been reconciled, we ought now to say that the unified practice of the integrated spectacle has "transformed the world economically" as well as "using police methods to transform perception." (The police in question, incidentally, are of a completely new variety.)

It was only because this fusion had already occurred worldwide on the economic and political planes that the world could be declared officially unified. It was, furthermore, only because of the grave predicament in which separated power universally finds itself that this world needed unifying post haste, so that it might function as one bloc in a single consensual organization of the world market, at once travestied and buttressed by the spectacle. And yet, in the end, it will not be unified.

The totalitarian bureaucracy - that "substitute ruling class for the market economy" - never had much faith in its own destiny. It knew itself to be nothing but an "undeveloped type of ruling class" even as it yearned to be something more. Long ago, Thesis 58 had established as axiomatic that
"The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of this field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market."

This striving of the spectacle toward modernization and unification, together with all the other tendencies toward the simplification of society, was what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current ideology of democracy - in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator. No one in the West felt the need to spend more than a single day considering the import and impact of this extraordinary media event - proof enough, were proof called for, of the progress made by the techniques of the spectacle. All that needed recording was the fact that a sort of geological tremor had apparently taken place. The phenomenon was duly noted, dated and deemed sufficiently well understood; a very simple sign, "the fall of the Berlin Wall," repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other signs of democracy.

In 1991 the first effects of this spectacular modernization were felt in the complete disintegration of Russia. Thus - more clearly even than in the West - were the disastrous results of the general development of the economy made manifest. The disorder presently reigning in the East is no more than a consequence. The same formidable question that has been haunting the world for two centuries is about to be posed again everywhere: How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?

Thesis 111, discerning the first symptoms of that Russian decline whose final explosion we have just witnessed and envisioning the early disappearance of a world society which (as we may now put it) will one day be erased from the memory of the computer, offered a strategic assessment whose accuracy will very soon be obvious: The "crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavorable portent for the future development of capitalist society."

This book should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society. There was never anything outrageous, however, about what it had to say.

Guy Debord June 30, 1992

Separation Perfected

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of The Essence of Christianity
1
The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

2
Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.

3
The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated -- and precisely for that reason -- this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.

4
The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.

5
The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm -- a world view transformed into an objective force.

6
Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world - - not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations -- news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment -- the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.

7
The phenomenon of separation is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis
that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other. Social practice, which the spectacle's autonomy challenges, is also the real totality to which the spectacle is subordinate. So deep is the rift in this totality, however, that the spectacle is able to emerge as its apparent goal. The language of the spectacle is composed of signs of the dominant organization of production -- signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization.

8

The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle's mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support. Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.

9

In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.

10

The concept of the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. Diversities and contrasts among such phenomena are the appearances of the spectacle -- the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth. Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life -- and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself.

11

In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree -- to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation's agenda. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.

12

The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear." The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.

13

The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe,
basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.

14

The spectacular character of modern industrial society has nothing fortuitous or superficial about it; on the contrary, this society is based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way. For the spectacle, as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all - - although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself.

15

As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.

16

The spectacle subjects living human beings to its will to the extent that the economy has brought them under its sway. For the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself -- at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.

17

An earlier stage in the economy's domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate raison d'être from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality is not that it is allowed to appear.

18

For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings -- tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society's generalized abstraction. This is not to say, however, that the spectacle itself is perceptible to the naked eye -- even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule.

19

The spectacle is heir to all the weakness of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision. Indeed the spectacle reposes on an incessant deployment of the very technical rationality to which that philosophical tradition gave rise. So far from realizing philosophy, the spectacle philosophizes reality, and turns the material life
of everyone into a universe of speculation.

20

Philosophy is at once the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them -- but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. It is thus the most earthbound aspects of life that have become the most impenetrable and rarefied. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a "world beyond" -- and the perfection of separation within human beings.

21

So long as the realm of necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.

22

The fact that the practical power of modern society has detached itself from itself and established itself in the spectacle as an independent realm can only be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness already present in that powerful practice.

23

At the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power. The specialized role played by the spectacle is that of spokesman for all other activities, a sort of diplomatic representative of hierarchical society at its own court, and the source of the only discourse which that society allows itself to hear. Thus the most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic.

24

By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relationships conceals their true character as relationships between human beings and between classes; a second Nature thus seems to impose inescapable laws upon our environment. But the spectacle is by no means the inevitable outcome of a technical development perceived as natural; on the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle -- understood in the limited sense of those "mass media" that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation -- seems at times to be invading society in the shape of a mere apparatus, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that it answers precisely to the needs of the spectacle's internal dynamics. If the social requirements of the age which develops such techniques can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such "instant"
communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially one-way; the concentration of the media thus amounts to the monopolization by the administrators of the existing system of the means to pursue their particular form of administration. The social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is inseparable from the modern State, which, as the product of the social division of labor and the organ of class rule, is the general form of all social division.

Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. Religious contemplation in its earliest form was the outcome of the establishment of the social division of labor and the formation of classes. Power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning. In former times the category of the sacred justified the cosmic and ontological ordering of things that best served the interests of the masters, expounding upon and embellishing what society could not deliver. Thus power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect, but mass allegiance to frozen religious imagery was originally a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity that was still widely felt to be a universal fact of life. The modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible. The spectacle preserves unconsciousness as practical changes in the conditions of existence proceed. The spectacle is self-generated, and it makes up its own rules: it is a specious form of the sacred. And it makes no secret of what it is, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater comminution of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. In the course of this development all community and critical awareness have ceased to be; nor have those forces, which were able -- by separating -- to grow enormously in strength, yet found a way to reunite.

The generalized separation of worker and product has spelled the end of any comprehensive view of the job done, as well as the end of direct personal communication between producers. As the accumulation of alienated products proceeds, and as the productive process gets more concentrated, consistency and communication become the exclusive assets of the system's managers. The triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the proletarianization of the world.

Owing to the very success of this separated system of production, whose product is separation itself, that fundamental area of experience which was associated in earlier societies with an individual's principal work is being transformed -- at least at the leading edge of the system's evolution -- into a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity: it remains in thrall to that activity, in an uneasy and worshipful subjection to production's needs and results; indeed it is itself a product of the rationality of production. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned -- a corollary of the fact that all real activity has been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. So what is referred to as "liberation from work," that is, increased leisure time, is a liberation neither within labor itself nor from the world labor has brought into being.

The reigning economic system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process
designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of "the lonely crowd." The spectacle is continually rediscovering its own basic assumptions -- and each time in a more concrete manner.

29

The origin of the spectacle lies in the world's loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been: the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction. The spectacle divides the world into two parts, one of which is held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world. The spectacle is simply the common language that bridges this division. Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness.

30

The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.

31

Workers do not produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves. The success of this production, that is, the abundance it generates, is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. All time, all space, becomes foreign to them as their own alienated products accumulate. The spectacle is a map of this new world—a map drawn to the scale of the territory itself. In this way the very powers that have been snatched from us reveal themselves to us in their full force.

32

The spectacle's function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic growth corresponds almost entirely to the growth of this particular sector of industrial production. If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy, it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception.

33

Though separated from his product, man is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life.

34

The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.
The Commodity as Spectacle

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression.... As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized man's lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness

35

The self-movement of the spectacle consists in this: it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form -- as things that, being the negative expression of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties.

36

Here we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are "at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses." This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible.

37

The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience. The commodity world is thus shown as it really is, for its logic is one with men's estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce.

38
The loss of quality so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle, from the objects it lauds to the behavior it regulates, merely echoes the basic traits of a real production process that shuns reality. The commodity form is characterized exclusively by self-equivalence -- it is exclusively quantitative in nature: the quantitative is what it develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative.

Despite the fact that it excludes quality, this development is still subject, qua development, to the qualitative. Thus the spectacle betrays the fact that it must eventually break the bounds of its own abundance. Though this is not true locally, except here and there, it is already true at the universal level which was the commodity's original standard -- a standard that it has been able to live up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.

The development of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups (understood as the conditions of survival and their extension): this development has been the basis of all human enterprise. The realm of commodities has meant the constitution, within a natural economy, of a surplus survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of a variety of products among independent producers, was long able to retain an artisanal aspect embodied in a marginal economic activity where its quantitative essence was masked. Wherever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale trade and capital accumulation, however, such production successfully established total hegemony over the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity, throughout this campaign of conquest, had shown itself to be -- namely, a process of quantitative development. The unceasing deployment of economic power in the shape of commodities has transfigured human labor into labor-as-commodity, into wage-labor, and eventually given rise to an abundance thanks to which the basic problem of survival, though solved, is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level. Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they still must be liberated from their liberators. The independence of the commodity has spread to the entire economy over which the commodity now reigns. The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy. The pseudo-nature in which labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain in its service indefinitely, and inasmuch as this estranged activity is answerable only to itself it is able in turn to enroll all socially permissible efforts and projects under its banner. In these circumstances an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an augmented survival.

The commodity's dominion over the economy was at first exercised in a covert manner. The economy itself, the material basis of social life, was neither perceived nor understood -- not properly known precisely because of its "familiarity." In a society where concrete commodities were few and far between, it was the dominance of money that seemed to play the role of emissary, invested with full authority by an unknown power. With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that revolution's manufacturing system, and mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life. It was at this moment too that political economy established itself as at once the dominant science and the science of domination.
The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see -- commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity. The growth of the dictatorship of modern economic production is both extensive and intensive in character. In the least industrialized regions its presence is already felt in the form of imperialist domination by those areas that lead the world in productivity. In these advanced sectors themselves, social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities. With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses. The entirety of labor sold is transformed overall into the total commodity. A cycle is thus set in train that must be maintained at all costs: the total commodity must be returned in fragmentary form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production. To this end the already specialized science of domination is further broken down into specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, semiology and so on, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

Whereas at the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy treats the proletarian as a mere worker" who must receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power, and never considers him "in his leisure, in his humanity," these ideas of the ruling class are revised just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begins to be produced that a surplus "collaboration" is required of the workers. All of a sudden the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The humanity of the commodity finally attends to the workers' "leisure and humanity" for the simple reason that political economy as such now can -- and must -- bring these spheres under its sway. Thus it is that the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the "perfected denial of man."

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

Automation, which is at once the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, confronts the world of the commodity with a contradiction that it must somehow resolve: the same technical infrastructure that is capable of abolishing labor must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity -- and indeed as the sole generator of commodities. If automation, or for that matter any mechanisms, even less radical ones, that can increase productivity, are to be prevented from reducing socially necessary labor-time to an unacceptably low level, new forms of employment have to be created. A happy solution presents itself in the growth of the tertiary or service sector in response to the immense strain on the supply lines of the army responsible for distributing and
hyping the commodities of the moment. The coincidence is neat: on the one hand, the system is faced with the necessity of reintegrating newly redundant labor; on the other, the very factitiousness of the needs associated with the commodities on offer calls out a whole battery of reserve forces.

Exchange value could only have arisen as the proxy of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the preconditions for its establishment as an autonomous power. By activating all human use value and monopolizing that value's fulfillment, exchange value eventually gained the upper hand. The process of exchange became indistinguishable from any conceivable utility, thereby placing use value at its mercy. Starting out as the condottiere of use value, exchange value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own.

The falling rate of use value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy, gives rise to a new form of privation within the realm of augmented survival; this is not to say that this realm is emancipated from the old poverty: on the contrary, it requires the vast majority to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of its ends -- a requirement to which, as everyone knows, one must either submit or die. It is the reality of this situation -- the fact that, even in its most impoverished form (food, shelter), use value has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival -- that is the real basis for the general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form.

Use value was formerly implicit in exchange value. In terms of the spectacle's topsy-turvy logic, however, it has to be explicit -- for the very reason that its own effective existence has been eroded by the overdevelopment of the commodity economy, and that a counterfeit life calls for a pseudo-justification.

The spectacle is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money in its familiar form has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence, that is, of the exchangeability of diverse goods whose uses are not otherwise compatible, the spectacle in its full development is money's modern aspect; in the spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do. The spectacle is money for contemplation only, for here the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just the servant of pseudo-use -- it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life.
With the achievement of a purely economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to an appearance that is in effect that labor's product. Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production. As it accumulates, capital spreads out to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects. Society in its length and breadth becomes capital's faithful portrait.

The economy's triumph as an independent power inevitably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one -- namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. Such an economy irrevocably breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a social unconscious that was dependent on it without knowing it. "Whatever is conscious wears out. Whatever is unconscious remains unalterable. Once freed, however, surely this too must fall into ruins?" (Freud).

By the time society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. Having grown as a subterranean force until it could emerge sovereign, the economy proceeds to lose its power. Where economic id was, there ego shall be. The subject can only arise out of society -- that is, out of the struggle that society embodies. The possibility of a subject's existing depends on the outcome of the class struggle which turns out to be the product and the producer of history's economic foundation.

Consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

Unity and Division Within Appearances

A lively new polemic about the concepts "one divides into two" and "two fuse into one" is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that "one divides into two" is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that "two fuse into one" are against the materialist
dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.

Red Flag, (Peking), 21 September 1964

Like modern society itself, the spectacle is at once united and divided. In both, unity is grounded in a split. As it emerges in the spectacle, however, this contradiction is itself contradicted by virtue of a reversal of its meaning: division is presented as unity, and unity as division.

Struggles between forces, all of which have been established for the purpose of running the same socioeconomic system, are thus officially passed off as real antagonisms. In actuality these struggles partake of a real unity, and this on the world stage as well as within each nation.

This is not to say that the spectacle's sham battles between competing versions of alienated power are not also real; they do express the system's uneven and conflict-ridden development, as well as the relatively contradictory interests of those classes or fractions of classes that recognize the system and strive in this way to carve out a role for themselves in it. Just as the development of the most advanced economies involves clashes between different agendas, so totalitarian economic management by a state bureaucracy and the condition of those countries living under colonialism or semi-colonialism are likewise highly differentiated with respect to modes of production and power. By pointing up these great differences, while appealing to criteria of quite a different order, the spectacle is able to portray them as markers of radically distinct social systems. But from the standpoint of their actual reality as mere sectors, it is clear that the specificity of each is subsumed under a universal system as functions of a single tendency that has taken the planet for its field of operations. That tendency is capitalism.

The society that brings the spectacle into being does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely through the exercise of economic hegemony. It also dominates them in its capacity as the society of the spectacle. Modern society has thus already invested the social surface of every continent -- even where the material basis of economic exploitation is still lacking -- by spectacular means. It can frame the agenda of a ruling class and preside over that class's constitution. And, much as it proposes pseudo-goods to be coveted, it may also offer false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. As for the bureaucratic power that rules in a number of industrialized countries, it certainly has its own peculiar spectacle, but this plays an integral part in the overarching spectacle as general pseudo-negation -- and hence as vital support. So even if in its local manifestations the spectacle may embody totalitarian varieties of social communication and control, when viewed from the standpoint of the system's global functioning these are seen to be merely different aspects of a worldwide division of spectacular tasks.
Though designed to maintain the existing order as a whole, the division of spectacular tasks is chiefly oriented toward the actively developing pole of that order. The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of that field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market, whatever ideological or police-state barriers of a protectionist kind may be set up by local spectacles with dreams of autarky.

Behind the glitter of the spectacle's distractions, modern society lies in thrall to the global domination of a banalizing trend that also dominates it at each point where the most advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly broadened the panoply of roles and objects available to choose from. The vestiges of religion and of the family (still the chief mechanism for the passing on of class power), and thus too the vestiges of the moral repression that these institutions ensure, can now be seamlessly combined with the rhetorical advocacy of pleasure in this life. The life in question is after all produced solely as a form of pseudo-gratification which still embodies repression. A smug acceptance of what exists is likewise quite compatible with a purely spectacular rebelliousness, for the simple reason that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material.

Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles. Stardom is a diversification in the semblance of life -- the object of an identification with mere appearance which is intended to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity. Celebrities figure various styles of life and various views of society which anyone is supposedly free to embrace and pursue in a global manner. Themselves incarnations of the inaccessible results of social labor, they mimic by-products of that labor, and project these above labor so that they appear as its goal. The by-products in question are power and leisure -- the power to decide and the leisure to consume which are the alpha and the omega of a process that is never questioned. In the former case, government power assumes the personified form of the pseudo-star; in the second, stars of consumption canvas for votes as pseudo-power over life lived. But, just as none of these celestial activities are truly global, neither do they offer any real choices.

The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things. Stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying an equal access to the whole realm of consumption and deriving exactly the same satisfaction therefrom. Stars of decision, meanwhile, must possess the full range of accepted human qualities; all official differences between them are thus canceled out by the official similarity which is an inescapable implication of their supposed excellence in every sphere. Khrushchev had to become a general in order to have been responsible for the outcome of the battle of Kursk -- not on the battlefield but twenty years later, as master of the State. And Kennedy the orator survived
himself, so to speak, and even delivered his own funeral oration, in the sense that Theodore Sorenson still wrote speeches for Kennedy's successor in the very style that had done so much to create the dead man's persona. The admirable people who personify the system are indeed well known for not being what they seem to be; they have achieved greatness by embracing a level of reality lower than that of the most insignificant individual life -- and everyone knows it.

62

The false choice offered by spectacular abundance, based on the juxtaposition, on the one hand, of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and, on the other hand, of roles -- for the most part signified by and embodied in objects -- that are at once exclusive and interconnected, evolves into a contest among phantom qualities meant to elicit devotion to quantitative triviality. Thus false conflicts of ancient vintage tend to be resuscitated -- regionalisms or racisms whose job it now is to invest vulgar rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority. Hence too the never-ending succession of paltry contests -- from competitive sports to elections -- that are utterly incapable of arousing any truly playful feelings. Wherever the consumption of abundance has established itself, there is one spectacular antagonism which is always at the forefront of the range of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adulthood. For here an adult in the sense of someone who is master of his own life is nowhere to be found. And youth -- implying change in what exists -- is by no means proper to people who are young. Rather, it characterizes only the economic system, the dynamism of capitalism: it is things that rule, that are young -- things themselves that vie with each other and usurp one another's places.

63

What spectacular antagonisms conceal is the unity of poverty. Differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice by virtue of the fact that they are all founded on real repressed contradictions. Depending on the needs of the particular stage of poverty that it is supposed at once to deny and sustain, the spectacle may be concentrated or diffuse in form. In either case, it is no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune.

64

The concentrated form of the spectacle normally characterizes bureaucratic capitalism, though it may on occasion be borrowed as a technique for buttressing state power over more backward mixed economies, and even the most advanced capitalism may call on it in moments of crisis. Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat's relation to the ownership of the economy as a whole is invariably mediated by the community of bureaucrats, by his membership in that community. And commodity production, less well developed in bureaucratic systems, is also concentrated in form: the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to society -- en bloc -- is society's survival. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and because any choice made independently of it, even the most trivial -- concerning food, say, or music -- amounts to a declaration of war to the death on the bureaucracy. This dictatorship must therefore be attended by permanent violence. Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which is a resume of everything that exists officially, and this is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system's totalitarian cohesiveness. Everyone must identify magically with this absolute celebrity -- or disappear. For this figure is the master of not-being-consumed, and the heroic image appropriate to the absolute exploitation constituted by primitive
accumulation accelerated by terror. If every Chinese has to study Mao, and in effect be Mao, this is because there is nothing else to be. The dominion of the spectacle in its concentrated form means the dominion, too, of the police.

65

The diffuse form of the spectacle is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each commodity considered in isolation is justified by an appeal to the grandeur of commodity production in general -- a production for which the spectacle is an apologetic catalog. The claims jostling for position on the stage of the affluent economy's integrated spectacle are not always compatible, however. Similarly, different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting approaches to the organization of society; thus the spectacular logic of the automobile argues for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of the old city centers, whereas the spectacle of the city itself calls for these same ancient sections to be turned into museums. So the already questionable satisfaction allegedly derived from the consumption of the whole is adulterated from the outset because the real consumer can only get his hands on a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven -- fragments each of which naturally lacks any of the quality ascribed to the whole.

66

Each individual commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others and aspires to impose its presence everywhere as though it were alone. The spectacle is the epic poem of this strife -- a strife that no fall of Ilium can bring to an end. Of arms and the man the spectacle does not sing, but rather of passions and the commodity. Within this blind struggle each commodity, following where passion leads, unconsciously actualizes something of a higher order than itself: the commodity's becoming worldly coincides with the world's being transformed into commodities. So it is that, thanks to the cunning of the commodity, whereas all particular commodities wear themselves out in the fight, the commodity as abstract form continues on its way to absolute self-realization.

67

The satisfaction that the commodity in its abundance can no longer supply by virtue of its use value is now sought in an acknowledgment of its value qua commodity. A use of the commodity arises that is sufficient unto itself; what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honor of the commodity's sovereign freedom. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fueled and boosted by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed. A film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right. Keychains that are not paid for but come as free gifts with the purchase of some luxury product, or are then traded back and forth in a sphere far removed from that of their original use, bear eloquent witness to a mystical self-abandonment to the transcendent spirit of the commodity. Someone who collects keychains that have recently been manufactured for the sole purpose of being collected might be said to be accumulating the commodity's indulgences -- the glorious tokens of the commodity's immanent presence among the faithful. In this way reified man proclaims his intimacy with the commodity. Following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism, with its transported convulsionaries and miraculous cures, the fetishism of the commodity also achieves its moment of acute fervor. The only use still in evidence here, meanwhile, is the basic use of submission.
It is doubtless impossible to contrast the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism with any authentic need or desire that is not itself equally determined by society and its history. But the commodity in the stage of its abundance attests to an absolute break in the organic development of social needs. The commodity's mechanical accumulation unleashes a limitless artificiality in face of which all living desire is disarmed. The cumulative power of this autonomous realm of artifice necessarily everywhere entails a falsification of life.

The image of the blissful unification of society through consumption suspends disbelief with regard to the reality of division only until the next disillusionment occurs in the sphere of actual consumption. Each and every new product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. As such it is ceremoniously presented as the unique and ultimate product. But, as with the fashionable adoption of seemingly rare aristocratic first names which turn out in the end to be borne by a whole generation, so the would-be singularity of an object can be offered to the eager hordes only if it has been mass-produced. The sole real status attaching to a mediocre object of this kind is to have been placed, however briefly, at the very center of social life and hailed as the revelation of the goal of the production process. But even this spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer -- and hence by all other consumers too. At this point its essential poverty, the natural outcome of the poverty of its production, stands revealed -- too late. For by this time another product will have been assigned to supply the system with its justification, and will in turn be demanding its moment of acclaim.

This continual process of replacement means that fake gratification cannot help but be exposed as products change, and as changes occur in the general conditions of production. Something that can assert its own unchanging excellence with uncontested arrogance changes nonetheless. This is as true of the concentrated as of the diffuse version of the spectacle, and only the system endures: Stalin, just like any obsolete product, can be cast aside by the very forces that promoted his rise. Each new lie of the advertising industry implicitly acknowledges the one before. Likewise every time a personification of totalitarian power is eclipsed, the illusion of community that has guaranteed that figure unanimous support is exposed as a mere sum of solitudes without illusions.

Whatever lays claim to permanence in the spectacle is founded on change, and must change as that foundation changes. The spectacle, though quintessentially dogmatic, can yet produce no solid dogma. Nothing is stable for it: this is its natural state, albeit the state most at odds with its natural inclination.

The unreal unity the spectacle proclaims masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production is based. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what separates them from it. What brings together men liberated from local and national limitations is also what keeps them apart. What pushes for greater rationality is also what
nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What creates society's abstract power also creates its concrete unfreedom.

The Proletariat as Subject and Representation

The equal right of all to the goods and enjoyment of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints -- these, at bottom, are the raison d'etre of the March 18th insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army.

Enquête parlementaire sur l'insurrection du 18 mars

The real movement that abolishes reigning conditions governed society from the moment the bourgeoisie triumphed in the economic sphere, and it did so visibly once that victory was translated onto the political plane. The development of the forces of production had shattered the old relations of production; every static order had crumbled to nothing. And everything that had formerly been absolute became historical.

It is because human beings have thus been thrust into history, and into participation in the labor and the struggles which constitute history, that they find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear-eyed manner. The history in question has no goal aside from whatever effects it works upon itself, even though the last unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era may view the productive progression through which history has unfolded as itself the object of that history. As for the subject of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world -- that is, of history -- and coming to exist as consciousness of its own activity.

The class struggles of the long revolutionary period ushered in by the rise of the bourgeoisie have evolved in tandem with the "thought of history," with the dialectic -- with a truly historical thinking that is not content simply to seek the meaning of what is but aspires to understand the dissolution of everything that is -- and in the process to dissolve all separation.

For Hegel it was no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but rather of interpreting the world's transformation. Inasmuch as he did no more than interpret that transformation, however, Hegel was
merely the philosophical culmination of philosophy. He sought to understand a world that made itself. Such historical thought was still part of that consciousness which comes on the scene too late and supplies a justification after the fact. It thus transcended separation -- but it did so in thought only. Hegel's paradoxical posture, which subordinates the meaning of all reality to its historical culmination, while at the same time revealing this meaning by proclaiming itself to be that culmination, arises from the simple fact that the great thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries strove in his philosophy merely for reconciliation with the results of those revolutions. "Even as a philosophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not reflect the entire process of that revolution, but only its concluding phase. It is thus a philosophy, not of the revolution, but of the restoration" (Karl Korsch, "Theses on Hegel and Revolution"). Hegel performed the task of the philosopher -- "the glorification of what exists" -- for the last time, but, even for him, what existed could only be the totality of the movement of history. Since the external position of thought was nevertheless maintained, this could be masked only by identifying that thought with a preexisting project of the Spirit -- of that absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done, that force whose achievement is the present. So philosophy, as it expires in the arms of truly historical thinking, can no longer glorify its world without denying it, for even in order to express itself it must assume that the total history in which it has vested everything has come to an end, and that the only court capable of ruling on truth or falsehood has been adjourned.

When the proletariat demonstrates through its own actions that historical thought has not after all forgotten and lost itself, that thought's conclusions are negated, but at the same time the validity of its method is confirmed.

Historical thought can be saved only if it becomes practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class cannot be less than historical consciousness applied to the totality of its world. All the theoretical strands of the revolutionary workers' movement stem from critical confrontation with Hegelian thought, and this goes for Marx as for Stirner and Bakunin.

The inseparability of Marx's theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from that theory's revolutionary character, that is to say, from its truth. It is under this aspect that the relationship between Marx and Hegel has generally been ignored, ill understood or even denounced as the weak point of what has been fallaciously transformed into a Marxist dogma. Deploiting the less-than-scientific predictions of the Manifesto of 1848 concerning the imminence of proletarian revolution in Germany, Bernstein perfectly described this connection between the dialectical method and a historical taking of sides: "Such historical autosuggestion, so grievously mistaken that the commonest of political visionaries would be hard pressed to top it, would be incomprehensible in a Marx -- who by that period had already become a serious student of the economy -- were it not possible to recognize here the traces of a lingering loyalty to Hegel's antithetical dialectics, from which Marx, no more than Engels, had never completely emancipated himself. In view of the general turbulence of the times, this was all the more fatal to him."
The inversion that Marx effected in order to salvage the thought of the bourgeois revolutions by "transplanting" it was no trivial substitution of the material development of the forces of production for the unfolding of the Hegelian Spirit on its way to its rendezvous with itself in time, its objectification being indistinguishable from its alienation, and its historical wounds leaving no scars. For history, once it becomes real, no longer has an end. What Marx did was to demolish Hegel's detached stance with respect to what occurs, along with the contemplation of a supreme external agent of whatever kind. Theory thence-forward had nothing to know beyond what it itself did. By contrast, the contemplation of the movement of the economy in the dominant thought of present-day society is indeed a non-inverted legacy of the undialectical aspect of the Hegelian attempt to create a circular system; this thought is an approbatory one which no longer has the dimension of the concept, which no longer has any need of Hegelianism to justify it, because the movement that it is designed to laud is a sector of the world where thought no longer has any place -- a sector whose mechanical development in effect dominates the world's development overall. Marx's project is the project of a conscious history whereby the quantitative realm that arises from the blind development of purely economic productive forces would be transformed into a qualitative appropriation of history. The critique of political economy is the first act of this end of prehistory: "Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself."

The close affinity of Marx's thinking with scientific thinking lies in its rational grasp of the forces actually at work in society. Fundamentally, though, Marx's theory lies beyond science, which is only preserved within it inasmuch as it is transcended by it. For Marx it is the struggle -- and by no means the law -- that has to be understood. "We know only a single science," says The German Ideology, "the science of history."

The bourgeois era, though eager to give history a scientific foundation, neglects the fact that the science available to it must certainly have been itself founded -- along with the economy -- on history. On the other hand, history is fundamentally dependent on economic knowledge only so long as it remains merely economic history. History's intervention in the economy (a global process that is after all capable of changing its own basic scientific preconditions) has in fact been overlooked by scientific observers to a degree well illustrated by the vain calculations of those socialists who believed that they could ascertain the exact periodicity of crises. Now that continual tinkering by the State has succeeded in compensating for the tendency for crises to occur, the same type of reasoning takes this delicate balance for a permanent economic harmony. If it is to master the science of society and bring it under its governance, the project of transcending the economy and taking possession of history cannot itself be scientific in character. The revolutionary point of view, so long as it persists in espousing the notion that history in the present period can be mastered by means of scientific knowledge, has failed to rid itself of all its bourgeois traits.

The utopian strands in socialism, though they do have their historical roots in the critique of the existing social organization, are properly so called inasmuch as they deny history -- inasmuch, that is, as they deny the struggle that exists, along with any movement of the times beyond the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society. Not, however, because they deny science. On the contrary, the utopians were completely in thrall to scientific thinking, in the form in which this had imposed itself in the preceding centuries. Their goal was the perfection of this rational
system. They certainly did not look upon themselves as prophets disarmed, for they believed firmly in the social power of scientific proof -- and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. "However did they imagine," Sombart wonders, "that what needed to be proved might be won by fighting?" All the same, the utopians' scientific orientation did not extend to knowledge of the fact that social groups are liable to have vested interests in a status quo, forces at their disposal equipped to maintain it and indeed forms of false consciousness designed to buttress their positions. Their idea of things thus lagged far behind the historical reality of the development of science itself, which was by this time largely governed by the social demand arising from factors, such as those mentioned above, which determined not only what was considered scientifically acceptable but also just what might become an object of scientific research. The utopian socialists remained prisoners to the scientific manner of expounding the truth, and they viewed this truth in accordance with its pure abstract image - - the form in which it had established itself at a much earlier moment in social development. As Sorel noted, the utopians took astronomy as their model for the discovery and demonstration of the laws of society: their conception of harmony, so hostile to history, was the product, logically enough, of an attempted application to society of the science least dependent on history. This conception was introduced and promoted with an experimental ingenuousness worthy of Newtonism, and the smiling future continually evoked by the utopians played "a role in their social science analogous to that played by inertia in rational mechanics" (Mat riaux pour une th'orie du prol'tariat).

84

The scientific-determinist side of Marx's thought was indeed what made it vulnerable to "ideologization"; the breach was opened in Marx's own lifetime, and greatly widened in his theoretical legacy to the workers' movement. The advent of the subject of history was consequently set back even further, as economics, the historical science par excellence, was depended on more and more as guarantor of the necessity of its own future negation. In this way revolutionary practice -- the only true agent of this negation -- tended to be thrust out of theory's field of vision altogether. It became important patiently to study economic development, and once more to accept, with Hegelian tranquility, the suffering it imposed -- that suffering whose outcome was still a "graveyard of good intentions." All of a sudden it was discovered that, according to the "science of revolutions," consciousness now always came on the scene too soon, and needed to be taught. "History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong," Engels would write in 1895. "It has made it clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was not, by a long way, ripe...." Throughout his life Marx upheld his theory's unitary standpoint, yet in the exposition of that theory he was drawn onto the ground of the dominant forms of thought, in that he undertook critiques of particular disciplines, and notably that of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It was in this mutilated form, later taken as definitive, that Marx's theory became "Marxism."

85

The weakness of Marx's theory is naturally part and parcel of the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The working class failed to inaugurate permanent revolution in 1848, and the Commune went down in isolation. Revolutionary theory was thus still unable to come into full possession of its own existence. That Marx should have been reduced to defending and honing that theory in the detachment of scholarly work in the British Museum can only have had a debilitating effect on the theory itself. What is certain is that the scientific conclusions that Marx drew about the future development of the working class -- along with the organizational practice founded on them -- would later become obstacles to proletarian consciousness.
All the theoretical shortcomings of a scientific defense of proletarian revolution, be they in the content or in the form of the exposition, come down in the end to the identification of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.

As early as the Manifesto, the urge to demonstrate the scientific legitimacy of proletarian power by citing a sequence of precedents only served to muddy Marx's historical thinking. This approach led him to defend a linear model of the development of modes of production according to which, at each stage, class struggles would end "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." The plain facts of history, however, are that, just as the "Asiatic mode of production" (as Marx himself observed in another connection) preserved its stasis in spite of class conflict, so too no jacquerie of serfs ever overthrew the barons and no slave revolt in the ancient world ever ended the rule of freemen. The first thing the linear model loses sight of is the fact that the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever been victorious; the only class, also, for which the development of the economy was the cause and consequence of its capture of society. The same simplified view led Marx to neglect the economic role of the State in the management of a class society. If the rising bourgeoisie appears to have liberated the economy from the State, this is true only to the extent that the State was formerly the instrument of class oppression in a static economy. The bourgeoisie developed its autonomous economic power during the medieval period when the State had been weakened, when feudalism was breaking up a stable equilibrium between powers. The modern State, on the other hand, which first supported the developing bourgeoisie thanks to the mercantile system, and then went on, in the time of "laisser faire, laisser passer," to become the bourgeoisie's own State, was eventually to emerge as wielder of a power central to the planned management of the economic process. Marx was already able, under the rubric of Bonapartism, accurately to depict a foreshadowing of modern State bureaucracy in that fusion of capital and State which established "capital's national power over labor and a public authority designed to maintain social servitude"; the bourgeoisie thus renounced any historical existence beyond its own reduction to the economic history of things, and permitted itself to be "condemned along with the other classes to a like political nullity." Already discernible in outline here are the sociopolitical bases of the modern spectacle, which in a negative way defines the proletariat as the only pretender to historical existence.

The only two classes that really correspond to Marx's theory, the two pure classes that the whole thrust of Capital's analysis tends to bring to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history -- but they are revolutionary under different conditions. The bourgeois revolution is a fait accompli. The proletarian revolution is a project, formulated on the basis of the earlier revolution but differing qualitatively from it. To neglect the originality of the bourgeoisie's historical role serves only to conceal the concrete originality of the proletarian project, which can get nowhere unless it advances under its own banner and comes to grips with the "prodigiousness of its own aims." The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the class of consciousness. The growth of the forces of production cannot in itself guarantee this accession to power -- not even indirectly, via the increase in dispossession that this growth entails. Nor can any Jacobin-style seizure of the State be a means to that end. The proletariat cannot make use of any ideology designed to pass partial goals off as general ones,
because it cannot maintain any partial reality that is truly its own.

It is true that during a certain period of his participation in the struggle of the proletariat Marx overrated the value of scientific prediction -- indeed he went so far in this direction that he provided the illusions of economism with an intellectual justification; however, he clearly never fell prey himself to such illusions. In a well-known letter of 7 December 1867, accompanying an article criticizing Capital which he himself had written, and which Engels was supposed to publish as if it were that of an opponent, Marx clearly indicated the limits of his scientific stance: "The author's subjective tendency (imposed on him, perhaps, by his political position and his past) -- that is to say, the way in which he himself pictures, and portrays for others, the ultimate outcome of the present movement, the present social process -- has nothing whatsoever to do with his real analysis." By thus censuring the "tendentious conclusions" of his own objective analysis, and by interpolating an ironic "perhaps" apropos of the unscientific choices supposedly "imposed" on him, Marx in effect reveals the methodological key to tackling the two aspects of the matter.

The fusion of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each of these poles depends for its validation on the other. What constitutes the proletarian class as a subject is its organizing of revolutionary struggles and its organizing of society at the moment of revolution: this is the point at which the practical conditions of consciousness must be assembled and the theory of praxis verified by virtue of its transformation into theory-in-practice. This pivotal issue of organization, however, received but the scantest attention from revolutionary theory during the founding period of the workers' movement -- the very period when that theory still possessed the unitary character which it had inherited from historical thought (and which it had rightly vowed to develop into a unitary historical practice). As it turned out, organization became the locus of revolutionary theory's inconsistency, allowing the tenets of that theory to be imposed by statist and hierarchical methods borrowed from the bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization developed subsequently by the workers' movement on the basis of this dereliction of theory have tended in turn to bar the construction of a unitary theory, to break theory up instead into a variety of specialized and fragmentary types of knowledge. Thus ideologically alienated, theory cannot even recognize the practical verification of the unitary historical thought that it has betrayed whenever that verification emerges in spontaneous workers' struggles; on the contrary, all it can do is help to repress it and destroy all memory of it. Yet such historical forms, thrown up by the struggle, are the very practical medium that theory needs in order to be true. They are in fact a requirement of theory, but one that has not been given theoretical expression. The soviets, for example, were not a theoretical discovery; and, to go back even farther, the highest theoretical truth attained by the International Workingmen's Association was its own existence in practice.

Early successes in the First International's struggle enabled it to free itself from the confused influences that the dominant ideology continued for a time to exercise upon it from within. But the defeat and repression that it soon confronted brought to the surface a conflict between two conceptions of the proletarian revolution, each of which had an authoritarian dimension spelling the abandonment of the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. The rift between Marxists and Bakuninists, which eventually became an irreconcilable one, had a dual aspect in that it bore
both upon the question of power in a future revolutionary society and upon the current organization of the movement; and both the opposing factions reversed their own position in moving from one of these issues to the other. Bakunin denounced as an illusion the idea that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian use of State power, warning that this course would lead to the reconstruction of a bureaucratic ruling class and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (or of those reputed to be the most knowledgeable). Marx, who held that the combined maturation, of economic contradictions on the one hand, and of the democratic education of the workers on the other hand, would reduce the proletarian State's role to the short phase needed to give the stamp of legality to new social relations brought into being by objective factors, charged Bakunin and his supporters with the authoritarianism of a conspiratorial elite that had deliberately placed itself above the International with the hare-brained intention of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those self-designated as such). Bakunin unquestionably recruited followers on just such a basis: "in the midst of the popular tempest, we must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution, not by any kind of overt power but by the collective dictatorship of all our allies, a dictatorship without badges, without official titles, without any official status, and therefore all the more powerful, as it does not carry the trappings of power." This was clearly a clash between two ideologies of workers' revolution; each embodied a partially correct critique, but each, having lost the unity of historical thought, aspired to set itself up as an ideological authority. Powerful organizations, among them the German Social Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation, would subsequently faithfully serve one or the other of these ideologies; in every case the result produced was greatly different from the one sought.

The fact that the anarchists regard the goal of the proletarian revolution as immediately present is at once the great strength and the great weakness of the real anarchist struggle (I refer to the struggle of collectivist anarchism; the claims of anarchism in its individualist variants are laughable). Collectivist anarchism retains only the terminal point of the historical thought of modern class struggles, and its unconditional demand that this point be attained instantly is echoed in its systematic contempt for method. Its critique of the political struggle consequently remains an abstract one, while its commitment to the economic struggle is framed only in terms of the mirage of a definitive solution to be achieved at one stroke, on the economic battleground itself, on the day of the general strike or insurrection. The anarchist agenda is the fulfillment of an ideal. Anarchism is the still ideological negation of the State and of classes, that is to say, of the very social preconditions of any separated ideology. It is an ideology of pure freedom which makes everything equal and eschews any suggestion of historical evil. This position, which fuses all partial demands into a single demand, has given anarchism the great merit of representing the refusal of existing conditions from the standpoint of the whole of life, not merely from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization. On the other hand, the fact that this fusion of demands is envisaged in the absolute, at the whim of the individual, and in advance of any actualization, has doomed anarchism to an incoherence that is only too easy to discern: the doctrine requires no more than the reiteration, and the reintroduction into each particular struggle, of the same simple and all-encompassing idea -- the same end-point that anarchism has identified from the first as the movement's sole and entire goal. Thus Bakunin, on quitting the Jura Federation in 1873, found it easy to write that "During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds." No doubt this attitude preserves the commitment of the truly historical thought of the proletariat to the notion that ideas must become practical, but it leaves the ground of history by assuming that the adequate forms of this transition to practice have already been discovered and are no longer subject to
variation.

The anarchists, whose ideological fervor clearly distinguished them from the rest of the workers' movement, extended this specialization of tasks into their own ranks, so offering a hospitable field of action, within any anarchist organization, to the propagandists and defenders of anarchist ideology; and the mediocrity of these specialists was only reinforced by the fact that their intellectual activity was generally confined to the repetition of a clutch of unchanging truths. An ideological respect for unanimity in the taking of decisions tended to favor the uncontrolled exercise of power, within the organization itself, by "specialists of freedom"; and revolutionary anarchism expects a comparable unanimity, obtained by comparable means, from the people once they are liberated. Furthermore, the refusal to distinguish between the opposed situations of a minority grouped in the ongoing struggle and a new society of free individuals has led time and again to the permanent isolation of anarchists when the time for common decisions arrives -- one need only think of the countless anarchist insurrections in Spain that have been contained and crushed at a local level.

The illusion more or less explicitly upheld in all genuine anarchism is that of the permanent imminence of a revolution which, because it will be made instantaneously, is bound to validate both anarchist ideology and the form of practical organization that flows from it. In 1936 anarchism really did lead a social revolution, setting up the most advanced model of proletarian power ever realized. Even here, though, it is pertinent to recall, for one thing, that the general insurrection was dictated by an army pronunciamento. Furthermore, inasmuch as the revolution was not completed in its earliest days -- Franco, enjoying strong foreign backing at a time when the rest of the international proletarian movement had already been defeated, held power in half the country, while bourgeois forces and other workers' parties of statist bent still existed in the Republican camp -- the organized anarchist movement proved incapable of broadening the revolution's semi-victories, or even of safeguarding them. The movement's leaders became government ministers -- hostages to a bourgeois state that was dismantling the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

The "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International was the scientific ideology of the socialist revolution, an ideology which asserted that its whole truth resided in objective economic processes, and in the gradual recognition of their necessity by a working class educated by the organization. This ideology exhumed utopian socialism's faith in pedagogics, eking this out with a contemplative evocation of the course of history. So out of touch was this attitude with the Hegelian dimension of a total history, however, that it lost even the static image of the totality present in the utopians' (and signally in Fourier's) critique. A scientific orientation of this variety, hardly capable of doing anything more than rehash symmetrical ethical alternatives, informed Hilferding's insipid observation in Das Finanzkapital that recognizing the necessity of socialism "gives no clue as to what practical attitude should be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize a necessity, and quite another to place oneself in the service of that necessity." Those who chose not to understand that for Marx, and for the revolutionary proletariat, a unitary historical thought was itself nothing more and nothing less than the practical attitude to be adopted could only fall victim to the practice which that choice immediately entailed.
The ideology of the social-democratic organization placed that organization in the hands of teachers who were supposed to educate the working class, and the organizational form adopted corresponded perfectly to the sort of passive learning that this implied. The participation of the socialists of the Second International in the political and economic struggles was concrete enough, but it was profoundly uncritical. Theirs was a manifestly reformist practice carried on in the name of an illusory revolution. It was inevitable that this ideology of revolution should founder on the very success of those who proclaimed it. The setting apart of parliamentary representatives and journalists within the movement encouraged people who had in any case been recruited from the bourgeois intelligentsia to pursue a bourgeois style of life, while the trade-union bureaucracy turned even those drawn in through industrial struggle, and of working-class background, into mere brokers of labor -- traders in labor-power as a commodity to be bought and sold like any other. For the activity of all these people to have retained any revolutionary aspect whatsoever, capitalism would have had to find itself conveniently unable to put up with a reformism on the economic plane that it was perfectly able to tolerate on the political, in the shape of the social democrats' legalistic agitation. The "science" of the social democrats vouched for the inevitability of such a paradoxical occurrence; history, however, gave the lie to it at every turn.

This was a contradiction that Bernstein, being the social democrat farthest removed from political ideology, and the one who most unabashedly embraced the methodology of bourgeois science, was honest enough to draw attention to; the reformism of the English workers' movement, which did without revolutionary ideology altogether, also attested to it; but only historical development itself could demonstrate it beyond all possibility of doubt. Though prey to all kinds of illusions in other areas, Bernstein had rejected the notion that a crisis of capitalism must miraculously occur, thus forcing the hand of the socialists, who declined to assume any revolutionary mantle in the absence of such a legitimating event. The profound social upheaval set in train by the First World War, though it raised consciousness on a wide scale, proved twice over that the social-democratic hierarchy had failed to educate the German workers in a revolutionary way, that it had failed, in short, to turn them into theoreticians: the first time was when the overwhelming majority of the party lent its support to the imperialist war; the second time was when, in defeat, the party crushed the Spartacist revolutionaries. The sometime worker Ebert still believed in sin -- declaring that he hated revolution "like sin." He also proved himself to be a fine herald of that image of socialism which was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat of Russia and elsewhere, by precisely articulating the agenda of this new form of alienation: "Socialism," said Ebert, "means working hard."

As a Marxist thinker, Lenin was simply a faithful and consistent Kautskyist who applied the revolutionary ideology of "orthodox Marxism" to the conditions existing in Russia, conditions that did not permit of the sort of reformist practice pursued in parallel fashion by the Second International. The task of directing the proletariat from without, by means of a disciplined clandestine party under the control of intellectuals who had become "professional revolutionaries," gave rise to a genuine profession -- and one disinclined to make compacts with any professional strata of capitalist society (even had such an overture -- presupposing the attainment of an advanced stage of bourgeois development -- been within the power of the czarist political regime to make). In consequence the speciality of the profession in question became that of total social
With the advent of the war, and the collapse of international social democracy in face of it, the authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks was able to cast its net across the globe. The bloody end of the workers’ movement’s democratic illusions made a Russia of the whole world, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary rift opened up by this period of crisis, proposed its hierarchical and ideological model to the proletariat of all countries as the way to "talk Russian" to the ruling class. Lenin never reproached the Second International's Marxism for being a revolutionary ideology -- but only for having ceased to be such an ideology.

This same historical moment, when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world, also marks the definitive inauguration of an order of things that lies at the core of the modern spectacle's rule: this was the moment when an image of the working class arose in radical opposition to the working class itself.

"In all earlier revolutions," wrote Rosa Luxemburg in Die Rote Fahne for 21 December 1918, "the opponents confronted one another face to face: class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops that protect the old order, instead of intervening in the name of the ruling classes, intervene under the banner of a 'social-democratic party.' If the central question of the revolution were posed openly and honestly -- in the form 'Capitalism or socialism?' -- then no doubt or hesitation would be possible today among the broad proletarian masses." Thus, a few days before its destruction, the radical current within the German proletariat uncovered the secret of the new conditions brought into being by the whole process which had gone before (and to which the image of the working class had largely contributed): the spectacular organization of the ruling order's defense, and a social reign of appearances under which no "central question" could any longer be "openly and honestly" posed. By this time the revolutionary image of the proletariat had become both the main element in, and the chief result of, a general falsification of society.

The organization of the proletariat according to the Bolshevik model stemmed from the backwardness of Russia and from the abdication from the revolutionary struggle of the workers' movement in the advanced countries. Russian backwardness also embodied all the conditions needed to carry this form of organization in the direction of the counterrevolutionary reversal that it had unconsciously contained from its beginnings; and the repeated balking of the mass of the European workers' movement at the Hic Rhodus, hic salta of the 1918-1920 period -- a balking that included the violent annihilation of its own radical minority -- further facilitated the complete unfolding of a process whose end result could fraudulently present itself to the world as the only possible proletarian solution. The Bolshevik party justified itself in terms of the necessity of a State monopoly over the representation and defense of the power of the workers, and its success in this quest turned the party into what it truly was, namely the party of the owners of the proletariat, which essentially dislodged all earlier forms of ownership.
For twenty years the various tendencies of Russian social democracy had engaged in an unresolved debate over which conditions were most propitious for the overthrow of czarism: the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the weight in the balance of the peasant majority, the decisive role to be played by a centralized and militant proletariat and so on. When practice finally provided the solution, however, it did so thanks to a factor that had figured in none of these hypotheses, namely the revolutionary bureaucracy which placed itself at the head of the proletariat, seized the State and proceeded to impose a new form of class rule on society. A strictly bourgeois revolution was impossible; talk of a "democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants" had no real meaning; and, as for the proletarian power of the soviets, it could not be maintained at once against the class of small landholding peasants, against a national and international White reaction, and against its own externalized and alienated representation in the shape of a workers' party of absolute masters of the State, of the economy, of the means of expression and (before long) of thought. Trotsky and Parvus's theory of permanent revolution -- which Lenin in effect espoused in April 1917 -- was the only theory that held true for countries that were backward from the point of view of the social development of the bourgeoisie, but even here it only applied once the unknown quantity of the bureaucracy's class power had come into play. In the many clashes within the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was the most consistent defender of the concentration of dictatorial powers in the hands of this supreme ideological representation. He invariably had the advantage over his opponents because he championed solutions that flowed logically from the earlier choices made by the minority that now exercised absolute power: a democracy refused to peasants on the State level should be by the same token refused to workers, and hence also to Communist union leaders, to party members in general, and even, in the end, to the highest ranks of the party's hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being put down by force of arms and deluged in slander, Lenin passed a judgment on the leftist bureaucrats of the "Workers' Opposition," the logic of which Stalin would later extend into a perfect division of the world: "Here with us -- or out there with a gun in your hand -- but not as an opposition. We have had enough of opposition."

Finding itself the sole owner of a state capitalism, the bureaucracy at first secured its power internally by entering, after Kronstadt, and under the "New Economic Policy," into a temporary alliance with the peasantry; externally, in parallel fashion, it defended its power by using the regimented workers of the bureaucratic parties of the Third International to back up Russian diplomacy, to sabotage revolutionary movements and to support bourgeois governments on whose support in the international sphere it was counting (the Kuomintang in the China of 1925-1927, Popular Fronts in Spain and France, etc.). In pursuit of its self-realization, however, bureaucratic society then proceeded, by means of terror exercised against the peasantry, to effect history's most brutal primitive accumulation of capital ever. The industrialization of the Stalin era reveals the bureaucracy's true nature: the prolonging of the reign of the economy and the salvaging of all essential aspects of market society, not least the institution of labor-as-commodity. The economy in its independence thus showed itself so thoroughly able to dominate society as to recreate for its own purposes that class domination which is essential to its operation. It proved, in other words, that the bourgeoisie had created a power so autonomous that, so long as it endured, it could even do without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy was not, in Bruno Rizzi's sense, "the last property-owning class in history," for it was merely a substitute ruling class for the market economy. A tottering capitalist property system was replaced by an inferior version of itself -- simplified, less diversified and concentrated as the collective property of the bureaucratic class. This underdeveloped type of ruling class was likewise a reflection of economic underdevelopment, and it had no agenda beyond correcting this backwardness in particular parts of the world. The hierarchical, statist framework for this cheap remake of the capitalist ruling class was supplied by
the party of the workers, organized on the bourgeois model of separation. As Anton Ciliga noted from the depths of one of Stalin's prisons, "Technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions" (Lenin and Revolution).

105

As the coherence of the separate, the revolutionary ideology of which Leninism was the highest voluntaristic expression governed the management of a reality that was resistant to it; with Stalinism, this ideology rediscovered its own incoherent essence. Ideology was no longer a weapon, but an end in itself. But a lie that can no longer be challenged becomes a form of madness. Eventually both reality and the goal sought dissolved in a totalitarian ideology proclaiming that whatever it said was all there was. This was a local primitivism of the spectacle that has nonetheless played an essential part in the spectacle's worldwide development. The ideology that took on material form in this context—did not transform the world economically, as capitalism in its affluent stage has done; it succeeded only in using police methods to transform perception.

106

The ideological-totalitarian class in power is the power of a world turned on its head: the stronger the class, the more forcefully it proclaims that it does not exist, and its strength serves first and foremost to assert its nonexistence. This is as far as its modesty goes, however, for its official nonexistence is supposed to coincide with the ne plus ultra of historical development, which is indeed owed to its infallible leadership. Though everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy is obliged to be a class imperceptible to consciousness, thus making the whole of social life unfathomable and insane. The social organization of the absolute lie reposes on this fundamental contradiction.

107

Stalinism was a reign of terror within the bureaucratic class. The terror on which the bureaucracy's power was founded was bound to strike the class itself, because this class had no legal basis, no juridical status as a property-owning class that could be extended to each of its members individually. Its real proprietorship was masked, because it had become an owner only by means of false consciousness. False consciousness can maintain absolute power only through absolute terror, where all real motives soon vanish. Members of the ruling bureaucratic class have the right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a basic lie: they have to play the part of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they are actors faithful to the text of ideological betrayal. Yet their effective participation in this counterfeit being has to be perceived as real. No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to present himself as the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the official truth of the bureaucracy is that the bureaucracy does not exist. Thus each bureaucrat is completely dependent on a central guarantee from ideology, which acknowledges the collective participation in "socialist power" of all such bureaucrats as it does not liquidate. As a group the bureaucrats may be said to make all the decisions, but the cohesiveness of their class can only be ensured by the concentration of their terroristic power in one person. In this person reposes the only practical truth of the lie in power: the power to lay down an unchallengeable boundary that is ever subject to revision. Stalin thus had the power to decide without appeal exactly who was a bureaucrat, and hence an owner; his word alone distinguished "proletarians" in power from "traitors in the pay of the Mikado and Wall Street." The atomized bureaucrat could find the shared essence of his juridical status only in the person of Stalin -- that lord and master of the world who takes himself in this way to be the absolute person and for whom
there exists no higher type of spirit: "The lord of the world becomes really conscious of what he is -- viz., the universal might of actuality -- by that power of destruction which he exercises against the contrasted selfhood of his subjects." He is at once the power that defines the field of domination and the power that devastates that field.

By the time ideology, become absolute because it possesses absolute power, has been transformed from a fragmentary knowledge into a totalitarian lie, truly historical thinking has for its part been so utterly annihilated that history itself, even at the level of the most empirical knowledge, can no longer exist. Totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which everything that has happened earlier exists for it solely as a space accessible to its police. A project already formulated by Napoleon, that of "monarchically directing the energy of memories," has thus been made concrete in a permanent manipulation of the past, and this not just in respect of the past's meaning, but even in respect of the facts themselves. The price paid for this emancipation from all historical reality, though, is the loss of the rational orientation indispensable to capitalism as a historical social system. We know how much the scientific application of an ideology gone mad has cost Russia -- one need only think of the Lysenko fiasco. The internal contradictions besetting totalitarian bureaucracy in its administration of an industrialized society -- its simultaneous need for rationality and refusal of it -- also constitutes one of its chief shortcomings as compared with normal capitalist development. Just as the bureaucracy cannot resolve the question of agriculture as capitalism does, so too it turns out eventually to be inferior to capitalism in industrial production, which it seeks to plan in an authoritarian manner on the twin bases of a complete lack of realism and an adherence to an all-embracing lie.

Between the two world wars the revolutionary workers movement was destroyed by the action, on the one hand, of the Stalinist bureaucracy and, on the other, of fascist totalitarianism, the latter having borrowed its organizational form from the totalitarian party as first tried out in Russia. Fascism was an attempt of the bourgeois economy to defend itself, in extremis, from the dual threat of crisis and proletarian subversion; it was a state of siege in capitalist society, a way for that society to survive through the administration of an emergency dose of rationalization in the form of massive State intervention in its management. Such rationalization, however, inevitably bore the stamp of the immensely irrational nature of the means whereby it was imposed. Even though fascism came to the aid of the chief icons (the family, private property, the moral order, the nation) of a bourgeois order that was by now conservative, and effectively mobilized both the petty bourgeoisie and unemployed workers panic-stricken because of the crisis or disillusioned by the impotence of revolutionary socialism, it was not itself fundamentally ideological in character. Fascism presented itself for what it was -- a violent resurrection of myth calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudo-values: race, blood, leader. Fascism is a cult of the archaic completely fitted out by modern technology. Its degenerate ersatz of myth has been revived in the spectacular context of the most modern means of conditioning and illusion. It is thus one factor in the formation of the modern spectacle, as well as being, thanks to its part in the destruction of the old workers' movement, one of the founding forces of present-day society. But inasmuch as fascism happens also to be the costliest method of maintaining the capitalist order, it was normal enough that it should be dislodged by more rational and stronger forms of this order -- that it should leave the front of the stage to the lead players, namely the capitalist States.
When the Russian bureaucracy at last successfully disencumbered itself of relics of bourgeois property standing in the way of its hegemony over the economy, once it had developed this economy in accordance with its own purposes, and once it had achieved recognition from without as a great power among others, it sought to enjoy its own world in tranquility, and to remove the arbitrariness to which it was still itself subjected; it therefore proceeded to denounce the Stalinism of its beginnings. Such a denunciation was bound, however, to remain Stalinist, arbitrary, unexplained and subject to continual adjustment, for the simple reason that the ideological falsehood that had attended the bureaucracy's birth could never be exposed. The bureaucracy cannot liberalize itself either culturally or politically because its existence as a class depends on its monopoly of an ideology -- which, for all its cumbersoness, is its sole title to ownership. Admittedly this ideology has lost the passion that informed its original self-affirmation, yet even the pithless triviality which is all that is left retains the oppressive role of prohibiting the least suggestion of competition and holding the entirety of thought captive. The bureaucracy is thus helplessly tied to an ideology no longer believed by anyone. What inspired terror now inspires derision, but even this derision would disappear were it not for the fact that the terror it mocks still lurks in the wings. So it is that at the very moment when the bureaucracy attempts to demonstrate its superiority on capitalism's own ground, it is exposed as capitalism's poor cousin. Just as its actual history is at odds with its judicial status, and its crudely maintained ignorance in contradiction with its scientific pretensions, so its wish to vie with the bourgeoisie in the production of an abundance of commodities is stymied by the fact that an abundance of this kind contains its own implicit ideology, and is generally accompanied by the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular false alternatives -- a pseudo-freedom, yes, but one which, for all that, is incompatible with the bureaucracy's ideology.

At the present stage in the bureaucracy's development, its ideological title to ownership is already collapsing internationally: a power set up on the national level as a basically internationalist model must now renounce any claim to maintaining its false cohesion irrespective of national frontiers. The unequal economic development experienced by those competing bureaucracies that have succeeded in owning "socialism" in more than one country has led only to a public and all-out confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie. Henceforward each bureaucracy in power, and likewise each of those totalitarian parties aspiring to a power that has outlived the Stalinist period within one national working class or another, will have to find its own way. Considered in conjunction with the expressions of internal negation which first became visible to the outside world when the workers of East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats and demanded a "government of metalworkers," and which have since even extended to the setting up of workers' councils in Hungary, this crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavorable portent for the future development of capitalist society. For the bourgeoisie is now in danger of losing an adversary that has objectively supported it by investing all opposition to its order with a purely illusory unity. A rift in the pseudo-revolutionary component of the established division of spectacular labor can only herald the end of that system itself. This spectacular aspect of the dissolution of the workers' movement is thus itself headed for dissolution.

The mirage of Leninism today has no basis today outside the various Trotskyist tendencies, where the conflation of the proletarian project with a hierarchical organization grounded in ideology has stolidly survived all the evidence of that conflation's real consequences.
and a revolutionary critique of present-day society is in effect coextensive with the respectful distance that the Trotskyists maintain toward positions that were already mistaken when they played themselves out in a real struggle. Until 1927 Trotsky remained fundamentally loyal to the high bureaucracy, though he sought to gain control of this bureaucracy and cause it to resume a properly Bolshevik foreign policy. (It is well known that at this time he went so far, in order to help conceal Lenin's famous "Testament," as to disavow slanderously his supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public.) Trotsky was doomed by his basic perspective; the fact was that as soon as the bureaucratic class knew itself, on the basis of the results of its action, to be a counterrevolutionary class on the domestic front, it was bound to opt for a counterrevolutionary role on the world stage, albeit one assumed in the name of revolution -- in short, to act abroad just as it did at home. Trotsky's subsequent struggle to set up a Fourth International enshrined the same inconsistency. Having once, during the second Russian revolution, become an unconditional partisan of the Bolshevik form of organization, Trotsky simply refused, for the rest of his life, to see that the bureaucracy's power was the power of a separate class. When Lukacs, in 1923, pointed to this same organizational form as the long-sought mediation between theory and practice thanks to which proletarians, instead of being mere "spectators" of events that occur in their own organization, consciously choose and experience those events, what he was describing as actual virtues of the Bolshevik party were in fact everything that the Party was not. The depth of his theoretical work notwithstanding, Lukacs was an ideologist speaking for a power that was in the crudest way external to the proletarian movement, believing and giving his audience to believe that he himself, his entire personal being, partook of this power as though it were truly his own. While subsequent events were to demonstrate exactly how the power in question repudiated and eliminated its servants, Lukacs, with his endless self-repudiations, revealed with caricatural clarity precisely what he had identified with, namely, the opposite of himself, and the opposite of everything for which he had argued in History and Class Consciousness. No one better than Lukacs illustrates the validity of a fundamental rule for assessing all the intellectuals of this century: what they respect is a precise gauge of their own contemptible reality. It certainly cannot be said that Lenin encouraged illusions of this kind concerning his activities, for it was Lenin who acknowledged that "a political party cannot examine its members to see whether contradictions exist between their philosophy and the party program." The real subject of Lukacs's purely imaginary -- and inopportune -- portrait was a party that was indeed coherent with respect to one precise and partial task only -- to wit, the seizure of State power.

113

The neo-Leninist mirage entertained by present-day Trotskyism is contradicted at every moment by the reality of modern capitalist society, whether of the bourgeois or the bureaucratic type. It is therefore not surprising that it gets its best reception in the formally independent "underdeveloped" countries, where a variety of fraudulent versions of state and bureaucratic socialism are consciously passed off by local ruling classes as, quite simply, the ideology of economic development. The hybrid nature of such classes is more or less directly associated with their position on the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between these two poles of existing capitalist power, along with ideological compromises (notably with Islam) corresponding to their heterogeneous social bases, together serve to strip these last retreats of ideological socialism of all credibility except for that of their police. One type of bureaucracy has established itself by providing a common framework for nationalist struggle and peasant agrarian revolt; in such cases, as in China, the Stalinist model of industrialization tends to be applied in societies even less advanced than the Russia of 1917. A bureaucracy capable of industrializing a nation may also arise out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened for instance in Egypt. In other places, among them Algeria following its war of independence, a bureaucracy that has
established itself as a para-State authority in the course of a struggle seeks stability through compromise, and fuses with a weak national bourgeoisie. Lastly, in those former colonies of black Africa that have maintained overt ties to Western bourgeoisies, whether European or American, a local bourgeoisie is constituted -- generally reposing on the power of traditional tribal chiefs -- through possession of the State: in such countries, where foreign imperialism is still the true master of the economy, a stage is reached at which the compradors' compensation for the sale of local products is ownership of a local State that is independent of the masses though not of the imperialist power. The result is an artificial bourgeoisie that is incapable of accumulating capital and merely squanders its revenue -- as much the portion of surplus value it extracts from local labor as the foreign subsidies it receives from protector States or monopolies. The manifest incapacity of such a bourgeoisie to fulfill normal bourgeois economic functions leads to its soon being confronted by a subversive opposition, structured on the bureaucratic model and more or less well adapted to local conditions, that is eager to usurp what the bourgeoisie has inherited. But the successful realization by any bureaucracy of its fundamental project of industrialization itself necessarily embodies the prospect of its historical failure, for as it accumulates capital it also accumulates the proletariat, so creating its own negation in countries where that negation did not yet exist.

In the course of the complex and terrible evolution that has brought the era of class struggle under a new set of conditions, the proletariat of the industrialized countries has lost the ability to assert its own independence. It has also, in the last reckoning, lost its illusions. But it has not lost its being. The proletariat has not been eliminated, and indeed it remains irreducibly present, under the intensified alienation of modern capitalism, in the shape of the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives and who, once they realize this, must necessarily redefine themselves as the proletariat -- as negation at work in the bosom of today's society. This class is objectively reinforced by the peasantry's gradual disappearance, as also by the extension of the logic of the factory system to a broad sector of labor in the "services" and the intellectual professions. Subjectively, though, this is a proletariat still very far removed from any practical class consciousness, and this goes not only for white-collar workers but also for wage workers who as yet know nothing but the impotence and mystifications of the old politics. But when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power conspires in the continual reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer merely thanks to the alienation of its labor, but also thanks to the form taken on by unions, parties and institutions of State power that it had established in pursuit of its own self-emancipation, then it must also discover through concrete historical experience that it is indeed that class which is totally opposed to all reified externalizations and all specializations of power. The proletariat is the bearer of a revolution that can leave no other sphere of society untransformed, that enforces the permanent domination of the past by the present and demands a universal critique of separation; the action of the proletariat must assume a form adequate to these tasks. No quantitative relief of its poverty, no illusory hierarchical incorporation, can supply a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong it has suffered; nor, therefore, in the righting of any particular wrong -- nor even in the righting of many such wrongs; but only in the righting of the unqualified wrong that has been perpetrated upon it -- the universal wrong of its exclusion from life.

Signs of a new and growing tendency toward negation proliferate in the more economically advanced countries. The spectacular system reacts to these signs with incomprehension or attempts to misrepresent them, but they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. After the failure of
the working class's first subversive assault on capitalism, we are now witness to the failure of capitalist abundance. On the one hand, we see anti-union struggles of Western workers that have to be repressed (and repressed primarily by the unions themselves); at the same time rebellious tendencies among the young generate a protest that is still tentative and amorphous, yet already clearly embodies a rejection of the specialized sphere of the old politics, as well as of art and everyday life. These are two sides of the same coin, both signaling a new spontaneous struggle emerging under the sign of criminality, both portents of a second proletarian onslaught on class society. When the lost children of this as-yet immobile horde enter once again upon the battlefield, which has changed yet stayed the same, a new General Ludd will be at their head -- leading them this time in an onslaught on the machinery of permitted consumption.

116

That long-sought political form whereby the economic emancipation of labor might finally be achieved" has taken on a clear outline in this century, in the shape of revolutionary workers' councils vesting all decision-making and executive powers in themselves and federating with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time. As yet such councils have enjoyed only a brief and experimental existence; their appearance has invariably occasioned attack and defeat by one or another of class society's means of defence -- often including, it must be said, the presence of false consciousness within the councils themselves. As Pannekoek rightly stressed, the decision to set up workers' councils does not in itself provide solutions so much as it "proposes problems." Yet the power of workers' councils is the one context in which the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can be truly solved. It is here that the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are assembled, opening the door to the realization of that active direct communication which marks the end of all specialization, all hierarchy, and all separation, and thanks to which existing conditions are transformed "into the conditions of unity." And it is here too that the proletarian subject can emerge from the struggle against a purely contemplative role, for consciousness is now equal to the practical organization that it has chosen for itself, and it has become inseparable from a coherent intervention in history.

117

Once embodied in the power of workers councils -- a power destined to supplant all other powers worldwide -- the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself, and in his own eyes the producer has himself as his goal. Only in this context can the spectacle's negation of life be negated in its turn.

118

The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century was the high point of the proletarian movement, but this reality has gone unnoticed, or else been presented in travestied form, because it inevitably vanished along with the remainder of a movement that the whole historical experience of the time tended to deny and destroy. From the standpoint of the renewal of the proletariat's critical enterprise, however, the councils may be seen in their true light as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement: historical consciousness, aware that this is the only environment in which it can thrive, now perceives the councils as situated historically not at the periphery of an ebbing tide but rather at the center of a rising one.
A revolutionary organization that exists before the establishment of the power of workers' councils -- which must discover its own appropriate form through struggle -- will know that, for all these historical reasons, it cannot represent the revolutionary class. It must simply recognize itself as radically separated from the world of separation.

120

The revolutionary organization is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into two-way communication with practical struggles; it is thus part of the process of the coming into being of practical theory.

121

The revolutionary organization must necessarily constitute an integral critique of society -- a critique, that is to say, which refuses to compromise with any form of separated power and which is directed globally against every aspect of alienated social life. In the revolutionary organization's struggle with class society, the weapons are nothing less than the essence of the antagonists themselves: the revolutionary organization cannot allow the conditions of division and hierarchy that obtain in the dominant society to be reproduced within itself. It must also fight constantly against its own distortion by and within the reigning spectacle. The only restriction on individual participation in the revolutionary organization's total democracy is that imposed by the effective recognition and appropriation by each member of the coherence of the organization's critique, a coherence that must be borne out both in critical theory proper and in the relationship between that theory and practical activity.

122

As capitalism's ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, and eventually puts them in the position of having either to reject it in its totality or do nothing at all, the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.

123

The proletarian revolution is predicated entirely on the requirement that, for the first time, theory as the understanding of human practice be recognized and directly lived by the masses. This revolution demands that workers become dialecticians, and inscribe their thought upon practice; it thus asks much more of its men without qualities than the bourgeois revolution asked of those men with qualifications that it enlisted to run things (the partial ideological consciousness constructed by a segment of the bourgeois class had as its basis only a key portion of social life, namely the economy, where this class was already in power). It is thus the very evolution of class society into the spectacular organization of non-life that obliges the revolutionary project to become visibly what it always was in essence.

124

Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology -- and it knows it.
O, gentlemen, the time of life is short!... An if we live, we live to tread on kings.

Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I

Man -- that "negative being who is solely to the extent that he abolishes being" -- is one with time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time the apprehension of the unfolding of the universe. "History itself," says Marx, "is a real part of natural history, and of nature's becoming man." Conversely, the "natural history" in question exists effectively only through the process of a human history, through the development of the only agency capable of discovering this historical whole; one is reminded of a modern telescope, whose range enables it to track the retreat of nebulae in time toward the edge of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. The temporalization of man, as effected through the mediation of a society, is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true in historical consciousness.

The movement of history properly so called (though still hidden) begins with the slow and imperceptible emergence of "the true nature of man," of that "nature which was born of human history -- of the procreative act that gave rise to human society"; but society, even when it had mastered a technology and a language, and even though by then it was already the product of its own history, remained conscious only of a perpetual present. All knowledge, which was in any case limited by the memory of society's oldest members, was always borne by the living. Neither death nor reproduction were understood as governed by time. Time was motionless -- a sort of enclosed space. When a more complex society did finally attain a consciousness of time, its reaction was to deny rather than embrace it, for it viewed time not as something passing, but as something returning. This was a static type of society that organized time, true to its immediate experience of nature, on a cyclical model.

Cyclical time was already dominant in the experience of nomadic peoples, who confronted the same conditions at each moment of their roaming; as Hegel notes, "the wandering of nomads is a merely formal one, because it is limited to uniform spaces." Once a society became fixed in a locality, giving space content through the individualized development of specific areas, it found itself enclosed thereby within the location in question. A time-bound return to similar places thus gave way to the pure return of time in a single place, the repetition of a set of gestures. The shift from pastoralism to settled agriculture marked the end of an idle and contentless freedom, and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production in general, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, was the basis
of cyclical time in its fullest development. Eternity, as the return of the same here below, was internal to this time. Myth was the unified mental construct whose job it was to make sure that the whole cosmic order confirmed the order that this society had in fact already set up within its own frontiers.

128

The social appropriation of time and the production of man by means of human labor were developments that awaited the advent of a society divided into classes. The power that built itself up on the basis of the penury of the society of cyclical time -- the power, in other words, of the class which organized social labor therein and appropriated the limited surplus value to be extracted, also appropriated the temporal surplus value that resulted from its organization of social time; this class thus had sole possession of the irreversible time of the living. The only wealth that could exist in concentrated form in the sphere of power, there to be expended on extravagance and festivity, was also expended in the form of the squandering of a historical time at society's surface. The owners of this historical surplus value were the masters of the knowledge and enjoyment of directly experienced events. Separated off from the collective organization of time that predominated as a function of the repetitive form of production which was the basis of social life, historical time flowed independently above its own, static, community. This was the time of adventure, of war, the time in which the lords of cyclical society pursued their personal histories; the time too that emerged in clashes between communities foreign to one another -- perturbations in society's unchanging order. For ordinary men, therefore, history sprang forth as an alien factor, as something they had not sought and against whose occurrence they had thought themselves secure. Yet this turning point also made possible the return of that negative human restlessness, which had been at the origin of the whole (temporarily arrested) development.

129

In its essence, cyclical time was a time without conflict. Yet even in this infancy of time, conflict was present: at first, history struggled to become history through the practical activity of the masters. At a superficial level this history created irreversibility; its movement constituted the very time that it used up within the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

130

So-called cold societies are societies that successfully slowed their participation in history down to the minimum, and maintained their conflicts with the natural and human environments, as well as their internal conflicts, in constant equilibrium. Although the vast diversity of institutions set up for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the plasticity of human nature's self-creation, this testimony is of course only accessible to an outside observer, to an anthropologist looking back from within historical time. In each of these societies a definite organizational structure ruled out change. The absolute conformity of their social practices, with which all human possibilities were exclusively and permanently identified, had no external limits except for the fear of falling into a formless animal condition. So, here, in order to remain human, men had to remain the same.

131

The emergence of political power, seemingly associated with the last great technical revolutions, such as iron smelting, which occurred at the threshold of a period that was to experience no further major upheavals until the rise of modern industry, also coincided with the first signs of the
dissolution of the bonds of kinship. From this moment on, the succession of the generations left the natural realm of the purely cyclical and became a purposeful succession of events, a mechanism for the transmission of power. Irreversible time was the prerogative of whoever ruled, and the prime yardstick of rulership lay in dynastic succession. The ruler’s chief weapon was the written word, which now attained its full autonomous reality as mediation between consciousnesses. This independence, however, was indistinguishable from the general independence of a separate power as the mediation whereby society was constituted. With writing came a consciousness no longer conveyed and transmitted solely within the immediate relationships of the living -- an impersonal memory that was the memory of the administration of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the State," said Novalis, "and archives are its memory."

As the expression of power's irreversible time, chronicles were a means of maintaining the voluntaristic forward progression of this time on the basis of the recording of its past; "voluntaristic," because such an orientation is bound to collapse, along with the particular power to which it corresponds, and sink once more into the indifferent oblivion of a solely cyclical time, a time known to the peasant masses who -- no matter that empires may crumble along with their chronologies -- never change. Those who possessed history gave it an orientation -- a direction, and also a meaning. But their history unfolded and perished apart, as a sphere leaving the underlying society unaffected precisely because it was a sphere separate from common reality. This is why, from our point of view, the history of Oriental societies may be reduced to a history of religions: all we can reconstruct from their ruins is the seemingly independent history of the illusions that once enveloped them. The masters who, protected by myth, enjoyed the private ownership of history, themselves did so at first in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; likewise, their earliest officially recognized dynasties were an imaginary reconstruction of the past. Such illusory ownership by the masters, however, was at the same time the only ownership then possible both of the common history and of their own history. The expansion of their effective historical power went hand in hand with a vulgarization of this illusory-mythical ownership. All of these consequences flowed from the simple fact that it was only to the degree that the masters made it their task to furnish cyclical time with mythic underpinnings, as in the seasonal rites of the Chinese emperors, that they themselves were relatively emancipated therefrom.

The dry, unexplained chronology which a deified authority offered to its subjects, and which was intended to be understood solely as the earthly execution of the commandments of myth, was destined to be transcended and to become conscious history. But, for this to happen, sizeable groups of people had first to experience real participation in history. From such practical communication between those who had recognized one another as possessors of a unique present, who had experienced the qualitative richness of events as their own activity, their own dwelling-place -- in short, their own epoch -- from such communication arose the general language of historical communication. Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the memorable and the danger of forgetting: "Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents the results of his researches, that the great deeds of men may not be forgotten."

To reflect upon history is also, inextricably, to reflect upon power. Greece was that moment when
power and changes in power were first debated and understood. This occurred under a democracy of society's masters, a system diametrically opposed to that of the despotic State, where power settled accounts only with itself, in the impenetrable obscurity of its densest point, by means of palace revolutions whose outcome, whether success or failure, invariably placed the event itself beyond discussion. The shared power of Greek communities inherited solely, however, in the expending of a social life whose production remained the separate and static domain of the slave class. The only people who lived were those who did not work. The divisions between Greek communities, and the struggle to exploit foreign cities, were the externalized expression of the principle of separation on which each of them was based internally. Greece, which dreamed of a universal history, was thus unable to unite in the face of invasion from without; it could not even manage to standardize the calendars of its constituent cities. Historical time became conscious in Greece -- but it was not yet conscious of itself.

135

The regression of Western thought that occurred once the local conditions favoring the Greek communities had disappeared was not accompanied by any reconstruction of the old mythic structures. Clashes between Mediterranean peoples and the constitution and collapse of the Roman State gave rise instead to semi-historical religions that were to become basic components of the new consciousness of time, and the new armature of separated power.

136

Monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time which still dominated the sphere of production and the irreversible time which was the theater of conflicts and realignments between peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were the abstract universal recognition of an irreversible time now democratized, open to all, yet still confined to the realm of illusion. Time remained entirely oriented toward a single final event: "The Kingdom of God is at hand." These religions had germinated and taken root in the soil of history; even here, however, they maintained a radical opposition to history. Semi-historical religion established qualitative starting points in time -- the birth of Christ, the flight of Muhammad -- yet its irreversible time, introducing an effective accumulation which would take the form of conquest in Islam and that of an increase in capital in the Christianity of the Reformation, was in fact inverted in religious thought, so as to become a sort of countdown: the wait, as time ran out, for the Last Judgment, for the moment of accession to the other, true world. Eternity emerged from cyclical time; it was that time's beyond. Eternity was also what humbled time in its mere irreversible flow -- suppressing history as history continued -- by positioning itself beyond irreversible time, as a pure point which cyclical time would enter only to be abolished. As Bossuet could still say: "So, by way of the passing of time, we enter eternity, which does not pass."

137

The Middle Ages, an unfinished mythical world whose perfection lay outside itself, was the period when cyclical time, which still governed the major part of production, suffered history's first real gnawing inroads. A measure of irreversible time now became available to everyone individually, in the form of the successive stages of life, in the form of life apprehended as a voyage, a one-way passage through a world whose meaning was elsewhere. Thus the pilgrim was the man who emerged from cyclical time to become in actuality the traveler that each individual was qua sign. Personal historical life invariably found its fulfillment within power's orbit -- either in struggles waged by power or in struggles in which power was disputed; yet power's irreversible time was now
shared to an unlimited degree within the context of the general unity that the oriented time of the
Christian era ensured. This was a world of armed faith in which the activity of the masters revolved
around fealty and around challenges to fealty owed. Under the feudal regime born of the coming
together of "the martial organization of the army during the actual conquest" and "the action of the
productive forces found in the conquered countries" (The German Ideology) -- and among the
factors responsible for organizing those productive forces must be included their religious language
-- under this regime social domination was divided up between the Church on the one hand and
State power on the other, the latter being further broken down in accordance with the complex
relations of suzerainty and vassalage characteristic, respectively, of rural landed property and urban
communes. This diversification of possible historical life reflected the gradual emergence, following
the collapse of the great official enterprise of this world, namely the Crusades, of the period's
unseen contribution: a society carried along in its unconscious depths by irreversible time, the time
directly experienced by the bourgeoisie in the production of commodities, the founding and
expansion of the towns, the commercial discovery of the planet -- in a word, the practical
experimentation that obliterated any mythical organization of the cosmos once and for all.

As the Middle Ages came to an end, the irreversible time that had invaded society was experienced
by a consciousness still attached to the old order as an obsession with death. This was the
melancholy of a world passing away -- the last world where the security of myth could still balance
history; and for this melancholy all earthly things were inevitably embarked on the path of
corruption. The great European peasant revolts were likewise a response to history -- a history that
was wrestling the peasantry from the patriarchal slumber thitherto guaranteed by the feudal order.
This was the moment when a millenarian utopianism aspiring to build heaven on earth brought
back to the forefront an idea that had been at the origin of semi-historical religion, when the early
Christian communities, like the Judaic messianism from which they sprang, responded to the
troubles and misfortunes of their time by announcing the imminent realization of God's Kingdom,
and so added an element of disquiet and subversion to ancient society. The Christianity that later
shared in imperial power denounced whatever remained of this hope as mere superstition: this is
the meaning of the Augustinian pronouncement -- the archetype of all the satisfecits of modern
ideology -- according to which the established Church was itself, and had long been, that self-same
hoped-for kingdom. The social revolt of the millenarian peasantry naturally defined itself as an
attempt to overthrow the Church. Millenarianism unfolded, however, in a historical world -- not in
the realm of myth. So, contrary to what Norman Cohn believes he has demonstrated in The Pursuit
of the Millennium, modern revolutionary hopes are not an irrational sequel to the religious passion
of millenarianism. The exact opposite is true: millenarianism, the expression of a revolutionary class
struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary
tendency, lacking only the consciousness of being historical and nothing more. The millenarians
were doomed to defeat because they could not recognize revolution as their own handiwork. The
fact that they made their action conditional upon an external sign of God's will was a translation
onto the level of thought of the tendency of insurgent peasants to follow outside leaders. The
peasant class could achieve a clear consciousness neither of the workings of society nor of the way
to conduct its own struggle, and it was because it lacked these prerequisites of unity in its action
and consciousness that the peasantry formulated its project and waged its wars according to the
imagery of an earthly paradise.

The Renaissance embodied the new form of possession of historical life. Seeking its heritage and its
juridical basis in Antiquity, it was the bearer of a joyous break with eternity. The irreversible time of the Renaissance was that of an infinite accumulation of knowledge, while the historical consciousness generated by the experience of democratic communities, as of the effects of those forces that had brought on their ruin, was now, with Machiavelli, able to resume its reflection upon secular power, and say the unsayable about the State. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the arts of festival, life came to recognize itself as the enjoyment of the passing of time. But this enjoyment of transience would turn out to be transient itself. The song of Lorenzo de' Medici, which Burckhardt considered "the very spirit of the Renaissance," is the eulogy delivered upon itself by this fragile historical feast: "Quant' Š bella giovinezza / Che si fugge tuttavia."

The tireless pursuit of a monopoly of historical life by the absolute-monarchist State, a transitional form along the way to complete domination by the bourgeois class, clearly illuminates the highest expression of the bourgeoisie's new irreversible time. The time with which the bourgeoisie was inextricably bound up was labor-time, now at last emancipated from the cyclical realm. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, work became that work which transforms historical conditions. The bourgeoisie was the first ruling class for which labor was a value. By abolishing all social privilege, and by recognizing no value unrelated to the exploitation of labor, the bourgeoisie effectively conflated its own value qua ruling class with labor, and made the progress of labor the only measure of its own progress. The class that accumulated commodities and capital continually modified nature by modifying labor itself -- by unleashing labor's productivity. All social life was by this time concentrated in the ornamented poverty of the Court -- in the chintzy trappings of a bleak State administration whose apex was the "profession of king"; and all individual historical freedom had had to consent to this sacrifice. The free play of the feudal lords' irreversible time had exhausted itself in their last, lost battles: in the Fronde, or in the Scots' uprising in support of Charles Edward. The world had a new foundation.

The victory of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time -- the time corresponding to the economic form of production, which transformed society permanently, and from top to bottom. So long as agriculture was the chief type of labor, cyclical time retained its deep-down hold over society and tended to nourish those combined forces of tradition which slowed down the movement of history. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economic revolution eliminated all such vestiges throughout the world. History, which had hitherto appeared to express nothing more than the activity of individual members of the ruling class, and had thus been conceived of as a chronology of events, was now perceived in its general movement -- an inexorable movement that crushed individuals before it. By discovering its basis in political economy, history became aware of the existence of what had been its unconscious. This unconscious, however, continued to exist as such -- and history still could not draw it out into the full light of day. This blind prehistory, a new fatality that no one controls, is the only thing that the commodity economy has democratized.

Though ever-present in society's depths, history tended to be invisible at its surface. The triumph of irreversible time was also its metamorphosis into the time of things, because the weapon that had ensured its victory was, precisely, the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity. The main product that economic development transformed from a luxurious rarity to a
commonly consumed item was thus history itself -- but only in the form of the history of that abstract movement which dominated any qualitative use of life. Whereas the cyclical time of an earlier era had supported an ever-increasing measure of historical time lived by individuals and groups, irreversible time's reign over production would tend socially to eliminate all such lived time.

143

So the bourgeoisie unveiled irreversible historical time and imposed it on society only to deprive society of its use. Once there was history, but "there is no longer any history" -- because the class of owners of the economy, who cannot break with economic history, must repress any other use of irreversible time as representing an immediate threat to itself. The ruling class, made up of specialists in the ownership of things who for that very reason are themselves owned by things, is obliged to tie its fate to the maintenance of a reified history and to the permanent preservation of a new historical immobility. Meanwhile the worker, at the base of society, is for the first time not materially estranged from history, for now the irreversible is generated from below. By demanding to live the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and every attempt to carry this project through -- though all up to now have gone down to defeat -- signals a possible point of departure for a new historical life.

144

The irreversible time of a bourgeoisie that had just seized power was called by its own name, and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of generalized freedom that had served to overthrow the last relics of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all traditional forms of social organization, was already unable completely to conceal the real goal that it had thus draped in Roman costume -- namely, generalized freedom of trade. The society of the commodity, soon discovering that it must reinstate the passivity which it had to shake to its foundations in order to inaugurate its own unchallenged rule, now found that, for its purposes, "Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract was the most fitting form of religion" (Capital). So the bourgeoisie concluded a pact with this religion, an arrangement reflected in its presentation of time: the Revolutionary calendar was abandoned and irreversible time was returned to the straitjacket of a duly extended Christian Era.

145

The development of capitalism meant the unification of irreversible time on a world scale. Universal history became a reality because the entire globe was brought under the sway of this time's progression. But a history that is thus the same everywhere at once has as yet amounted to nothing more than an intrahistorical refusal of history. What appears the world over as the same day is merely the time of economic production -- time cut up into equal abstract fragments. Unified irreversible time still belongs to the world market -- and, by extension, to the world spectacle.

146

The irreversible time of production is first and foremost the measure of commodities. The time officially promoted all around the world as the general time of society, since it signifies nothing beyond those special interests which constitute it, is therefore not general in character, but particular.
Spectacular Time

We have nothing that is ours except time, which even those without a roof can enjoy.

Baltasar Graci n, Or culo manual y Arte de prudencia

147

The time of production, time-as-commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability. It is under the rule of time-as-commodity that "time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most time's carcass" (The Poverty of Philosophy). This is time devalued -- the complete inversion of time as "the sphere of human development."

148

The general time of human non-development also has a complementary aspect, that of a consumable time which, on the basis of a determinate form of production, presents itself in the everyday life of society as a pseudo-cyclical time.

149

Pseudo-cyclical time is in fact merely the consumable disguise of the time-as-commodity of the production system, and it exhibits the essential traits of that time: homogeneous and exchangeable units, and the suppression of any qualitative dimension. But as a by-product of time-as-commodity intended to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life it necessarily finds itself laden with false attributions of value, and it must manifest itself as a succession of artificially distinct moments.

150

Pseudo-cyclical time typifies the consumption of modern economic survival -- of that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labor. It is therefore quite "natural" that pseudo-cyclical time should echo the old cyclical rhythms that governed survival in pre-industrial societies. It builds, in fact, on the natural vestiges of cyclical time, while also using these as models on which to base new but homologous variants: day and night, weekly work and weekly rest, the cycle of vacations and so on.
Pseudo-cyclical time is a time transformed by industry. The time founded on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, recombining everything which, during the period of the old unitary society's disintegration, had become distinct: private life, economic life, political life. The entirety of the consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as raw material for the production of a diversity of new products to be put on the market as socially controlled uses of time. "A product, though ready for immediate consumption, may nevertheless serve as raw material for a further product" (Capital).

In its most advanced sectors, a highly concentrated capitalism has begun selling "fully equipped" blocks of time, each of which is a complete commodity combining a variety of other commodities. This is the logic behind the appearance, within an expanding economy of "services" and leisure activities, of the "all-inclusive" purchase of spectacular forms of housing, of collective pseudo-travel, of participation in cultural consumption and even of sociability itself, in the form of "exciting conversations," "meetings with celebrities" and suchlike. Spectacular commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody. And, not surprisingly, they are also paradigmatic of modern sales techniques in that they may be bought on credit.

Consumable pseudo-cyclical time is the time of the spectacle: in the narrow sense, as the time appropriate to the consumption of images, and, in the broadest sense, as the image of the consumption of time. The time appropriate to the consumption of images, the medium of all commodities, is at once the chosen field of operations of the mechanisms of the spectacle and the goal that these mechanisms hold up overall as the locus and central representation of every individual act of consumption; as we know, modern society's obsession with saving time, whether by means of faster transport or by means of powdered soup, has the positive result that the average American spends three to six hours daily watching television. The social image of the consumption of time is for its part exclusively dominated by leisure time and vacations -- moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, at a distance, and as desirable by definition. This particular commodity is explicitly presented as a moment of authentic life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. Yet even in such special moments, ostensibly moments of life, the only thing being generated, the only thing to be seen and reproduced, is the spectacle -- albeit at a higher-than-usual level of intensity. And what has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more authentically spectacular.

Our epoch, which presents its time to itself as essentially made up of many frequently recurring festivities, is actually an epoch without festival. Those moments when, under the reign of cyclical time, the community would participate in a luxurious expenditure of life, are strictly unavailable to a society where neither community nor luxury exists. Mass pseudo-festivals, with their travesty of dialogue and their parody of the gift, may incite people to excessive spending, but they produce only a disillusion -- which is invariably in turn offset by further false promises. The self-approval of the time of modern survival can only be reinforced, in the spectacle, by reduction in its use value. The reality of time has been replaced by its publicity.
In ancient societies the consumption of cyclical time was consistent with the actual labor of those societies. By contrast, the consumption of pseudo-cyclical time in developed economies is at odds with the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the time of a motionless illusion authentically experienced; spectacular time is the time of a real transformation experienced as illusion.

156

Innovation is ever present in the process of the production of things. This is not true of consumption, which is never anything but more of the same. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in spectacular time the past continues to dominate the present.

157

Another aspect of the lack of historical life in general is that the individual life is still not historical. The pseudo-events that vie for attention in the spectacle's dramatizations have not been lived by those who are thus informed about them. In any case they are quickly forgotten, thanks to the precipitation with which the spectacle's pulsing machinery replaces one by the next. At the same time, everything really lived has no relation to society's official version of irreversible time, and is directly opposed to the pseudo-cyclical rhythm of that time's consumable by-products. Such individual lived experience of a cut-off everyday life remains bereft of language or concept, and it lacks any critical access to its own antecedents, which are nowhere recorded. It cannot be communicated. And it is misunderstood and forgotten to the benefit of the spectacle's false memory of the unmemorable.

158

The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a false consciousness of time.

159

A prerequisite to the enrollment of the workers as "free" producers and consumers of time-as-commodity was the violent expropriation of their time. The spectacular restoration of time was only possible on the basis of this initial dispossession of the producers.

160

The irreducibly biological element that labor retains -- evident as much in our dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking as in the marks of a lifetime's wear and tear, which attest to the irreversible time of the individual -- is treated by the modern production system as a strictly secondary consideration. Such factors are consequently ignored in the official discourse of this system as it advances, and as it generates the consumable trophies that translate its triumphant forward march into accessible terms. Immobilized at the distorted center of the movement of its world, the consciousness of the spectator can have no sense of an individual life moving toward self-realization, or toward death. Someone who has given up the idea of living life will surely never be able to embrace death. Promoters of life insurance merely intimate that it is reprehensible to die without first arranging for the system's adjustment to the economic loss one's death will incur; and the promoters of the "American way of death" dwell solely on how much of the appearance of life
can be maintained in the individual's encounter with death. Elsewhere under advertising's bombardments it is simply forbidden to get old. Anybody and everybody is urged to economize on an alleged "capital of youth" -- which, though it is unlikely to have suffered much in the way of dilapidation, has scant prospect of ever attaining the durable and cumulative properties of capital tout court. This social absence of death is one with the social absence of life.

161

As Hegel showed, time is a necessary alienation, being the medium in which the subject realizes himself while losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself. The opposite obtains in the case of the alienation that now holds sway -- the alienation suffered by the producers of an estranged present. This is a spatial alienation, whereby a society which radically severs the subject from the activity that it steals from him separates him in the first place from his own time. Social alienation, though in principle surmountable, is nevertheless the alienation that has forbidden and petrified the possibilities and risks of a living alienation within time.

162

In contrast to the passing fashions that clash and fuse on the frivolous surface of a contemplated pseudo-cyclical time, the grand style of our era can ever be recognized in whatever is governed by the obvious yet carefully concealed necessity for revolution.

163

Time's natural basis, the sensory data of its passage, becomes human and social inasmuch as it exists for human beings. The limitations of human practice, and the various stages of labor -- these are what until now have humanized (and also dehumanized) time, both cyclical time and the separated irreversible time of the economic system of production. The revolutionary project of a classless society, of a generalized historical life, is also the project of a withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of an individual and collective irreversible time which is playful in character and which encompasses, simultaneously present within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times -- the complete realization, in short, within the medium of time, of that communism which "abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals."

164

The world already has the dream of a such a time; it has yet to come into possession of the consciousness that will allow it to experience its reality.

**Environmental Planning**

And he who becomes master of a city used to being free and does not destroy her can expect to be destroyed by her, because always she has as pretext in rebellion the name of liberty and her old
customs, which never through either length of time or benefits are forgotten, and in spite of anything that can be done or foreseen, unless citizens are disunited or dispersed, they do not forget that name and those institutions....

Machiavelli, The Prince

The capitalist production system has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is also a process, at once extensive and intensive, of trivialization. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market inevitably shattered all regional and legal barriers, as well as all those corporative restrictions that served in the Middle Ages to preserve the quality of craft production, so too it was bound to dissipate the independence and quality of places. The power to homogenize is the heavy artillery that has battered down all Chinese walls.

If henceforward the free space of commodities is subject at every moment to modification and reconstruction, this is so that it may become ever more identical to itself, and achieve as nearly as possible a perfectly static monotony.

This society eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation.

Human circulation considered as something to be consumed -- tourism -- is a by-product of the circulation of commodities; basically, tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made trite. The economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places' interchangeability. The same modernization that has deprived travel of its temporal aspect has likewise deprived it of the reality of space.

A society that molds its entire surroundings has necessarily evolved its own techniques for working on the material basis of this set of tasks. That material basis is the society's actual territory. Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into its own peculiar decor.

The requirement of capitalism that is met by urbanism in the form of a freezing of life might be described, in Hegelian terms, as an absolute predominance of "tranquil side-by-sideness" in space over "restless becoming in the progression of time."
It is true that all the capitalist economy's technical forces should be understood as effecting separations, but in the case of urbanism we are dealing with the fitting out of the general basis of those forces, with the readying of the ground in preparation for their deployment -- in a word, with the technology of separation itself.

Urbanism is the modern way of tackling the ongoing need to safeguard class power by ensuring the atomization of workers dangerously massed together by the conditions of urban production. The unremitting struggle that has had to be waged against the possibility of workers coming together in whatever manner has found a perfect field of action in urbanism. The effort of all established powers, since the experience of the French Revolution, to augment their means of keeping order in the street has eventually culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Evoking a "civilization . . . moving along a one-way road," Lewis Mumford, in The City in History, points out that with the advent of long-distance mass communications, the isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control. But the general trend toward isolation, which is the essential reality of urbanism, must also embody a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. Such an integration into the system must recapture isolated individuals as individuals isolated together. Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps and housing developments -- all are expressly oriented to the goals of a pseudo-community of this kind. These imperatives pursue the isolated individual right into the family cell, where the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle's message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images -- images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation.

In all previous periods, architectural innovation served the ruling class exclusively; now for the first time there is such a thing as a new architecture specifically for the poor. Both formal poverty and the immense extension of this new experience in housing are the result of its mass character, dictated at once by its ultimate ends and by the modern conditions of construction. At the core of these conditions we naturally find an authoritarian decision-making process that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction. The same architecture appears everywhere just as soon as industrialization begins, even in the countries that are the furthest behind in this regard, for even these are considered a fertile terrain for the implantation of the new type of social existence. The threshold crossed in the growth of society's material power, and the corresponding lag in the conscious appropriation of this power, are just as clearly manifested in urbanism as they are, say, in the spheres of nuclear weapons or of the management of births (where the possibility of manipulated heredity is already on the horizon).

We already live in the era of the self-destruction of the urban environment. The explosion of cities into the countryside, covering it with what Mumford calls "formless masses" of urban debris, is presided over in unmediated fashion by the requirements of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile, the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance, has left its mark on the landscape in the dominance of freeways that bypass the old urban centers and promote an ever greater dispersal. Meanwhile, instants of incomplete reorganization of the urban fabric briefly crystallize around the "distribution factories" -- giant shopping centers created ex nihilo and
surrounded by acres of parking space; but even these temples of frenetic consumption are subject to
the irresistible centrifugal trend, and when, as partial reconstructions of the city, they in turn
become overtaxed secondary centers, they are likewise cast aside. The technical organization of
consumption is thus merely the herald of that general process of dissolution which brings the city to
the point where it consumes itself.

175

The history of the economy, whose development has turned entirely on the opposition between
town and country, has progressed so far that it has now succeeded in abolishing both of these poles.
The present paralysis of overall historical development, due to the exclusive pursuit of the
economy's independent goals, means that the moment when town and country begin to disappear,
so far from marking the transcendence of the split between them, marks instead their simultaneous
collapse. The reciprocal erosion of town and country that has resulted from the faltering of the
historical movement by whose means existing urban reality should have been superseded is clearly
reflected in the bits and pieces of both that are strewn across the most advanced portions of the
industrialized world.

176

Universal history was born in cities, and attained its majority with the town's decisive victory over
the country. Marx considered that one of the bourgeoisie's great merits as a revolutionary class was
the fact that it "subjected the country to the rule of the towns" - whose very air made one free. But
while the history of cities is certainly a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny, of State
administration controlling not only the country but also the city itself. The towns may have supplied
the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom, but up to now they have not taken
possession of that freedom. The city is the locus of history because it embodies at once a
concentration of social power, which is what makes the historical enterprise possible, and a
consciousness of the past. The present urge to destroy cities is thus merely another index of the
belatedness of the economy's subordination to historical consciousness, the tardiness of a unification
that will enable society to recapture its alienated powers.

177

The country demonstrates just the opposite fact - isolation and separation" (The German Ideology).
As it destroys the cities, urbanism institutes a pseudo-countryside devoid not only of the natural
relationships of the country of former times but also of the direct (and directly contested)
relationships of the historical cities. The forms of habitation and the spectacular control of today's
"planned environment" have created a new, artificial peasantry. The geographic dispersal and
narrow-mindedness that always prevented the peasantry from undertaking independent action and
becoming a creative historical force are equally characteristic of these modern producers, for whom
the movement of a world of their own making is every bit as inaccessible as were the natural
rhythms of work for an earlier agrarian society. The traditional peasantry was the unshakable basis
of "Oriental despotism," and its very scatteredness called forth bureaucratic centralization; the new
peasantry that has emerged as the product of the growth of modern state bureaucracy differs from
the old in that its apathy has had to be historically manufactured and maintained: natural ignorance
has given way to the organized spectacle of error. The "new towns" of the technological pseudo-
peasantry are the clearest of indications, inscribed on the land, of the break with historical time on
which they are founded; their motto might well be: "On this spot nothing will ever happen -- and
nothing ever has." Quite obviously, it is precisely because the liberation of history, which must take
place in the cities, has not yet occurred, that the forces of historical absence have set about
designing their own exclusive landscape there.

178

The same history that threatens this twilight world is capable of subjecting space to a directly
experienced time. The proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby
individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the
appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting
mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the
independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too
the authentic journey will be restored to us, along with authentic life understood as a journey
containing its whole meaning within itself.

179

The most revolutionary idea concerning city planning derives neither from urbanism, nor from
technology, nor from aesthetics. I refer to the decision to reconstruct the entire environment in
accordance with the needs of the power of established workers' councils -- the needs, in other
words, of the anti-State dictatorship of the proletariat, the needs of dialogue invested with executive
power. The power of workers' councils can be effective only if it transforms the totality of existing
conditions, and it cannot assign itself any lesser a task if it aspires to be recognized -- and to
recognize itself -- in a world of its own design.

Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere

Do you seriously think we shall live long enough to see a political revolution? -- we, the
contemporaries of these Germans? My friend, you believe what you want to believe.... Let us judge
Germany on the basis of its present history -- and surely you are not going to object that all its
history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people?
Read whatever papers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you
must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and
national happiness that we enjoy....

Ruge to Marx, March 1843

180

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge, and of representations of lived experience, within a
historical society divided into classes; what this amounts to is that culture is the power to
generalize, existing apart, as an intellectual division of labor and as the intellectual labor of division.
Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society, according to Hegel, "when the power to unify disappeared from the life of man, and opposites lost their connection and living interaction, and became autonomous" ("The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling"). In thus gaining its independence, culture was embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that was at the same time the beginning of the decline of its independence. The history that brought culture's relative autonomy into being, along with ideological illusions concerning that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And the whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of culture's insufficiency, as a march toward culture's self-abolition. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In the course of this search, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

181

The struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, is predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation. Cultural innovation is impelled solely, however, by that total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends toward the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions -- and hence toward the suppression of all separations.

182

The sudden expansion of society's knowledge, including -- as the heart of culture -- an understanding of history, brought about the irreversible self-knowledge that found expression in the abolition of God. This "prerequisite of every critique," however, was also the first task of a critique without end. In a situation where there are no longer any tenable rules of action, culture's every result propels it toward its own dissolution. Just like philosophy the moment it achieved its full independence, every discipline, once it becomes autonomous, is bound to collapse -- in the first place as an attempt to offer a coherent account of the social totality, and eventually even as a partial methodology viable within its own domain. The lack of rationality in a separated culture is what dooms it to disappear, for that culture itself embodies a call for the victory of the rational.

183

Culture issued from a history that had dissolved the way of life of the old world, yet culture as a separate sphere is as yet no more than an intelligence and a sensory communication which, in a partially historical society, must themselves remain partial. Culture is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

184

The end of the history of culture manifests itself under two antagonistic aspects: the project of culture's self-transcendence as part of total history, and its management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency has cast its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defense of class power.

185

Each of the two aspects of the end of culture has a unitary existence, as much in all spheres of knowledge as in all spheres of sensory representation-- that is, in all spheres of what was formerly understood as art in the most general sense. The first aspect enshrines an opposition between, on
the one hand, the accumulation of a fragmentary knowledge which becomes useless in that any endorsement of existing conditions must eventually entail a rejection of that knowledge itself, and, on the other hand, the theory of practice, which alone has access, not only to the truth of all the knowledge in question, but also to the secret of its use. The second aspect enshrines an opposition between the critical self-destruction of society's old common language and its artificial reconstruction, within the commodity spectacle, as the illusory representation of non-life.

186

Once society has lost the community that myth was formerly able to ensure, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a truly common language until such time as the divided character of an inactive community is superseded by the inauguration of a real historical community. As soon as art- - which constituted that former common language of social inaction -- establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art.

187

The fact that the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses positively. What it expresses negatively is that a new common language has yet to be found -- not, this time, in the form of unilaterally arrived-at conclusions like those which, from the viewpoint of historical art, always came on the scene too late, speaking to others of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable -- but rather in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it. The point is to take effective possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely represented.

188

When a newly independent art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.

189

The historical time that invaded art in fact found its first expression in the artistic sphere, beginning with the baroque. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its center with the demise of the last mythic order recognized by the Middle Ages, an order founded, both cosmically and from the point of view of earthly government, on the unity between Christianity and the ghost of an Empire. An art of change was obliged to embody the principle of the ephemeral that it recognized in the world. In the words of Eugenio d'Ors, it chose "life as opposed to eternity." Theater and festival, or theatrical festival -- these were the essential moments of the baroque, moments wherein all specific artistic expression derived its meaning from its reference to the decor of a constructed space, to a construction that had to constitute its own unifying center; and that center was passage, inscribed as a vulnerable equilibrium on an overall dynamic disorder. The sometimes excessive importance taken on in modern discussions of aesthetics by the concept of the baroque reflects a growing awareness of the impossibility of classicism in art: for three centuries all efforts to create a
normative classicism or neoclassicism have never been more than brief, artificial projects giving voice to the official discourse of the State -- whether the State of the absolute monarchy or that of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas. What eventually followed the baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, renewed its assault time after time until the fragmentation and destruction of the artistic sphere were complete. The disappearance of a historical art, which was tied to the internal communications of an elite whose semi-independent social basis lay in the relatively playful conditions still directly experienced by the last aristocracies, also testified to the fact that capitalism had thrown up the first class power self-admittedly bereft of any ontological quality; a power whose foundation in the mere running of the economy bespoke the loss of all human mastery. The baroque ensemble, a unity itself long lost to the world of artistic creation, recurs in a certain sense in today's consumption of the entirety of the art of the past. The historical knowledge and recognition of all past art, along with its retrospective promotion to the rank of world art, serve to relativize it within the context of a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice at a higher level, an edifice into which even the production of a baroque art, and all its possible revivals, is bound to be melded. The very fact that such "recollections" of the history of art should have become possible amounts to the end of the world of art. Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted -- and accepted as equal in value -- for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication in general, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own particular ability to communicate.

190

Art in the period of its dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its demands, the further from its grasp is true self-realization. This is an art that is necessarily avant-garde; and it is an art that is not. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

191

The two currents that marked the end of modern art were dadaism and surrealism. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they paralleled the proletarian revolutionary movement's last great offensive; and the halting of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried, was the fundamental cause of their own immobilization. Historically, dadaism and surrealism are at once bound up with one another and at odds with one another. This antagonism, involvement in which constituted for each of these movements the most consistent and radical aspect of its contribution, also attested to the internal deficiency in each's critique -- namely, in both cases, a fatal one-sidedness. For dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since worked out by the situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.

192

Spectacular consumption preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle's cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality -- the communication of the incommunicable. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly
invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a
dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent.
Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is
concealed. The spectacle, whose function it is to bury history in culture, presses the pseudo-novelty
of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense. Thus a
school of neo-literature baldly admitting that it merely contemplates the written word for its own
sake can pass itself off as something truly new. Meanwhile, beyond the unadorned claim that the
dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own, one encounters the most modern
tendency of spectacular culture -- and the one most closely bound up with the repressive practice of
the general social organization -- seeking by means of a "global approach" to reconstruct a complex
neo-artistic environment out of flotsam and jetsam; a good example of this is urbanism's striving to
incorporate old scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technological forms. All of which shows how a
general project of advanced capitalism is translated onto the plane of spectacular pseudo-culture --
that project being the remodeling of the fragmented worker into "a personality well integrated into
the group" (cf. recent American sociology -- Riesman, Whyte, et al.). Wherever one looks, one
encounters this same intent: to restructure society without community.

193

A culture now wholly commodity was bound to become the star commodity of the society of the
spectacle. Clark Kerr, an ideologue at the cutting edge of this trend, reckons that the whole complex
system of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge is already equivalent to 29
percent of the annual gross national product of the United States, and he predicts that in the second
half of this century culture will become the driving force of the American economy, so assuming the
role of the automobile industry in the first half, or that of the railroads in the late nineteenth
century.

194

The task of the complex of claims still evolving as spectacular thought is to justify a society with no
justification, and ultimately to establish itself as a general science of false consciousness. This
thought is entirely determined by the fact that it cannot and does not wish to apprehend its own
material foundation in the spectacular system.

195

The official thought of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized
subcommunication that it has to defend. It does not see that conflict is at the root of every feature of
its universe. Spectacular power, which is absolute within the unchallengeable internal logic of the
spectacle's language, corrupts its specialists absolutely. They are corrupted by their experience of
contempt, and by the success of that contempt, for the contempt they feel is confirmed by their
acquaintanceship with that genuinely contemptible individual -- the spectator.

196

A new division of tasks occurs within the specialized thought of the spectacular system in response
to the new problems presented by the perfecting of this system itself: in the first place modern
sociology undertakes a spectacular critique of the spectacle, studying separation with the sole aid of
separation's own conceptual and material tools; meanwhile, from within the various disciplines in
which structuralism has taken root, an apologetics of the spectacle is disseminated as the thought of
non-thought, as an authorized amnesia with respect to historical practice. As forms of enslaved
thought, however, there is nothing to choose between the fake despair of a nondialectical critique
on the one hand and the fake optimism of a plain and simple boosting of the system on the other.

197

There is a school of sociology, originating in the United States, which has begun to raise questions
about the conditions of existence created by modern social development. But while this approach
has been able to gather much empirical data, it is quite unable to grasp the true nature of its chosen
object, because it cannot recognize the critique immanent to that object. The sincerely reformist
orientation of this sociology has no criteria aside from morality, common sense and other such
yardsticks -- all utterly inadequate for dealing with the matter at hand. Because it is unaware of the
negativity at the heart of its world, this mode of criticism is obliged to concentrate on describing a
sort of surplus negativity that it views as a regrettable irritation, or an irrational parasitic infestation,
afflicting the surface of that world. An outraged goodwill of this kind, which even on its own terms
can do nothing except put all the blame on the system's external consequences, can see itself as
critical only by ignoring the essentially apologetic character of its assumptions and method.

198

People who denounce incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic
abundance do not understand the purpose of waste. It is distinctly ungrateful of them to condemn,
in the name of economic rationality, those faithful (albeit irrational) guardians without whom the
power of that same economic rationality would collapse. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book
The Image describes the spectacular consumption of commodities in America, never arrives at a
concept of the spectacle because he mistakenly feels able to treat private life, like something he calls
an "honest product," as quite independent of what he sees as a disastrous distortion or
"exaggeration." What he fails to grasp is that the commodity form itself lays down laws whose
"honest" application gives rise not only to private life as a distinct reality but also to that reality's
subsequent conquest by the social consumption of images.

199

Boorstin treats the excesses of a world that has become alien to us as excesses alien to our world.
The "normal" basis of social life to which he refers implicitly when he describes the superficial reign
of images, in terms of psychological and moral judgments, as the product of "our ever more
extravagant expectations," has no reality at all, however, either in his book or in the historical
period in which he lives. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the
past -- even in a past of religious passivity -- he has no way of comprehending the true depth of
society's dependence on images. The truth of that society is nothing less than its negation.

200

A sociology that believes it possible to isolate an industrial rationality, functioning on its own, from
social life as a whole, is liable likewise to view the technology of reproduction and communication
as independent of overall industrial development. Thus Boorstin accounts for the situation he
portrays in terms of an unfortunate and quasi-serendipitous coming together of too vast a
technology of image-diffusion on the one hand, and, on the other, too great an appetite for
sensationalism on the part of today's public. The spectacle, in this view, would have to be attributed
to man's "spectatorial" inclinations. Boorstin cannot see that the proliferation of prefabricated
"pseudo-events" -- which he deplores -- flows from the simple fact that, in face of the massive realities of present-day social existence, individuals do not actually experience events. Because history itself is the specter haunting modern society, pseudo-history has to be fabricated at every level of the consumption of life; otherwise, the equilibrium of the frozen time that presently holds sway could not be preserved.

201

The claim that a brief freeze in historical time is in fact a definitive stability -- such is, both consciously and unconsciously expressed, the undoubted basis of the current tendency toward "structuralist" system building. The perspective adopted by the anti-historical thought of structuralism is that of the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never disappear. This fantasy of a preexisting unconscious structure's hegemony over all social practice is illegitimately derived from linguistic and anthropological structural models -- even from models of the functioning of capitalism -- that are misapplied even in their original contexts; and the only reason why this has occurred is that an academic approach fit for complacent middle-range managers, a mode of thought completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system, crudely reduces all reality to the existence of that system.

202

In seeking to understand structuralist categories, it should always be borne in mind, as in the case of any historical social science, that categories express not only the forms but also the conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge a man's value according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge -- or admire -- this specific society by taking the discourse it addresses to itself as necessarily true. "One cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life." Structures are the progeny of the power that is in place. Structuralism is a thought underwritten by the State, a thought that conceives of the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an absolute. Its fashion of studying the code of messages in itself is merely the product, and the acknowledgment, of a society where communication has the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Thus it is not structuralism that serves to prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; but, on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its massive reality, that validates the chill dream of structuralism.

203

Without a doubt, the critical concept of the spectacle is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything in the abstract -- so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no idea could transcend the spectacle that exists -- it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle. For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people setting a practical force in motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation within society; and this negation, which constitutes the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, cannot for its part achieve self-consciousness unless it develops the critique of the spectacle, a critique that embodies the theory of negation's real conditions -- the practical conditions of present-day oppression -- and that also, inversely, reveals the secret of negation's potential. Such a theory expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle -- for, on the basis here defined, the
very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot be conceived independently of a rigorous practice---we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole.

204

Critical theory has to be communicated in its own language -- the language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some "writing degree zero" -- just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

205

Even the style of exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination to the canons of the prevailing language, and to sensibilities molded by those canons, because it includes in its positive use of existing concepts a simultaneous recognition of their rediscovered fluidity, of their inevitable destruction.

206

This style, which embodies its own critique, must express the mastery of the critique in hand over all its predecessors. The mode of exposition of dialectical theory will thus itself exemplify the negative spirit it contains. The truth, says Hegel, is not "detached... like a finished article from the instrument that shapes it." Such a theoretical consciousness of dialectical movement, which must itself bear the stamp of that movement, is manifested by the reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the diversion (or d'tournement) of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts. Thus the reversed genitive, as an expression of historical revolutions distilled into a form of thought, came to be considered the hallmark of Hegel's epigrammatic style. As a proponent of the replacement of subject by predicate, following Feuerbach's systematic practice of it, the young Marx achieved the most cogent use of this insurrectional style: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy. The device of d'tournement restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths -- or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies. Kierkegaard too made use of d'tournement, and offered his own pronouncement on the subject: "But how you twist and turn, so that, just as Saft always ended up in the pantry, you inevitably always manage to introduce some little word or phrase that is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections" (Philosophical Fragments). The defining characteristic of this use of d'tournement is the necessity for distance to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity. As Kierkegaard acknowledges in the same work, "One further remark I wish to make, however, with respect to your many animadversions, all pointing to my having introduced borrowed expressions in the course of my exposition. That such is the case I do not deny, nor will I now conceal from you that it was done purposely, and that in the next section of this piece, if I ever write such a section, it is my intention to call the whole by its right name, and to clothe the problem in its historical costume."

207

Ideas improve. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas.
D’tournement is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework. D’tournement, by contrast, is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. D’tournement founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.

Whatever is explicitly presented as d’tournement within formulated theory serves to deny any durable autonomous existence to the sphere of theory merely formulated. The fact that the violence of d’tournement itself mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order is a reminder that the existence of the theoretical domain is nothing in itself, that it can only come to self-knowledge in conjunction with historical action, and that it can only be truly faithful by virtue of history’s corrective judgment upon it.

Only the real negation of culture can inherit culture’s meaning. Such negation cannot no longer remain cultural. It is what remains, in some manner, at the level of culture -- but it has a quite different sense.

In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture manifests itself as unified: unified in that it dominates the whole of culture -- culture as knowledge as well as culture as poetry; unified, too, in that it is no longer separable from the critique of the social totality. It is this unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a unified social practice.

**Ideology in Material Form**

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or "recognized."

Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind
Ideology is the foundation of the thought of a class society within the conflictual course of history. Ideological entities have never been mere fictions -- rather, they are a distorted consciousness of reality, and, as such, real factors retroactively producing real distorting effects; which is all the more reason why that materialization of ideology, in the form of the spectacle, which is precipitated by the concrete success of an autonomous economic system of production, results in the virtual identification with social reality itself of an ideology that manages to remodel the whole of the real to its own specifications.

Once ideology, which is the abstract will to universality and the illusion thereof, finds itself legitimated in modern society by universal abstraction and by the effective dictatorship of illusion, then it is no longer the voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but rather its triumph. The claims of ideology now take on a sort of flat, positivistic exactness: ideology is no longer a historical choice, but simply an assertion of the obvious. Names of particular ideologies have vanished. The portion of properly ideological labor serving the system may no longer be conceived of other than in terms of an "epistemological base" supposedly transcending all specific ideological phenomena. Ideology in material form is itself without a name, just as it is without a formulable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of ideologies, plural, is over.

Ideology, whose whole internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls "total ideology" -- the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as the pseudo-knowledge of a frozen whole, as a totalitarian worldview -- has now fulfilled itself in the immobilized spectacle of non-history. Its fulfillment is also its dissolution into society as a whole. Come the practical dissolution of that society itself, ideology -- the last unreason standing in the way of historical life -- must likewise disappear.

The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. Materially, the spectacle is "the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man." The "new potentiality of fraud" concentrated within it has its basis in that form of production whereby "with the mass of objects grows the mass of alien powers to which man is subjected." This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. "The need for money is for that reason the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates" (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). The principle which Hegel enunciated in the Jenenser Realphilosophie as that of money -- "the life, moving of itself, of that which is dead" -- has now been extended by the spectacle to the entirety of social life.

In contrast to the project outlined in the Theses on Feuerbach -- the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism -- the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudo-concreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives of the world as
representation, not as activity -- and which in the last reckoning idealizes matter -- has found fulfillment in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatically masters of social life. Correlatively, idealism's imaginary activity likewise finds its fulfillment in the spectacle, this through the technical mediation of signs and signals - - which in the last reckoning endow an abstract ideal with material form.

217

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia drawn by Joseph Gabel in his False Consciousness should be seen in the context of this economic process of materialization of ideology. What ideology already was, society has now become. A blocked practice and its corollary, an antdialectical false consciousness, are imposed at every moment on an everyday life in thrall to the spectacle -- an everyday life that should be understood as the systematic organization of a breakdown in the faculty of encounter, and the replacement of that faculty by a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, or an "illusion of encounter." In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality. Here ideology is at home; here separation has built its world.

218

In clinical pictures of schizophrenia, according to Gabel, "a degradation of the dialectic of the totality (of which dissociation is the extreme form) and a degradation in the dialectic of becoming (of which catatonia is the extreme form) seem to be intimately interwoven." Imprisoned in a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle's screen, the consciousness of the spectator has only figmentary interlocutors which subject it to a one-way discourse on their commodities and the politics of those commodities. The sole mirror of this consciousness is the spectacle in all its breadth, where what is staged is a false way out of a generalized autism.

219

The spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed; it likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate. The recognition and consumption of commodities are at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible. The need to imitate that the consumer experiences is indeed a truly infantile need, one determined by every aspect of his fundamental dispossession. In terms used by Gabel to describe quite another level of pathology, "the abnormal need for representation here compensates for a torturing feeling of being at the margin of existence."

220

Whereas the logic of false consciousness cannot accede to any genuine self-knowledge, the quest for the critical truth of the spectacle must also be a true critique. This quest calls for commitment to a practical struggle alongside the spectacle's irreconcilable enemies, as well as a readiness to withhold commitment where those enemies are not active. By eagerly embracing the machinations of reformism or making common cause with pseudo-revolutionary dregs, those driven by the abstract wish for immediate efficacity obey only the laws of the dominant forms of thought, and adopt the
exclusive viewpoint of actuality. In this way delusion is able to reemerge within the camp of its erstwhile opponents. The fact is that a critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must know how to bide its time.

221

Self emancipation in our time is emancipation from the material bases of an inverted truth. This "historic mission to establish truth in the world" can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but -- only and always -- by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of a realized democracy -- to councils in which practical theory exercises control over itself and surveys its own action. It cannot be carried out, in other words, until individuals are "directly bound to universal history"; until dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world.

End
the society of the spectacle

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Index

Arabic numerals refer to theses, Roman numerals to chapter epigraphs.

Bakunin, Mikhail, 78, 91-92
Bernstein, Eduard, 79, 97
Bonaparte, Napoleon, 108
Boorstin, Daniel, 198-200
Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne, 136
Burckhardt, Jakob, 139
Capital (Marx), 88-89, 144, 151
Christ, Jesus, 136
Ciliga, Ante, 104
The City in History (Mumford), 172
Cohn, Norman, 138
Communist Manifesto (Marx & Engels), 79, 87
The Difference Between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling (Hegel), 180
Eastman, Max, 112
Ebert, Friedrich, 97
Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (Marx), 215
Engels, Friedrich, 79, 84, 89
The Essence of Christianity (Feuerbach), i
Evolutionary Socialism (Bernstein), 79
False Consciousness (Gabel), 217
Feuerbach, Ludwig, i
Finance Capital (Hilferding), 95
Fourier, Charles, 95
Freud, Sigmund, 51
Gabel, Joseph, 217-219
The German Ideology (Marx & Engels), 81, 137, 177
Gracian, Baltasar, vi
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 76, 80, 127, 206, IX, 215
Henry V (Shakespeare), v
Herodotus, 133
History and Class Consciousness (Lukács), ii, 112
Hilferding, Rudolf, 95
The Image (Boorstin), 198
Jenenser Realphilosophie (Hegel), 215
Kennedy, John F., 61
Kerr, Clark, 193
Khrushchev, Nikita, 61
Kierkegaard, Soren, 206
Korsch, Karl, 76
Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, 98-99, 103, 112
Lenin and the Revolution (Ciliga), 104

“Lenin’s Testament,” 112
“General Ludd,” 115
Lukács, Georg, ii, 112
Luxemburg, Rosa, 101
Lysenko, Trofim, 108
Machiavelli, Nicolo, 139, vi
Mannheim, Karl, 214
Mao Zedong, 64
Marx, Karl, 78-81, 84-85, 87-89, 91, 95, 125, 176, viii, 206
Material for a Theory of the Proletariat (Sorel), 83
Medici, Lorenzo de`, 139
Mohammed, 136
Mumford, Lewis, 172, 174
Novalis, 131
Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia (Gracian), vi
Ors, Eugenio d`, 189
Pannekoek, Anton, 116
Parliamentary Inquest on the Paris Commune, iv
Parvus (Alexander Helphand), 103
The Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel), ix
Philosophical Fragments (Kierkegaard), 206
The Poverty of Philosophy (Marx), 147
The Prince (Machiavelli), vii
The Pursuit of the Millennium (Cohn), 138
Red Flag (Beijing), iii
Reisman, David, 192
Rizzi, Bruno, 104
Rote Fahne (Berlin), 101
Ruge, Arnold, viii
Shakespeare, William, v
Sombart, Werner, 83
Sorel, Georges, 83
Sorenson, Theodore, 61
Stalin, Josef, 70, 103-104, 107
Stirner, Max, 78
Stuart, Charles Edward (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”), 140
“Theses on Feuerbach” (Marx), 216
“Theses on Hegel and Revolution” (Korsch), 76
Trotsky, Leon, 103, 112
Whyte, William, 192

The Society of the Spectacle

by Guy Debord

Treason Press
Canberra
2002
Translator’s Note

There have been several previous English translations of *The Society of the Spectacle*. I have gone through them all and have retained whatever seemed already to be adequate. In particular, I have adopted quite a few of Donald Nicholson-Smith’s renderings, though I have diverged from him in many other cases. His translation (*Zone Books*, 1994) and the earlier one by Fredy Perlman and John Supak (*Black and Red*, 1977) are both in print, and both can also be found at the Situationist International Online website (http://situationist.cjb.net).

I believe that my translation conveys Debord’s actual meaning more accurately, as well as more clearly and idiomatically, than any of the other versions. I am nevertheless aware that it is far from perfect, and welcome any criticisms or suggestions.

If you find the opening chapters too difficult, you might try starting with Chapter 4 or Chapter 5. As you see how Debord deals with concrete historical events, you may get a better idea of the practical implications of ideas that are presented more abstractly in the other chapters.

The book is not, however, as difficult or abstract as it is reputed to be. It is not an ivory-tower academic or philosophical discourse. It is an effort to clarify the nature of the society in which we find ourselves and the advantages and drawbacks of various methods for changing it. Every single thesis has a direct or indirect bearing on issues that are matters of life and death. Chapter 4, which with remarkable conciseness sums up the lessons of two centuries of revolutionary experience, is simply the most obvious example.

—Ken Knabb
February 2002

P.S. (March): In answer to a number of queries I have received: At the moment I have no plans to publish this translation in book form. For one thing, I’m not yet completely satisfied with it, and will be fine-tuning it over the next few months. Then I may start considering different publication possibilities, depending on what sort of interest has been expressed.

Another reason is that Alice Debord has asked me to prepare new translations of all of Debord’s films, to be used in subtitled them for English-speaking audiences. One of those films, of course, is based on this book, so I will want to get that taken care of (which may involve minor last-minute changes in the portions of the book that are used in the film) before thinking about book publication.

P.P.S. (July): During the last few weeks I have made a considerable number of stylistic revisions in the *Society of the Spectacle* translation. Although I will continue to make any improvements that occur to me, the translation as it now stands is probably pretty close to final.

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even without mentioning the source.
In contrast to the project outlined in the “Theses on Feuerbach” (the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism), the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudoconcreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives the world as representation and not as activity — and which ultimately idealizes matter — is fulfilled in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatic masters of social life. Conversely, the dreamed activity of idealism is also fulfilled in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and signals — which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia demonstrated in Gabel’s False Consciousness should be considered in the context of this economic materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was. The repression of practice and the antiedialectical false consciousness that results from that repression are imposed at every moment of everyday life subjected to the spectacle — a subjection that systematically destroys the “faculty of encounter” and replaces it with a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.

“In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia,” says Gabel, “the disintegration of the dialectic of totality (with dissociation as its extreme form) and the disintegration of the dialectic of becoming (with catatonia as its extreme form) seem closely interrelated.” Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking glass. What he sees there are dramatizations of illusory escapes from a universal autism.

The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world. It also obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudoresponse to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities. The consumer’s compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. As Gabel puts it in describing a quite different level of pathology, “the abnormal need for representation compensates for an agonizing feeling of being at the margin of existence.”

In contrast to the logic of false consciousness, which cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and admit that it is nothing without them. By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudorevolutionary collective actions, those driven by an abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the latest news. In this way delirium reappears in the camp that claims to be opposing it. A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.

The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that...
1
The Culmination of Separation

“But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence... truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.”
—Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of The Essence of Christianity

1. In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance.

2. The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.

3. The spectacle appears simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is ostensibly the focal point of all vision and consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness. The unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.

4. The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

5. The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized.

6. Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality. In all its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle also represents the constant presence of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process.

7. Separation is itself an integral part of the unity of the world, of a global social practice split into reality and image. The social practice confronted by an autonomous spectacle is at the same time the real totality which contains that spectacle. But the split within this totality mutilates it to

212. Ideology is the intellectual basis of class societies within the conflictual course of history. Ideological expressions have never been pure fictions; they represent a distorted consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors that have in turn produced real distorting effects. This interconnection is intensified with the advent of the spectacle — the materialization of ideology brought about by the concrete success of an autonomized system of economic production — which virtually identifies social reality with an ideology that has remolded all reality in its own image.

213. Once ideology — the abstract will to universality and the illusion associated with that will — is legitimized by the universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion that prevail in modern society, it is no longer a voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but its triumph. Ideological pretensions take on a sort of flat, positivistic precision: they no longer represent historical choices, they are assertions of undeniable facts. The particular names of ideologies thus tend to disappear. The specifically ideological forms of system-supporting labor are reduced to an “epistemological base” that is itself presumed to be beyond ideology. Materialized ideology has no name, just as it has no formulatable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of different ideologies is over.

214. Ideology, whose whole internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls “total ideology” — the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as pseudoknowledge of a frozen totality, as a totalitarian worldview — has reached its culmination in the immobilized spectacle of nonhistory. Its culmination is also its dissolution into society as a whole. When that society itself is concretely dissolved, ideology — the final irrationality standing in the way of historical life — must also disappear.

215. The spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. The spectacle is the material “expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man.” The “new power of deception” concentrated in it is based on the production system in which “as the mass of objects increases, so do the alien powers to which man is subjected.” This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. “The need for money is thus the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates” (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). Hegel’s characterization of money as “the self-moving life of what is dead” (Jenenser Realphilosophie) has now been extended by the spectacle to all social life.
Détournement is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation — a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework. Détournement is the flexible language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication that knows it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty. It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play. Détournement has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique.

The element of overt détournement in formulated theory refutes any notion that such theory is durably autonomous. By introducing into the theoretical domain the same type of violent subversion that disrupts and overthrows every existing order, détournement serves as a reminder that theory is nothing in itself, that it can realize itself only through historical action and through the historical correction that is its true allegiance.

The real values of culture can be maintained only by negating culture. But this negation can no longer be a cultural negation. In a sense it may take place within culture, but it points beyond it.

In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture is a unified critique, in that it dominates the whole of culture — its knowledge as well as its poetry — and in that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. This unified theoretical critique is on its way to meet unified social practice.

The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity; each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each concept established in this manner has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society.

In a world that is really turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false.

The concept of “the spectacle” interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena. The apparent diversities and contrasts of these phenomena stem from the social organization of appearances, whose essential nature must itself be recognized. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with those appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle’s essential character reveals it to be a visible negation of life — a negation of life that has taken on a visible form.

In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces that work against it, it is necessary to make some artificial distinctions. In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle’s own language, in the sense that we have to move through the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle. For the spectacle is both the meaning and the agenda of our particular socio-economic formation. It is the historical moment in which we are caught.

The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: “What appears is good; what is good appears.” The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.

The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.

The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectacleist. In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.

As indispensable embellishment of currently produced objects, as general articulation of the system’s rationales, and as advanced economic sector that directly creates an ever-increasing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the leading production of present-day society.

The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.
The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real.

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings — dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle’s job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch; the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people’s activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.

The spectacle inherits the weakness of the Western philosophical project, which attempted to understand activity by means of the categories of vision, and it is based on the relentless development of the particular technical rationality that grew out of that form of thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality, reducing everyone’s concrete life to a universe of speculation.

Philosophy — the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power — was never by itself able to supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispersed the religious mists into which human beings had projected their own alienated powers; it has merely brought those mists down to earth, to the point that even the most mundane aspects of life have become impenetrable and unbreathable. The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a “world beyond”; the culmination of humanity’s internal separation.

As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains, and ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of this sleep.

The fact that the practical power of modern society has detached itself from that society and established an independent realm in the spectacle can only be explained by the additional fact that that powerful practice continued to lack cohesion and had remained in contradiction with itself.

The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society’s ambassador to itself, delivering its official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.

The spectacle is the ruling order’s nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as

The critical concept of “the spectacle” can undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociolinguistic-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything in the abstract, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system. It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can only lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it unites with the practical current of negation in society. And that negation, the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, can for its part only become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle, which is the theory of its real conditions — the concrete conditions of present-day oppression — and which also reveals its hidden potential. This theory does not expect miracles from the working class. It envisages the reformulation and fulfillment of proletarian demands as a long-term task. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle (for the formulation and communication of the type of theory envisaged here is already inconceivable without a rigorous practice), it is certain that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the fate of the practical movement acting on the scale of society.

Critical theory must communicate itself in its own language — the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a “zero degree of writing,” but its opposite. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

The very style of dialectical theory is a scandal and abomination to the prevailing standards of language and to the sensibilities molded by those standards, because while it makes concrete use of existing concepts it simultaneously recognizes their fluidity and their inevitable destruction.

This style, which contains its own critique, must express the domination of the present critique over its entire past. Dialectical theory’s mode of exposition reveals the negative spirit within it. “Truth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it” (Hegel). This theoretical consciousness of a movement whose traces must remain visible within it is manifested by the reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the détournement [diversion] of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts. Hegel’s practice of reversing the genitive was an expression of historical revolutions, though that expression was confined to the form of thought. The young Marx, inspired by Feuerbach’s systematic reversal of subject and predicate, achieved the most effective use of this insurrectional style, which answers “the philosophy of poverty” with “the poverty of philosophy.” Détournement redesignates previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies. Kierkegaard already used it deliberately, though he also denounced it: “But despite all your twists and turns, just as jam always returns to the pantry, you always end up introducing some little phrase which is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections” (Philosophical Fragments). As he acknowledged elsewhere in the same book, this use of détournement requires maintaining one’s distance from whatever has been turned into an official truth: “One further remark regarding your many complaints that I introduced borrowed expressions into my exposition. I do not deny that I did so. It was in fact done deliberately. In the next section of this work, if I ever write such a section, I intend to call this topic by its true name and to clothe the problem in its historical attire.”

Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author’s phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one.
consumption in the United States, never arrives at the concept of the spectacle because he thinks he can treat private life and “honest commodities” as separate from the “excesses” he deplores. He fails to understand that the commodity itself made the laws whose “honest” application leads both to the distinct reality of private life and to its subsequent reconquest by the social consumption of images.

Boorstin describes the excesses of a world that has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world. When, like a moral or psychological prophet, he denounces the superficial reign of images as a product of “our extravagant expectations,” he is implicitly contrasting these excesses to a “normal” life that has no reality in either his book or his era. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past, including the past that was dominated by religious resignation, he has no way of comprehending the true extent of the present society’s domination by images. We can truly understand this society only by negating it.

A sociology that believes that a separately functioning industrial rationality can be isolated from social life as a whole may go on to view the techniques of reproduction and communication as independent of general industrial development. Thus Boorstin concludes that the situation he describes is caused by an unfortunate but almost fortiﬁous encounter of an excessive technology of image-diffusion with an excessive appetite for sensationalism on the part of today’s public. This amounts to blaming the spectacle on modern man’s excessive inclination to be a spectator. Boorstin fails to see that the proliferation of the prefabricated “pseudo-events” he denounces ﬂows from the simple fact that the overwhelming realities of present-day social existence prevent people from actually living events for themselves. Because history itself haunts modern society like a specter, pseudohistories have to be concocted at every level in order to preserve the threatened equilibrium of the present frozen time.

The current tendency toward structuralist systematization is based on the explicit or implicit assumption that this brief freezing of historical time will last forever. The antihistorical thought of structuralism believes in the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never come to an end. Its illusion that all social practice is unconsciously determined by preexisting structures is based on illegitimate analogies with structural models developed by linguistics and anthropology (or even on models used for analyzing the functioning of capitalism) — models that were already inaccurate even in their original contexts. This fallacious reasoning stems from the limited intellectual and imaginative capacity of the academic functionaries hired to expound this thought, who are so thoroughly caught up in their awe-struck celebration of the existing system that they can do nothing but reduce all reality to the existence of that system.

In order to understand “structuralist” categories, one must bear in mind that such categories, like those of any other historical social science, reﬂect forms and conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, one cannot judge or admire this particular society by assuming that the language it speaks to itself is necessarily true. “We cannot judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, that consciousness must be explained in the light of the contradictions of material life...” Structures are the progeny of established powers. Structuralism is thought underwritten by the state, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its method of studying code in isolation from content is merely a reflection of a taken-for-granted society where communication takes the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its overwhelming reality, that validates the frigid dream of structuralism. 

relations between people and between classes: a second Nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the inevitable consequence of some supposedly natural technological development. On the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technological content. If the spectacle, considered in the limited sense of the “mass media” that are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to be invading society in the form of a mere technical apparatus, it should be understood that this apparatus is in no way neutral and that it has been developed in accordance with the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social needs of the age in which such technologies are developed can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially unilateral. The concentration of these media thus amounts to concentrating in the hands of the administrators of the existing system the means that enable them to carry on this particular form of administration. The social separation reﬂected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern state — that product of the social division of labor that is both the chief instrument of class rule and the concentrated expression of all social divisions.

Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor in the form of class divisions had given rise to an earlier, religious form of contemplation: the mythical order with which every power has always camouﬂaged itself. Religion justiﬁed the cosmic and ontological order that corresponded to the interests of the masters, expounding and embellishing everything their societies could not deliver. In this sense, all separate power has been spectacular. But this earlier universal devotion to a ﬁxed religious imagery was only a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for the poverty of a concrete social activity that was still generally experienced as a unitary condition. In contrast, the modern spectacle depicts what society could deliver, but in so doing it rigidly separates what is possible from what is permitted. The spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence. Like a factitious god, it generates itself and makes its own rules. It reveals itself for what it is: an autonomously developing separate power, based on the increasing productivity resulting from an increasingly reﬁned division of labor into parcelized gestures dictated by the independent movement of machines, and working for an ever-expanding market. In the course of this development, all community and all critical awareness have disintegrated; and the forces that were able to grow by separating from each other have not yet been reunited.

The general separation of worker and product tends to eliminate any consistent sense of accomplished activity and any direct personal communication between producers. With the increasing accumulation of separate products and the increasing concentration of the productive process, accomplishment and communication are monopolized by the managers of the system. The triumph of this separation-based economic system proletarianizes the whole world.

Due to the very success of this separate production of separation, the fundamental experience that in earlier societies was associated with people’s primary work is in the process of being replaced (in sectors near the cutting edge of the system’s evolution) by an identiﬁcation of life with nonworking time, with inactivity. But such inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity; it remains dependent on it, in an uneasy and admiring submission to the requirements and consequences of the production system. It is itself one of the consequences of that system. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nulliﬁed — all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a “liberation from work,” namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of the activity stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced.
The reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From cars to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender “lonely crowds.” With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions.

The spectacle was born from the world’s loss of the unity, and the immense expansion of the modern spectacle reveals the enormity of this loss. The abstractifying of all individual labor and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose manner of being concrete is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, a part of the world presents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness.

The alienation of the spectacle, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle’s estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

Workers do not produce themselves, they produce a power independent of themselves. The success of this production, the abundance it generates, is experienced by the producers as an abundance of dispossession. As their alienated products accumulate, all time and space become foreign to them. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map that is identical to the territory it represents. The forces that have escaped us display themselves to us in all their power.

The spectacle’s social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion consists primarily of the expansion of this particular sector of industrial production. The “growth” generated by an economy developing for its own sake can be nothing other than a growth of the very alienation that was at its origin.

Though separated from what they produce, human beings nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life.

The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.

As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge already accounts for 29% of the gross national product of the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century the “knowledge industry” will become the driving force of the American economy, as was the automobile in the first half of this century and the railroad in the last half of the previous century.

The task of the various branches of knowledge that are in the process of developing spectacular thought is to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness. This thought is totally conditioned by the fact that it cannot recognize, and does not want to recognize, its own material dependence on the spectacular system.

The official thought of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized lack of communication that it has to defend. It cannot understand that conflict is at the origin of everything in its world. The specialists of spectacular power — a power that is absolute within its realm of one-way communication — are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and by the success of that contempt, because they find their contempt confirmed by their awareness of how truly contemptible spectators really are.

As the very triumphs of the spectacular system pose new problems, a new division of tasks appears within the specialized thought of that system. On one hand, a spectacular critique of the spectacle is undertaken by modern sociology, which studies separation exclusively by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation. On the other, the various disciplines where structuralism has become entrenched are developing an apologetics of the spectacle — a mindless thought that imposes an official amnesia regarding all historical practice. But the fake despair of nondialectical critique and the fake optimism of overt promotion of the system are equally submissive.

The sociologists who have begun to raise questions about the living conditions created by modern social developments (first of all in the United States) have gathered a great deal of empirical data, but they have failed to grasp the true nature of their object of study because they fail to recognize the critique that is inherent in that object. As a result, those among them who sincerely wish to reform these conditions can only appeal to ethical standards, common sense, moderation, and other measures that are equally inadequate for dealing with the problems in question. Because this method of criticism is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, it focuses on describing and deploring an excessive sort of negativity that seems to blight the surface of that world like some irrational parasitic infestation. This outraged good will, which even within its own moralizing framework ends up blaming only the external consequences of the system, can see itself as critical only by ignoring the essentially apologetic character of its assumptions and methods.

Those who denounce the affluent society’s incitement to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous do not understand the purpose of this wastefulness. In the name of economic rationality, they ungratefully condemn the faithful irrational guardians that keep the power of this economic rationality from collapsing. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book The Image describes spectacle-commodity
from romanticism to cubism, continually renewed its assaults until it had fragmented and destroyed the entire artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and which had its semi-independent social basis in the partially playful conditions still experienced by the last aristocracies, also reflects the fact that capitalism is the first form of class power that acknowledges its own total lack of ontological quality — a power whose basis in the mere management of the economy is symptomatic of the loss of all human mastery. The comprehensive unity of the baroque ensemble, which has long been lacking in the world of artistic creation, has in a sense been revived in today’s wholesale consumption of the totality of past art. As all the art of the past comes to be recognized and appreciated historically, and is retrospectively reclassified as phases of a single “world art,” it is incorporated into a global disorder that can itself be seen as a sort of baroque structure at a higher level, a structure that absorbs baroque art itself along with all its possible revivals. For the first time in history the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together, and the fact that it has become possible to collect and recollect all these art-historical memories marks the end of the world of art. In this age of museums in which artistic communication is no longer possible, all the previous expressions of art can be accepted equally, because whatever particular communication problems they may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication in general.

190 Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived — is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfillment. This art is necessarily avant-garde, and at the same time it does not really exist. Its avant-garde is its own disappearance.

191 Dadaism and surrealism were the two currents that marked the end of modern art. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they were contemporaries of the last great offensive of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere whose decrèpitude they had denounced, was the fundamental reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism were historically linked yet also opposed to each other. This opposition involved the most important and radical contributions of the two movements, but it also revealed the internal inadequacy of their one-sided critiques. Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since developed by the situationists has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.

192 The spectacular consumption that preserves past culture in congealed form, including coopted rehashes of its negative manifestations, gives overt expression in its cultural sector to what it implicitly is in its totality: the *communication of noncommunication*. The most extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one’s acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent. The critical truth of this destruction — the real life of modern poetry and art — is obviously concealed, since the spectacle, whose function is to *use culture to bury all historical memory*, applies its own essential strategy in its promotion of modernistic pseudo-innovations. Thus a school of neoliterature that baldly admits that it does nothing but contemplate the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something new. Meanwhile, alongside the simple claim that the death of communication has a sufficient beauty of its own, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture — which is also the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society — seeks by means of “collective projects” to construct complex neoartistic environments out of decomposed elements, as can be seen in urbanism’s attempts to incorporate scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technical forms. This is an expression, in the domain

### The Commodity as Spectacle

“The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the attitudes that people adopt toward it, as it subjugates their consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression. ... As labor is increasingly rationalized and mechanized, this subjugation is reinforced by the fact that people’s activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.”

—Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

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35 In the spectacle’s basic practice of incorporating into itself all the fluid aspects of human activity so as to possess them in a congealed form, and of inverting living values into purely abstract values, we recognize our old enemy the *commodity*, which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious, yet which is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties.

36 The fetishism of the commodity — the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things” — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.

37 The world at once present and absent which the spectacle holds up to view is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its development is identical to people’s estrangement from each other and from everything they produce.

38 The loss of quality that is so evident at every level of spectacular language, from the objects it glorifies to the behavior it regulates, stems from the basic nature of a production system that shuns reality. The commodity form reduces everything to quantitative equivalence. The quantitative is what it develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative.

39 Despite the fact that this development excludes the qualitative, it is itself subject to qualitative change. The spectacle reflects the fact that this development has crossed the threshold of *its own abundance*. Although this qualitative change has as yet taken place only partially in a few local areas, it is already implicit at the universal level that was the commodity’s original standard — a standard that the commodity has lived up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.

40 The development of productive forces is the *unconscious history* that has actually created and altered the living conditions of human groups — the conditions enabling them to survive and the expansion of those conditions. It has been the economic basis of all human undertakings. Within natural economies, the emergence of a commodity sector represented a surplus survival. Commodity production, which implies the exchange of varied products between independent producers, tended for a long time to retain its small-scale craft aspects, relegated as it was to a marginal economic role where its quantitative reality was still hidden. But whenever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale commerce and capital accumulation, it took total control of the economy. The entire
human existence. The "perfected denial of man" has thus taken charge of all political economy worker's "leisure and humanity" simply because political economy now can and must dominate takes charge of the perspective is revised as soon as commodity abundance reaches a level that requires an additional collaboration from him. ... seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. At this point the proletarian only as a semiology, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process. Has to be returned in fragmented form to fragmented individuals who are completely cut off from the overall operation of the productive forces. To this end the specialized science of domination is whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has become a total commodity whose constant turno...
Negation and Consumption Within Culture

“The do you really believe that these Germans will make a political revolution in our lifetime? My friend, that is just wishful thinking. . . . Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history — and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever newspapers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy.”

—Ruge to Marx, March 1844

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies divided into classes. It is a generalizing power which itself exists as a separate entity, as division of intellectual labor and as intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society “when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connections and interactions and became autonomous” (The Difference Between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling). In thus gaining its independence, culture embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that ultimately led to the decline of that independence. The history that gave rise to the relative autonomy of culture, and to the ideological illusions regarding that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And this whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as a progressive revelation of the inadequacy of culture, as a march toward culture’s self-abolition. Culture is the terrain of the quest for lost unity. In the course of this quest, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

In the struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic theme of internal cultural development in historical societies, innovation always wins. But cultural innovation is generated by nothing other than the total historical movement — a movement which, in becoming conscious of itself as a whole, tends to go beyond its own cultural presuppositions and thus to move toward the suppression of all separations.

The rapid expansion of society’s knowledge, including the understanding that history is the underlying basis of culture, led to the irreversible self-knowledge reflected by the destruction of God. But this “first condition of any critique” is also the first task of a critique without end. When there are no longer any tenable rules of conduct, each result of culture pushes culture toward its own dissolution. Like philosophy the moment it achieved full independence, every discipline that becomes autonomous is bound to collapse — first as a credible pretension to give a coherent account of the social totality, and ultimately even as a fragmented methodology that might be workable within its own domain. Separate culture’s lack of rationality is what dooms it to disappear, because that culture already embodies a striving for the victory of the rational.

Culture grew out of a history that dissolved the previous way of life, but as a separate sphere within a partially historical society its understanding and sensory communication inevitably remain partial. It is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to include privation. If augmented survival never comes to a resolution, if there is no point where it might stop expanding, this is because it is itself stuck in the realm of privation. It may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

Automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, obliges the commodity system to resolve the following contradiction: The technological developments that objectively tend to eliminate work must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity, because labor is the only creator of commodities. The only way to prevent automation (or any other less extreme method of increasing labor productivity) from reducing society’s total necessary labor time is to create new jobs. To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or “service” sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities; and in this it is serving a real need, in the sense that increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.

Exchange value could arise only as a representative of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the conditions for its own autonomous power. By mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in controlling it. Usefulness has come to be seen purely in terms of exchange value, and is now completely at its mercy. Starting out like a mercenary in the service of use value, exchange value has ended up waging the war for its own sake.

The constant decline of use value that has always characterized the capitalist economy has given rise to a new form of poverty within the realm of augmented survival — alongside the old poverty which still persists, since the vast majority of people are still forced to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of the system’s ends and each of them knows that he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail — the fact that even in its most impoverished forms (food, shelter) use value now has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival — accounts for the general acceptance of the illusions of modern commodity consumption. The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.

Use value was formerly understood as an implicit aspect of exchange value. Now, however, within the upside-down world of the spectacle, it must be explicitly proclaimed, both because its actual reality has been eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because it serves as a necessary pseudojustification for a counterfeit life.

The spectacle is the flip side of money. It, too, is an abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence — the exchangeability of different goods whose uses remain incomparable — the spectacle is the modern complement of money: a representation of the commodity world as a whole which serves as a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is money one can only look at, because it in all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just a servant of pseudo-use, it is already in itself a pseudo-use of life.

With the achievement of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to the appearances that are now that labor’s primary product. Capital is no longer the invisible center governing the production process; as it accumulates, it spreads to
the ends of the earth in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

51 The economy’s triumph as an independent power at the same time spells its own doom, because the forces it has unleashed have eliminated the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity with a necessity for boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But that economy loses all connection with authentic needs insofar as it emerges from the social unconscious that unknowingly depended on it. “Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin” (Freud).

52 Once society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy in fact depends on the society. When the subterranean power of the economy grew to the point of visible domination, it lost its power. The economic Id must be replaced by the I. This subject can only arise out of society, that is, out of the struggle within society. Its existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle that is both product and producer of the economic foundation of history.

53 Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and the workers’ direct possession of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.

176 Universal history was born in cities, and it reached maturity with the city’s decisive victory over the country. For Marx, one of the greatest merits of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class was the fact that it “subjected the country to the city,” whose “very air is liberating.” But if the history of the city is a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny — a history of state administrations controlling not only the countryside but the cities themselves. The city has served as the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom without yet having been able to win it. The city is the focal point of history because it embodies both a concentration of social power, which is what makes historical enterprises possible, and a consciousness of the past. The current destruction of the city is thus merely one more reflection of humanity’s failure, thus far, to subordinate the economy to historical consciousness; of society’s failure to unify itself by reappropriating the powers that have been alienated from it.

177 “The country represents the complete opposite: isolation and separation” (The German Ideology). As urbanism destroys the cities, it recreates a pseudocountryside devoid of both the natural relations of the traditional countryside and of the direct (and directly challenged) social relations of the historical city. The conditions of habitation and spectacular control in today’s “planned environment” have created an artificial neopeasantry. The geographical dispersal and the narrow-mindedness that have always prevented the peasantry from undertaking independent action and becoming a creative historical force are equally characteristic of these modern producers, for whom a world of their own making is as inaccessible as were the natural rhythms of work in agrarian societies. The peasantry was the steadfast foundation of “Oriental despotism,” in that its inherent fragmentation gave rise to a natural tendency toward bureaucratic centralization. The neopeasantry generated by the increasing bureaucratization of the modern state differs from the old in that its apathy must now be historically manufactured and maintained; natural ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of falsification. The landscape of the “new cities” inhabited by this technological pseudopeasantry is a glaring expression of the repression of historical time on which they have been built. Their motto could be: “Nothing has ever happened here, and nothing ever will.” The forces of historical absence have been able to create their own landscape because historical liberation, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred.

178 The history that threatens this twilight world could potentially subject space to a directly experienced time. Proletarian revolution is the critique of human geography through which individuals and communities could create places and events commensurate with the appropriation no longer just of their work, but of their entire history. The ever-changing playing field of this new world and the freely chosen variations in the rules of the game will regenerate a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular. And this diversity will revive the possibility of authentic journeys — journeys within an authentic life that is itself understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.

179 The most revolutionary idea concerning urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or aesthetic. It is the project of reconstructing the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of workers councils, of the antistate dictatorship of the proletariat, of executory dialogue. Such councils can be effective only if they transform existing conditions in their entirety; and they cannot set themselves any lesser task if they wish to be recognized and to recognize themselves in a world of their own making.
The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.

Although the struggles between different powers for control of the same socio-economic system are officially presented as irreconcilable antagonisms, they actually reflect that system’s fundamental unity, both internationally and within each nation.

The sham spectacular struggles between rival forms of separate power are at the same time real, in that they express the system’s uneven and conflictual development and the more or less contradictory interests of the classes or sections of classes that accept that system and strive to carve out a role for themselves. By invoking any number of different criteria, the spectacle can present these oppositions as totally distinct social systems. But in reality they are nothing but particular sectors whose total integration is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.”

—Red Flag (Beijing), 21 September 1964

Urbanism is the modern method for solving the ongoing problem of safeguarding class power by atomizing workers who have been dangerously brought together by the conditions of urban production. The constant struggle that has had to be waged against anything that might lead to such coming together has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. The efforts of all the established powers since the French Revolution to increase the means of maintaining law and order in the streets have finally culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Evoking a “civilization . . . moving along a one-way road,” Lewis Mumford, in The City in History, points out that “with the advent of long-distance mass communications, the isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control.” But the general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together as isolated individuals. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the family cell, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images — images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation.

In all previous periods architectural innovations were designed exclusively for the ruling classes. Now for the first time a new architecture has been specifically designed for the poor. The aesthetic poverty and vast proliferation of this new experience in habitation stem from its mass character, which character in turn stems both from its function and from the modern conditions of construction. The obvious core of these conditions is the authoritarian decisionmaking which abstractly converts the environment into an environment of abstraction. The same architecture appears everywhere as soon as industrialization has begun, even in the countries that are furthest behind in this regard, as an essential foundation for implanting the new type of social existence. The contradiction between the growth of society’s material powers and the continued lack of progress toward any conscious control of those powers is revealed as glaringly by the developments of urbanism as by the issues of thermonuclear weapons or of birth control (where the possibility of manipulating heredity is already on the horizon).

The self-destruction of the urban environment is already well under way. The explosion of cities into the countryside, strewing it with what Mumford calls “formless masses of urban debris,” is directly governed by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile — the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance — has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centers and promote an ever-wider dispersal. Within this process various forms of partially reconstituted urban fabric fleetingly crystallize around “distribution factories” — giant shopping centers built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots. But these temples of frenetic consumption are subject to the same irresistible centrifugal momentum, which casts them aside as soon as they have engendered enough surrounding development to become overburdened secondary centers in their turn. But the technical organization of consumption is only the most visible aspect of the general process of decomposition that has brought the city to the point of consuming itself.

Economic history, whose entire previous development centered around the opposition between city and country, has now progressed to the point of nullifying both. As a result of the current paralysis of any historical development beyond the independent movement of the economy, the incipient disappearance of city and country does not represent a transcendence of their separation, but their simultaneous collapse. The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from

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The sham spectacular struggles between rival forms of separate power are at the same time real, in that they express the system’s uneven and conflictual development and the more or less contradictory interests of the classes or sections of classes that accept that system and strive to carve out a role for themselves within it. Just as the development of the most advanced economies involves clashes between different priorities, totalitarian state-bureaucratic forms of economic management and countries under colonialism or semicolonialism also exhibit highly divergent types of production and power. By invoking any number of different criteria, the spectacle can present these oppositions as totally distinct social systems. But in reality they are nothing but particular sectors whose fundamental essence lies in the global system that contains them, the single movement that has turned the whole planet into its field of operation: capitalism.

The society that bears the spectacle does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely by its economic hegemony. It also dominates them as the society of the spectacle. Even where the material base is still absent, modern society has already used to spectacle to invade the social surface of every continent. It sets the stage for the formation of indigenous ruling classes and frames their agendas. Just as it presents pseudogoods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialized countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support. Even if local manifestations of the spectacle include certain totalitarian specializations of communication and control, from the standpoint of the overall functioning of the system those specializations are simply playing their allotted role within a global division of spectacular tasks.

Unity and Division Within Appearances

“A lively new polemic about the concepts ‘one divides into two’ and ‘two fuse into one’ is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that ‘one divides into two’ is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that ‘two fuse into one’ are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.”

—Red Flag (Beijing), 21 September 1964
Although this division of spectacular tasks preserves the existing order as a whole, it is primarily oriented toward protecting its dominant pole of development. The spectacle is rooted in the economy of abundance, and the products of that economy ultimately tend to dominate the spectacular market and override the ideological or police-state protectionist barriers set up by local spectacles with pretensions of independence.

Behind the glimmer of spectacular distractions, a tendency toward banalization dominates modern society the world over, even where the more advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly multiplied the variety of roles and objects to choose from. The vestiges of religion and of the family (the latter is still the primary mechanism for transferring class power from one generation to the next), along with the vestiges of moral repression imposed by those two institutions, can be blended with ostentatious pretensions of worldly gratification precisely because life in this particular world remains repressive and offers nothing but pseudogratifications. Compliant acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness — dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material.

Stars — spectacular representations of living human beings — project this general banality into images of possible roles. As specialists of apparent life, stars serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations that they actually live. The function of these celebrities is to act out various lifestyles or sociopolitical viewpoints in a full, totally free manner. They embody the inaccessible results of social labor by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: power and vacations — the decisionmaking and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned. On one hand, a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudostar; on the other, a star of consumption may campaign for recognition as a pseudopower over life. But the activities of these stars are not really free, and they offer no real choices.

The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the individuality of others. Entering the spectacle as a model to take credit for the victory of the battle of Kursk twenty years after it happened. And Kennedy survived as an orator to ... that had contributed so much toward the dead man's public persona. The admirable people who personify the system are well — the decisionmaking and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned. On one hand, a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudostar; on the other, a star of consumption may campaign for recognition as a pseudopower over life. But the activities of these stars are not really free, and they offer no real choices.

The false choices offered by spectacular abundance — choices based on the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects) — develop into struggles between illusory qualities designed to generate fervent allegiance to quantitative trivialities. Fallacious archaic oppositions are revived — regionalisms and racisms which serve to endow mundane rankings in the hierarchies of consumption

Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This uniﬁcation is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market shattered all regional and legal barriers and all the Medieval corporative restrictions that maintained the quality of craft production, it also undermined the autonomy and quality of places. This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China.

The free space of commodities is constantly being altered and redesigned in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony.

While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation.

Tourism — human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities — is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their equivalence. The modernization that has reduced the time involved in traveling has simultaneously reduced the real space through which and to which one can travel.

The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding the very territory that constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism — “city planning” — is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular decor.

The capitalist need that is satisﬁed by urbanism’s conspicuous petrification of life can be described in Hegelian terms as a total predominance of a “peaceful coexistence within space” over “the restless becoming that takes place in the progression of time.”

While all the technical forces of capitalism contribute toward implementing various forms of separation, urbanism provides the material foundation for those forces and prepares the ground for their deployment. It is the very technology of separation.
The spectacle, considered as the reigning society’s method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a false consciousness of time.

In order to force the workers into the status of “free” producers and consumers of commodified time, it was first necessary to violently expropriate their time. The imposition of the new spectacular form of time became possible only after this initial dispossession of the producers.

The unavoidable biological limitations of the work force — evident both in its dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking and in the debilitating effects of irreversible time over each individual’s lifetime — are treated by the modern production system as strictly secondary considerations. As such, they are ignored in that system’s official proclamations and in the consumable trophies that embody its relentless triumphant progress. Fixed on the delusory center around which his world seems to move, the spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfillment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living he can no longer acknowledge his own death. Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system following the resultant economic loss, while the promoters of the “American way of death” stress his capacity to preserve most of the appearances of life in his post-mortem state. On all the other fronts of advertising bombardment it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Everybody is urged to economize on their “youth-capital,” though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of economic capital. This social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life.

As Hegel showed, time is the necessary alienation, the terrain where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself. In total contrast, the current form of alienation is imposed on the producers of an estranged present. In this spatial alienation, the society that radically separates the subject from the activity it steals from him is in reality separating him from his own time. This potentially surmountable social alienation is what has prevented and paralyzed the possibilities and risks of a living alienation within time.

Behind the fashions that come and go on the frivolous surface of the spectacle of pseudocyclical time, the grand style of the era can always be found in what is governed by the secret yet obvious necessity for revolution.

The natural basis of time, the concrete experience of its passage, becomes human and social by existing for humanity. The limitations of human practice imposed by the various stages of labor have humanized time and also dehumanized it, in the forms of cyclical time and of the separated irreversible time of economic production. The revolutionary project of a classless society, of an all-embracing historical life, implies the withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of a federation of independent times — a federation of playful individual and collective forms of irreversible time that are simultaneously present. This would be the temporal realization of authentic communism, which “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.”

The world already dreams of such a time. In order to actually live it, it only needs to become fully conscious of it.

Spectacular oppositions conceal the unity of poverty. If different forms of the same alienation struggle against each other in the guise of irreconcilable antagonisms, this is because they are all based on real contradictions that are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated form and a diffuse form, depending on the requirements of the particular stage of poverty it denies and supports. In both cases, it is nothing more than an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm center of misery.

The concentrated spectacle is primarily associated with bureaucratic capitalism, though it may also be imported as a technique for reinforcing state power in more backward mixed economies or even adopted by advanced capitalism during certain moments of crisis. Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat takes part in the ownership of the entire economy only through his membership in the community of bureaucrats. And since commodity production is less developed under bureaucratic capitalism, it too takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is the total social labor, and what it sells back to the society is that society’s wholesale survival. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and any choice made independently of it, whether regarding food or music or anything else, thus amounts to a declaration of war against it. This dictatorship must be enforced by permanent violence. Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system’s totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute star or disappear. This master of everyone else’s nonconsumption is the heroic image that disguises the absolute exploitation of those who are now young; it is present solely in the economic system, in the dynamism of capitalism. It is things that rule and that are young, vying with each other and constantly replacing each another.

The diffuse spectacle is associated with commodity abundance, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the total commodity production, of which the spectacle is a laudatory catalog. Irreconcilable claims jockey for position on the stage of the affluent economy’s unified spectacle, and different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting social policies. The automobile spectacle, for example, strives for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of old urban districts, while the city spectacle wants to preserve those districts as tourist attractions. The already dubious satisfaction alleged to be obtained from the consumption of the whole is thus constantly being disappointed because the actual consumer can directly access only a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven, fragments which invariably lack the quality attributed to the whole.

Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end. The spectacle does not sing of men with a magical ontological superiority — and pseudoplayful enthusiasms are aroused by an endless succession of ludicrous competitions, from sports to elections. Wherever abundant consumption is established, one particular spectacular opposition is always in the forefront of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adults. But real adults — people who are masters of their own lives — are in fact nowhere to be found. And a youthful transformation of what exists is in no way characteristic of those who are now young; it is present solely in the economic system, in the dynamism of capitalism. It is things that rule and that are young, vying with each other and constantly replacing each another.
and their arms, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle each commodity, by
pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself: the globalization of
the commodity (which also amounts to the commodification of the globe). Thus, as a result of the
cunning of the commodity, while each particular manifestation of the commodity eventually falls in
battle, the general commodity-form continues onward toward its absolute realization.

The satisfaction that no longer comes from using the commodities produced in abundance is
now sought through recognition of their value as commodities. Consumers are filled with religious
fervor for the sovereign freedom of commodities whose use has become an end in itself. Waves of
enthusiasm for particular products are propagated by all the communications media. A film sparks
a fashion craze; a magazine publicizes night spots which in turn spin off different lines of products.
The proliferation of faddish gadgets reflects the fact that as the mass of commodities becomes
increasingly absurd, absurdity itself becomes a commodity. Trinkets such as key chains which come
as free bonuses with the purchase of some luxury product, but which end up being traded
back and forth as valued collectibles in their own right, reflect a mystical self-abandonment to
commodity transcendence. Those who collect the trinkets that have been manufactured for the sole
purpose of being collected are accumulating commodity indulgences — glorious tokens of the
commodity’s real presence among the faithful. Reified people proudly display the proofs of their
intimacy with the commodity. Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and
miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent exaltation.
All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission.

The pseudoneeds imposed by modern consumerism cannot be opposed by any genuine
needs or desires that are not themselves also shaped by society and its history. But commodity
abundance represents a total break in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical
accumulation unleashes an unlimited artificiality which overpowers any living desire. The cumulative
power of this autonomous artificiality ends up by falsifying all social life.

The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely postpones the
consumer’s awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular
commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic
shortcut to the promised land of total consummation. But as with the fashionable adoption of
seemingly aristocratic first ... due to the fact that they have been placed, however briefly, at the center of social life and hailed as a revelation of
the unfathomable purposes of production. But the object that was prestigious in the spectacle
becomes mundane as soon as it is taken home by its consumer — and by all its other consumers.
Too late, it reveals its essential poverty, a poverty that stems from the poverty of its production.
Meanwhile, some other object is already replacing it as representative of the system and demanding
its own moment of acclaim.

The fraudulence of the satisfactions offered by the system is exposed by this continual
replacement of products and of general conditions of production. In both the diffuse and the
concentrated spectacle, entities that have brazenly asserted their definitive perfection nevertheless
end up changing, and only the system endures. Stalin, like any other outmoded commodity, is
denounced by the very forces that originally promoted him. Each new lie of the advertising industry
is an implicit admission of its previous lie. And with each downfall of a personification of totalitarian
power, the illusory community that had unanimously approved him is exposed as nothing but a
coalition of loners without illusions.

Consumable pseudocyclical time is spectacular time, both in the narrow sense as time spent
consuming images and in the broader sense as image of the consumption of time. The time spent
consuming images (images which in turn serve to publicize all the other commodities) is both the
particular terrain where the spectacle’s mechanisms are most fully implemented and the general goal
that those mechanisms present, the focus and epitone of all particular consumptions. Thus, the
time that modern society is constantly seeking to “save” by increasing transportation speeds or
using packaged soups ends up being spent by the average American in watching television three to
six hours a day. As for the social image of the consumption of time, it is exclusively dominated by
leisure time and vacations — moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, at a distance
as desirable by definition. These commodified moments are explicitly presented as moments of
real life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. But all that is really happening
is that the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity. What is
presented as true life turns out to be merely a more truly spectacular life.

Although the present age presents itself as a series of frequently recurring festivities, it is an
age that knows nothing of real festivals. The moments within cyclical time when members of a
community joined together in a luxurious expenditure of life are impossible for a society that lacks
both community and luxury. Its vulgarized pseudofestivals are parodies of real dialogue and gift-
giving; they may incite waves of excessive economic spending, but they lead to nothing but
dissolutions, which can be compensated only by the promise of some new disillusion to come.
The less use value is present in the time of modern survival, the more highly it is exalted in the
spectacle. The reality of time has been replaced by the publicity of time.

While the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real
labor of those societies, the pseudocyclical consumption of developed economies contradicts the
abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the really lived
time of unchanging illusions. Spectacular time is the illusorily lived time of a constantly changing
realty.

The production process’s constant innovations are not echoed in consumption, which only
consists of more and more of the same. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in
spectacular time the past continues to dominate the present.

The lack of general historical life also means that individual life as yet has no history. The
pseudo-events that vie for attention in spectacular dramatizations have not been lived by those
who are informed about them; and in any case they are soon forgotten due to their increasingly
frenetic replacement at every pulsation of the spectacular machinery. Conversely, what is really
lived has no relation to the society’s official version of irreversible time, and is directly opposed to
the pseudocyclical rhythm of that time’s consumable by-products. This individual experience of a
disconnected everyday life remains without language, without concepts, and without critical accessto its own past, which has nowhere been recorded. Uncommunicated, misunderstood and forgotten,
it is smothered by the spectacle’s false memory of the unmemorable.
Spectacular Time

“We have nothing of our own except time, which even the homeless can experience.”
—Baltasar Gracián, Oráculo manual y Arte de prudencia

The time of production — commodified time — is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract, in which each segment need only demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all the others. It has no reality apart from its exchangeability. Under the social reign of commodified time, “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the carcass of time” (The Poverty of Philosophy). This devalued time is the complete opposite of time as “terrain of human development.”

This general time of human nondevelopment also has a complementary aspect — a consumable form of time based on the present mode of production and presenting itself in everyday life as a pseudocyclical time.

This pseudocyclical time is in fact merely a consumable disguise of the production system’s commodified time. It exhibits the latter’s essential traits: homogenous exchangeable units and suppression of any qualitative dimension. But as a by-product of commodified time whose function is to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life, it is loaded with pseudovalorizations and manifests itself as a succession of pseudoindividualized moments.

Pseudocyclical time is associated with the consumption of modern economic survival — the augmented survival in which everyday experience is cut off from decisionmaking and subjected no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudonature created by alienated labor. It is thus quite natural that it echoes the old cyclical rhythm that governed survival in preindustrial societies, incorporating the natural vestiges of cyclical time while generating new variants: day and night, work and weekend, periodic vacations.

Pseudocyclical time is a time that has been transformed by industry. The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, one that recombines everything that the disintegration of the old unitary societies had differentiated into private life, economic life, and political life. The entire consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as a raw material for various new products put on the market as socially controlled uses of time. “A product that already exists in a form suitable for consumption may nevertheless serve as raw material for some other product” (Capital).

In its most advanced sectors, concentrated capitalism is increasingly tending to market “fully equipped” blocks of time, each functioning as a unified commodity combining a variety of

The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle’s natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.

The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle masks the class division underlying the real unity of the capitalist mode of production. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what excludes them from it. What links people up by liberating them from their local and national limitations is also what keeps them apart. What requires increased rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What produces society’s abstract power also produces its concrete lack of freedom.
The Proletariat as Subject and Representation

“Equal right to all the goods and pleasures of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints — in the final analysis, these are the aims behind the March 18th insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army.”
—Parliamentary Inquest on the Paris Commune

The real movement that transforms existing conditions has been the dominant social force since the bourgeoisie’s victory within the economic sphere, and this dominance became visible once that victory was translated onto the political plane. The development of productive forces shattered the old production relations, and all static order crumbled. Everything that was absolute became historical.

When people are thrust into history and forced to participate in the work and struggles that constitute history, they find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear and disabused manner. This history has no object distinct from what it creates from out of itself, although the final unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era considered the productive progression through which history had unfolded as itself the object of history. As for the subject of history, it can be nothing other than the self-production of the living — living people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world and of their own fully conscious adventures.

The class struggles of the long era of revolutions initiated by the rise of the bourgeoisie have developed in tandem with the dialectical “thought of history” — the thought which is no longer content to seek the meaning of what exists, but which strives to learn how to supersede what exists, and in the process breaks down every separation.

For Hegel the point was no longer to interpret the world, but to interpret the transformation of the world. But because he limited himself to merely interpreting that transformation, Hegel only represents the philosophical culmination of philosophy. He seeks to understand a world that develops by itself. This historical thought is still a consciousness that always arrives too late, a consciousness that can only formulate retrospective justifications of what has already happened. It has thus gone beyond separation only in thought. Hegel’s paradoxical stance — his subordination of the meaning of all reality to its historical culmination while at the same time proclaiming that his own system represents that culmination — flows from the simple fact that this thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought in his philosophy only a reconciliation with the results of those revolutions. “Even as a philosophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not express the entire process of this revolution, but only its concluding phase. In this sense it is a philosophy not of the revolution, but of the restoration” (Karl Korsch, “Theses on Hegel and Revolution”). Hegel performed the task of the philosopher — “the glorification of what exists” — for the last time; but already what existed for him could be nothing less than the entire movement of history. Since he nevertheless maintained the external position of thought, this externality could have been unconscious; but this basis remains unconscious because it cannot be brought to light. This blind prehistory, this new fate that no one controls, is the only thing that the commodity economy has democratized.

The history that is present in all the depths of society tends to become invisible at the surface. The triumph of irreversible time is also its metamorphosis into a time of things, because the weapon that brought about its victory was the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity. The main product that economic development has transformed from a luxurious rarity to a commonly consumed item is thus history itself — but only in the form of the history of the abstract movement of things that dominates all qualitative aspects of life. While the earlier cyclical time had supported an increasing degree of historical time lived by individuals and groups, the irreversible time of production tends to socially eliminate such lived time.

The bourgeoisie has thus made irreversible historical time known and has imposed it on society, but it has prevented society from using it. “History once existed, but not any longer; because the class of owners of the economy, which is inextricably tied to economic history, must repress every other irreversible use of time because it is directly threatened by them all. The ruling class, made up of specialists in the possession of things who are themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility within history. Meanwhile the worker at the base of society is for the first time not materially estranged from history, because the irreversible movement is now generated from that base. By demanding to live the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life.

The irreversible time of the bourgeoisie that had just seized power was at first called by its own name and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of general freedom that had served to overthrow the last remnants of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all the traditional forms of social organization, was already unable to completely conceal the real goal that it had draped in Roman costume: unrestricted freedom of trade. Commodity society, discovering its need to restore the passivity that it had so profoundly shaken in order to establish its own unchallenged rule, now found that, for its purposes, “Christianity with its cult of man in the abstract . . . is the most fitting form of religion” (Capital). The bourgeoisie thus entered into a compromise with that religion, a compromise reflected in its presentation of time: the Revolutionary calendar was abandoned and irreversible time returned to the straitjacket of a duly extended Christian Era.

With the development of capitalism, irreversible time has become globally unified. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is brought under the sway of this time’s development. But this history that is everywhere simultaneously the same is as yet nothing but an intrahistorical rejection of history. What appears the world over as the same day is merely the time of economic production, time cut up into equal abstract fragments. This unified irreversible time belongs to the global market, and thus also to the global spectacle.

The irreversible time of production is first of all the measure of commodities. The time officially recognized throughout the world as the general time of society actually only reflects the specialized interests that constitute it, and thus is merely one particular type of time.
in a historical world, not on the terrain of myth. Modern revolutionary expectations are not irrational continuations of the religious passion of millenarianism, as Norman Cohn thought he had demonstrated in The Pursuit of the Millennium. On the contrary, millenarianism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary tendency, a tendency that lacked only the consciousness that it was a purely historical movement. The millenarians were doomed to defeat because they were unable to recognize their revolution as their own undertaking. The fact that they hesitated to act until they had received some external sign of God’s will was an ideological corollary to the insurgent peasants’ practice of following leaders from outside their own ranks. The peasant class could not attain a clear understanding of the workings of society or of how to conduct its own struggle, and because it lacked these conditions for unifying its action and consciousness, it expressed its project and waged its wars with the imagery of an earthly paradise.

The Renaissance was a joyous break with eternity. Though seeking its heritage and legitimacy in the ancient world, it represented a new form of historical life. Its irreversible time was that of a never-ending accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness engendered by the experience of democratic communities and of the forces that destroy them now took up once again, with Machiavelli, the analysis of secularized power, saying the previously unsayable about the state. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the creation of festivals, life is experienced as an enjoyment of the passage of time. But this enjoyment of transience is itself transient. The song of Lorenzo de’ Medici, which Burckhardt considered “the very spirit of the Renaissance,” is the eulogy this fragile historical festival delivers on itself: “How beautiful the spring of life — and how quickly it vanishes.”

The constant tendency toward the monopolization of historical life by the absolute-monarchist state — a transitional form on the way to complete domination by the bourgeois class — brings into clear view the nature of the bourgeoisie’s new type of irreversible time. The bourgeoisie is associated with a labor time that has finally been freed from cyclical time. With the bourgeoisie, work becomes a collectively transformative historical condition. The bourgeoisie is the first ruling class for which work is a value. And the bourgeoisie, which suppresses all privilege and recognizes no value that does not stem from the exploitation of labor, has appropriately identified its own value as a ruling class with labor, and has made the progress of labor the measure of its own progress. The class that accumulates commodities and capital continually modifies nature by modifying labor itself, by unleashing labor’s productivity. At the stage of absolute monarchy, all social life was already concentrated within the ornamented poverty of the Court, the gaudy trappings of a bleak state administration whose apex was the “profession of king”; and all particular historical freedoms had to surrender to this new power. The free play of the feudal lords’ irreversible time came to an end in their last, lost battles — in the Fronde and in the Scottish uprising in support of Bonnie Prince Charlie. The world now had a new foundation.

The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of a profoundly historical time, because it is the time corresponding to an economic production that continuously transforms society from top to bottom. So long as agrarian production remains the predominant form of labor, the cyclical time that remains at the base of society reinforces the joint forces of tradition, which tend to hold back any historical movement. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economy eradicates these vestiges throughout the world. History, which until then had seemed to involve only the actions of individual members of the ruling class, and which had thus been recorded as a mere chronology of events, is now understood as a general movement — a relentless movement that crushes any individuals in its path. By discovering its basis in political economy, history becomes aware of what had previously be masked only by identifying that thought with a preexisting project of the Spirit — of that absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done, and whose ultimate goal coincides with the present. Philosophy, in the process of being superseded by historical thought, has thus arrived at the point where it can glorify its world only by denying it, since in order to speak it must presuppose that the total history to which it has relegated everything has already come to an end, and that the only tribunal where truth could be judged is closed.

When the proletariat demonstrates through its own actions that this historical thought has not been forgotten, its refutation of that thought’s conclusion is at the same time a confirmation of its method.

Historical thought can be saved only by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class can be nothing less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of its world. All the theoretical currents of the revolutionary working-class movement — Stirner and Bakunin as well as Marx — grew out of a critical confrontation with Hegelian thought.

The inseparability of Marx’s theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from that theory’s revolutionary character, that is, from its truth. It is in this regard that the relationship between Marx and Hegel has generally been ignored or misunderstood, or even denounced as the weak point of what became fallaciously transformed into a doctrine: “Marxism.” Bernstein implicitly revealed this connection between the dialectical method and historical partisanship when he in his book Evolutionary Socialism he deplored the 1847 Manifesto’s unscientific predictions of imminent proletarian revolution in Germany: “This historical self-deception, so erroneous that the most naïve political visionary ... could never completely free himself. In those times of general effervescence this influence was all the more fatal to him.”

The inversion carried out by Marx in order to “salvage” the thought of the bourgeois revolutions by transferring it to a different context does not trivially consist of putting the materialist development of productive forces at the center of history, but rather of constructing a critique of the concept of time and historical movement. When the proletariat demonstrates through its own actions that this historical thought has not been forgotten, its refutation of that thought’s conclusion is at the same time a confirmation of its method.

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thought, preserving it only by superseding it. It seeks to understand social struggles, not sociological laws. “We recognize only one science: the science of history” (The German Ideology).

82 The bourgeois era, which wants to give history a scientific foundation, overlooks the fact that the science available to it could itself arise only on the foundation of the historical development of the economy. But history is fundamentally dependent on this economic knowledge only so long as it remains merely economic history. The extent to which the viewpoint of scientific observation could overlook history’s effect on the economy (an overall process modifying its own scientific premises) is shown by the vanity of those socialists who thought they had calculated the exact periodicity of economic crises. Now that constant government intervention has succeeded in counteracting the tendencies toward crisis, the same type of mentality sees this delicate balance as a definitive economic harmony. The project of transcending the economy and mastering history must grasp and incorporate the science of society, but it cannot itself be a scientific project. The revolutionary movement remains bourgeois insofar as it thinks it can master current history by means of scientific knowledge.

83 The utopian currents of socialism, though they are historically grounded in criticism of the existing social system, can rightly be called utopian insofar as they ignore history (that is, insofar as they ignore actual struggles taking place and any passage of time outside the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society), but not because they reject science. On the contrary, the utopian thinkers were completely dominated by the scientific thought of earlier centuries. They sought the completion and fulfillment of that general rational system. They did not consider themselves unamused prophets, for they firmly believed in the social power of scientific proof and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. “Why,” Sombart asked, “would they want to seize through struggle what merely needed to be proved?” But the utopians’ scientific understanding did not include the awareness that some social groups have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, forces to maintain it, and forms of false consciousness to reinforce it. Their grasp of reality thus lagged far behind the historical reality of the development of science itself, which had been largely oriented by the social requirements arising from such factors, which determined not only what findings were considered acceptable, but even what might or might not become an object of scientific research. The utopian socialists remained prisoners of the scientific manner of expounding the truth, viewing this truth as a pure abstract image — the form in which it had established itself at a much earlier stage of social development. As Sorel noted, the utopians took astronomy as their model for discovering and demonstrating the laws of society; their unintentional conception of harmony was the natural result of their attempt to apply to society the science least dependent on history. They described this harmony as if they were Newtons discovering universal scientific laws, and the happy ending they constantly evoked “plays a role in their social science analogous to the role of inertia in classical physics” (Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat).

84 The scientific-determinist aspect of Marx’s thought was precisely what made it vulnerable to “ideologization,” both during his own lifetime and even more so in the theoretical heritage he left to the workers movement. The advent of the historical subject continues to be postponed, and it is economics, the historical science par excellence, which is increasingly seen as guaranteeing the inevitability of its own future negation. In this way revolutionary practice, the only true agent of this negation, tends to be pushed out of theory’s field of vision. Instead, it is seen as essential to patiently study economic development, and to go back to accepting the suffering which that development imposes with a Hegelian tranquility. The result remains “a graveyard of good intentions.” The “science of revolutions” then concludes that consciousness always comes too soon, and has to be taught. “History has shown that we, and all who thought as we did, were wrong,” Engels wrote in 1895. “It has made clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time
and perishes separately, leaving the underlying society unchanged, because it remains separated from the common reality. This is why we tend to reduce the history of Oriental empires to a history of religions: the chronologies that have fallen to ruins have left nothing but the seemingly independent history of the illusions that veiled them. The masters who used the protection of myth to make history their private property did so first of all in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; and their earliest officially recognized dynasties were nothing but imaginary reconstructions of the past. But this illusory ownership by the masters was the only ownership possible, both of the common history and of their own history. As their real historical power expanded, this illusory-mythical ownership became increasingly vulgarized. All these consequences flowed from the simple fact that as the masters played the role of mythically guaranteeing the permanence of cyclical time (as in the seasonal rites performed by the Chinese emperors), they themselves achieved a relative liberation from cyclical time.

133 The dry, unexplained chronology that a deified authority offered to its subjects, who were supposed to accept it as the earthly fulfillment of mythic commandments, was destined to be transcended and transformed into conscious history. But for this to happen, sizeable groups of people had to have experienced real participation in history. Out of this practical communication between those who have recognized each other as possessors of a unique present, who have experienced a qualitative richness of events in their own activity and who are at home in their own era, arises the general language of historical communication. Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the memorable and the threat of oblivion: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents the results of his researches, so that time will not abolish the deeds of men...”

134 Examining history amounts to examining the nature of power. Greece was the moment when power and changes in power were first debated and understood. It was a democracy of the masters of society — a total contrast to the despotic state, where power settles accounts only with itself, within the impenetrable obscurity of its inner sanctum, by means of palace revolutions which are beyond the pale of discussion whether they fail or succeed. But the shared power in the Greek communities was limited to the consumption of a social life whose production remained the separate and static domain of the servile class. The only people who lived were those who did not work. The divisions among the Greek communities and their struggles to exploit foreign cities were the externalized expression of the principle of separation on which each of them was based internally. Although Greece had dreamed of universal history, it did not succeed in unifying itself in the face of foreign invasion, or even in unifying the calendars of its independent city-states. Historical time became conscious in Greece, but it was not yet conscious of itself.

135 The disappearance of the particular conditions that had favored the Greek communities brought about a regression of Western historical thought, but it did not lead to a restoration of the old mythic structures. The clashes of the Mediterranean peoples and the rise and fall of the Roman state gave rise instead to semihistorical religions, which became a new armor for separate power and basic components of a new consciousness of time.

136 The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time that still governed the sphere of production and the irreversible time that was the theater of conflicts and regroupings among different peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were abstract universal acknowledgments of an irreversible time that had become democratized and open to all, but only in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: “The Kingdom of God is soon to come.” These religions were rooted in the soil of history, but they remained radically opposed to history. The semihistorical religions establish a was far from being ripe.” Throughout his life Marx had maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the exposition of his theory was carried out on the terrain of the dominant thought insofar as it took the form of critiques of particular disciplines, most notably the critique of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It was in this mutilated form, which eventually came to be seen as orthodox, that Marx’s theory was transformed into “Marxism.”

85 The weakness of Marx’s theory is naturally linked to the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The German working class failed to inaugurate a permanent revolution in 1848; the Paris Commune was defeated in isolation. As a result, revolutionary theory could not yet be fully realized. The fact that Marx was reduced to defending and refining it by cloistered scholarly work in the British Museum had a debilitating effect on the theory itself. His scientific conclusions about the future development of the working class, and the organizational practice apparently implied by those conclusions, became obstacles to proletarian consciousness at a later stage.

86 The theoretical shortcomings of the scientific defense of proletarian revolution (both in its content and in its form of exposition) all ultimately result from identifying the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.

87 As early as the Communist Manifesto, Marx’s effort to demonstrate the legitimacy of proletarian power by citing a repetitive sequence of precedents led him to oversimplify his historical analysis into a linear model of the development of modes of production, in which class struggles invariably resulted “either in a revolutionary transformation of the entire society or in the mutual ruin of the contending classes.” The plain facts of history, however, are that the “Asiatic mode of production” (as Marx himself acknowledged elsewhere) maintained its immobility despite all its class conflicts; that no serf uprising ever overthrew the feudal lords; and that none of the slave revolts in the ancient world ended the rule of the freemen. The linear schema loses sight of the fact that the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever won; and that it is also the only class for which the development of the economy was both the cause and the consequence of its taking control of society. The same oversimplification led Marx to neglect the economic role of the state in the management of class society. If the rising bourgeoisie seemed to liberate the economy from the state, this was true only to the extent that the previous state was an instrument of class oppression within a static economy. The bourgeoisie originally developed its independent economic power during the medieval period when the state had been weakening and feudalism was breaking up. The stable equilibrium between different powers. In contrast, the modern state — which began to support the bourgeoisie’s development through its mercantile policies and which developed into the bourgeoisie’s own state during the laissez-faire era — was eventually to emerge as a central power in the planned management of the economic process. Marx was nevertheless able to describe the “Bonapartist” prototype of modern statist bureaucracy, the fusion of capital and state to create a “national power of capital over labor, a public force designed to maintain social servitude” — a form of social order in which the bourgeoisie renounces all historical life apart from what has been reduced to the economic history of things, and would like to be “condemned to the same political nothingness as all the other classes.” The sociopolitical foundations of the modern spectacle are already discernable here, and these foundations negatively imply that the proletariat is the only pretender to historical life.

88 The only two classes that really correspond to Marx’s theory, the two pure classes that the entire analysis of Capital brings to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history, but operating under very different conditions. The bourgeoisie revolution is done. The proletarian revolution is a yet-unrealized project, born on the
foundation of the earlier revolution but differing from it qualitatively. If one overlooks the originality of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, one also tends to overlook the specific originality of the proletarian project, which can achieve nothing unless it carries its own banners and recognizes the “immensity of its own tasks.” The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat cannot create its own new form of power except by becoming the class of consciousness. The growth of productive forces will not in itself guarantee the emergence of such a power — not even indirectly by way of the increasing dispossession which that growth entails. Nor can a Jacobin-style seizure of the state be a means to this end. The proletariat cannot make use of any ideology designed to disguise its partial goals as general goals, because the proletariat cannot preserve any partial reality that is truly its own.

90 The fusion of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each depends on the other for its validation. The proletarian class is formed into a subject in its process of organizing revolutionary struggles and in its reorganization of society at the moment of revolution — this is where the practical conditions of consciousness must exist, conditions in which the theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory. But this crucial question of organization was virtually ignored by revolutionary theory during the period when the workers movement was first taking shape — the very period when that theory still possessed the most advanced theoretical truth of the International Workingmen’s Association was its own existence needed in order to validate the theory. They were what the theory needed, yet that need had not been formulated theoretically. The soviet, for example, was not a theoretical discovery. And the most advanced theoretical truth of the International Workingmen’s Association was its own existence in practice.

91 The First International’s initial successes enabled it to free itself from the confused influences of the dominant ideology that had survived within it. But the defeat and repression that it soon encountered brought to the surface a conflict between two different conceptions of proletarian revolution, each of which contained an authoritarian aspect that amounted to abandoning the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. The feud between the Marxists and the Bakuninists,

128 The social appropriation of time and the production of man by human labor develop within a society divided into classes. The power that establishes itself above the poverty of the society of cyclical time, the class that organizes this social labor and appropriates its limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the temporal surplus value resulting from its organization of social time: it alone possesses the irreversible time of the living. The wealth that can only be concentrated in the hands of the rulers and spent in extravagant festivities is also spent as a squandering of historical time at the surface of society. The owners of this historical surplus value are the only ones in a position to know and enjoy real events. Separated from the collective organization of time associated with the repetitive production at the base of social life, this historical time flows independently above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war, the time in which the masters of cyclical society pursue their personal histories; it is also the time that emerges in the clashes with foreign communities that disrupt the unchanging social order. History thus arises as something alien to people, as something they never sought and from which they had thought themselves protected. But it also revives the negative human restlessness that had been at the very origin of this whole (temporarily suspended) development.

129 In itself, cyclical time is a time without conflict. But conflict is already present even in this infancy of time, as history first struggles to become history in the practical activity of the masters. This history creates a surface irreversibility: its movement constitutes the very time it uses up within the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

130 “Static societies” are societies that have reduced their historical movement to a minimum and that have managed to maintain their internal conflicts and their conflicts with the natural and human environment in a constant equilibrium. Although the extraordinary diversity of the institutions established for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the flexibility of human nature’s self-creation, this diversity is apparent only to the external observer, the anthropologist who looks back from the vantage point of historical time. In each of these societies a definitive organizational structure has eliminated any possibility of change. The total conformism of their social practices, with which all human possibilities are identified for all time, has no external limit but the fear of falling back into a formless animal condition. The members of these societies remain human at the price of always remaining the same.

131 With the emergence of political power — which seems to be associated with the last great technological revolutions (such as iron smelting) at the threshold of a period that would experience no further major upheavals until the rise of modern industry — kinship ties begin to dissolve. The succession of generations within a natural, purely cyclical time begins to be replaced by a linear succession of powers and events. This irreversible time is the time of those who rule, and the dynasty is its first unit of measurement. Writing is the rulers’ weapon. In writing, language attains its complete independence as a mediation between consciousnesses. But this independence coincides with the independence of separate power, the mediation that shapes society. With writing there appears a consciousness that is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living — an impersonal memory, the memory of the administration of society. “Writings are the thoughts of the state; archives are its memory” (Novalis).

132 The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power. It also serves to inspire the continued progression of that time by recording the past out of which it has developed, since this orientation of time tends to collapse with the fall of each particular power and would otherwise sink back into the indifferent oblivion of cyclical time (the only time known to the peasant masses who, during the rise and fall of all the empires and their chronologies, never change). The owners of history have given time a direction, a direction which is also a meaning. But this history develops
5 Time and History

O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! . . .
An if we live, we live to tread on kings.

—Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I

125 Man, “the negative being who is solely to the extent that he suppresses Being,” is one with time. Man’s appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the development of the universe. “History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man” (Marx). Conversely, this “natural history” has no real existence other than through the process of human history, the only vantage point from which one can take in that historical totality (like the modern telescope whose power enables one to look back in time at the receding nebula at the periphery of the universe). History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. The temporaliization of humanity, brought about through the mediation of a society, amounts to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true within historical consciousness.

126 True (though still hidden) historical movement begins with the slow and imperceptible development of the “real nature of man” — the “nature that is born with human history, out of the generative action of human society.” But even when such a society has developed a technology and a language and is already a product of its own history, it is conscious only of a perpetual present. Knowledge is carried on only by the living, never going beyond the memory of the society’s oldest members. Neither death nor procreation is understood as a law of time. Time remains motionless, like an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally becomes conscious of time, it tries to negate it — it views time not as something that passes, but as something that returns. This static type of society organizes time in a cyclical manner, in accordance with its own direct experience of nature.

127 Cyclical time is already dominant among the nomadic peoples because they find the same conditions repeated at each moment of their journey. As Hegel notes, “the wandering of nomads is only nominal because it is limited to uniform spaces.” When a society settles in a particular location and gives space a content by developing distinctive areas within it, it finds itself confined within that locality. The periodic return to similar places now becomes the pure return of time in the same place, the repetition of a sequence of activities. The transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture marks the end of an idle and contentless freedom and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, is the basis for fully developed cyclical time. Eternity is within this time, it is the return of the same here on earth. Myth is the unitary mental construct which guarantees that the cosmic order conforms with the order that this society has in fact already established within its frontiers.

which eventually became irremediable, actually centered on two different issues — the question of power in a future revolutionary society and the question of the organization of the current movement — and each of the adversaries reversed their position when they went from one aspect to the other. Bakunin denounced the illusion that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian implementation of state power, warning that this would lead to the formation of a new bureaucratic ruling class and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (or of those reputed to be such). Marx, who believed that the concomitant maturation of economic contradictions and of the workers’ education in democracy would reduce the role of a proletarian state to a brief phase needed to legitimize the new social relations brought into being by objective factors, denounced Bakunin and his supporters as an authoritarian conspiratorial elite who were deliberately placing themselves above the International with the harebrained scheme of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those who would designate themselves as such). Bakunin did in fact recruit followers on such a basis: “In the midst of the popular tempest we must be the invisible pilots guiding the revolution, not through any kind of overt power but through the collective dictatorship of our Alliance — a dictatorship without any badges or titles or official status, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power.” Thus two ideologies of working-class revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique, but each losing the unity of historical thought and setting itself up as an ideological authority. Powerful organizations such as German Social Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation faithfully served one or the other of these ideologies; and everywhere the result was very different from what had been sought.

92 The fact that anarchists have seen the goal of proletarian revolution as immediately present represents both the strength and the weakness of collectivist anarchist struggles (the only forms of anarchism that can be taken seriously — the pretensions of the individualist forms of anarchism have always been ludicrous). From the historical thought of modern class struggles collectivist anarchism retains only the conclusion, and its constant harping on this conclusion is accompanied by a deliberate indifference to any consideration of methods. Its critique of political struggle has thus remained abstract, while its commitment to economic struggle has been channeled toward the mirage of a definitive solution that will supposedly be achieved by a single blow on this terrain, on the day of the general strike or the insurrection. The anarchists have saddled themselves with fulfilling an ideal. Anarchism remains a merely ideological negation of the state and of class society — the very social conditions which in their turn foster separate ideologies. It is the ideology of pure freedom, an ideology that puts everything on the same level and loses any conception of the “historical evil” (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence. Anarchism responds to each particular struggle by repeating and reapplying the same simple and all-embracing lesson, because this lesson has from the beginning been considered the be-all and end-all of the movement. This is reflected in Bakunin’s 1873 letter of resignation from the Jura Federation: “During the past nine years the International has developed more than enough ideas to save the world, if ideas alone could save it, and I challenge anyone to come up with a new one. It’s no longer the time for ideas, it’s time for actions.” This perspective undoubtedly retains proletarian historical thought’s recognition that ideas must be put into practice, but it abandons the historical terrain by assuming that the appropriate forms for this transition to practice have already been discovered and will never change.
The anarchists, who explicitly distinguish themselves from the rest of the workers movement by their ideological conviction, reproduce this separation of competencies within their own ranks by providing a terrain that facilitates the informal domination of each particular anarchist organization by propagandists and defenders of their ideology, specialists whose mediocre intellectual activity is largely limited to the constant regurgitation of a few eternal truths. The anarchists’ ideological reverence for unanimous decisionmaking has ended up paving the way for uncontrolled manipulation of their own organizations by specialists in freedom; and revolutionary anarchism expects the same type of unanimity, obtained by the same means, from the masses once they have been liberated. Furthermore, the anarchists’ refusal to take into account the great differences between the conditions of a minority banded together in present-day struggles and of a postrevolutionary society of free individuals has repeatedly led to the isolation of anarchists when the moment for collective decisionmaking actually arrives, as is shown by the countless anarchist insurrections in Spain that were contained and crushed at a local level.

The illusion more or less explicitly maintained by genuine anarchism is its constant belief that a revolution is just around the corner, and that the instantaneous accomplishment of this revolution will demonstrate the truth of anarchist ideology and of the form of practical organization that has developed in accordance with that ideology. In 1936 anarchism did indeed initiate a social revolution, a revolution that was the most advanced expression of proletarian power ever realized. But even in that case it should be noted that the general uprising began as a merely defensive reaction to the army’s attempted coup. Furthermore, inasmuch as the revolution was not carried to completion during its opening days (because Franco controlled half the country and was being strongly supported from abroad, because the rest of the international proletarian movement had already been defeated, and because the anti-Franco camp included various bourgeois forces and statist working-class parties), the organized anarchist movement proved incapable of extending the revolution’s partial victories, or even of defending them. Its recognized leaders became government ministers, hostages to a bourgeois state that was destroying the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

The “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International is the scientific ideology of socialist revolution, an ideology which identifies its whole truth with objective economic processes and with the progressive recognition of the inevitability of those processes by a working class educated by the organization. This ideology revives the faith in pedagogical demonstration that was found among the utopian socialists, combining that faith with a contemplative invocation of the course of history; but it has lost both the Hegelian dimension of total history and the static image of totality presented by the utopians (most richly by Fourier). This type of scientific attitude, which can do nothing more than resurrect the traditional dilemmas between symmetrical ethical choices, is at the root of Hilferding’s absurd conclusion that recognizing the inevitability of socialism “gives no indication as to what practical attitude should be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize that something is inevitable, and quite another to put oneself in the service of that inevitability” (Finanzkapital). Those who failed to realize that for Marx and for the revolutionary proletariat unitary historical thought was in no way distinct from a practical attitude to be adopted generally ended up becoming victims of the practice they did adopt.

The ideology of the social-democratic organizations put those organizations under the control of the professors who were educating the working class, and their organizational forms corresponded to this type of passive apprenticeship. The participation of the socialists of the Second International in political and economic struggles was admittedly concrete, but it was profoundly uncritical. It was a manifestly reformist practice carried on in the name of an illusory revolutionism. This ideology of revolution inevitably floundered on the very success of those
battleground — a battleground which has changed and yet remains the same — they are following
a new “General Ludd” who, this time, urges them to attack the machinery of permitted consumption.

116 The long-sought political form through which the working class could carry out its own
economic liberation has taken on a clear shape in this century, in the form of revolutionary workers
councils which assume all decision-making and executive powers and which federate with each other
by means of delegates who are answerable to their base and revocable at any moment. The councils
that have actually emerged have as yet provided no more than a rough hint of their possibilities
because they have immediately been opposed and defeated by class society’s various defensive
forces, among which their own false consciousness must often be included. As Pannekoek rightly
stressed, opting for the power of workers councils “poses problems” rather than providing a
solution. But it is precisely within this form of social organization that the problems of proletarian
revolution can find their real solution. This is the terrain where the objective preconditions of
historical consciousness are brought together — the terrain where active direct communication is
realized, marking the end of specialization, hierarchy and separation, and the transformation of
existing conditions into “conditions of unity.” In this process proletarian subjects can emerge from
their struggle against their contemplative position; their consciousness is equal to the practical
organization they have chosen for themselves because this consciousness has become inseparable
from coherent intervention in history.

117 With the power of the councils — a power that must internationally supplant all other
forms of power — the proletarian movement becomes its own product. This product is nothing
other than the producers themselves, whose goal has become nothing other than their own fulfillment.
Only in this way can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in its turn.

118 The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century was the most
advanced expression of the old proletarian movement, but it went unnoticed, except in travestied
forms, because it was repressed and destroyed along with all the rest of the movement. Now, from
the vantage point of the new stage of proletarian critique, the councils can be seen in their true light
as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement. The historical consciousness that recognizes
that the councils are the only terrain in which it can thrive can now see that they are no longer at the
periphery of a movement that is subsiding, but at the center of a movement that is rising.

119 A revolutionary organization that exists before the establishment of the power of workers
councils must discover its own appropriate form through struggle; but all these historical experiences
have already made it clear that it cannot claim to represent the working class. Its task, rather, is to
embody a radical separation from the world of separation.

120 Revolutionary organization is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into
two-way communication with practical struggles, in the process of becoming practical theory. Its
own practice is to foster the communication and coherence of these struggles. At the revolutionary
moment when social separations are dissolved, the organization must dissolve itself as a separate
organization.

121 A revolutionary organization must constitute an integral critique of society, that is, it must
make a comprehensive critique of all aspects of alienated social life while refusing to compromise
with any form of separate power anywhere in the world. In the organization’s struggle with class
society, the combattants themselves are the fundamental weapons: a revolutionary organization
must thus see to it that the dominant society’s conditions of separation and hierarchy are not
reproduced within itself. It must constantly struggle against its deformation by the ruling spectacle.

who proclaimed it. The elevation of socialist journalists and parliamentary representatives above
the rest of the movement encouraged them to become habituated to a bourgeois lifestyle (most of
them had in any case been recruited from the bourgeoisie intelligentsia). And even industrial workers
who had been recruited out of struggles in the factories were transformed by the trade-union
bureaucracy into brokers of labor-power, whose task was to make sure that that commodity was
sold at a “fair” price. For the activity of all these people to have retained any appearance of being
revolutionary, capitalism would have had to have turned out to be conveniently incapable of
tolerating this economic reformism, despite the fact that it had no trouble tolerating the legalistic
political expressions of the same reformism. The social democrats’ scientific ideology confidently
affirmed that capitalism could not tolerate these economic antagonisms; but history repeatedly
proved them wrong.

97 Bernstein, the social democrat least attached to political ideology and most openly attached
to the methodology of bourgeois science, was honest enough to point out this contradiction (a
contradiction which had also been implied by the reformist movement of the English workers, who
never bothered to invoke any revolutionary ideology). But it was historical development itself
which ultimately provided the definitive demonstration. Although full of illusions in other regards,
Bernstein had denied that a crisis of capitalist production would miraculously force the hand of the
socialists, who wanted to inherit the revolution only by way of this orthodox sequence of events.
The profound social upheaval touched off by World War I, though it led to a widespread awakening
of radical consciousness, twice demonstrated that the social-democratic hierarchy had failed to
provide the German workers with a revolutionary education capable of turning them into theorists:
first, when the overwhelming majority of the party rallied to the imperialist war; then, following the
German defeat, when the party crushed the Spartakist revolutionaries. The ex-worker Ebert, who
had become one of the social-democratic leaders, apparently still believed in sin since he admitted
that he hated revolution “like sin.” And he proved himself a fitting precursor of the
socialist representation that was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat in Russia and
elsewhere, when he accurately summed up the essence of this new form of alienation: “Socialism
means working a lot.”

98 As a Marxist thinker, Lenin was simply a faithful and consistent Kautskyist who applied the
revolutionary ideology of “orthodox Marxism” within the conditions existing in Russia, conditions
which did not lend themselves to the reformist practice carried on elsewhere by the Second
International. In the Russian context, the Bolshevik practice of directing the proletariat from
outside by means of a disciplined underground party under the control of intellectuals who had
become “professional revolutionaries,” became a new profession — a profession which refused to
come to terms with any of the professional ruling strata of capitalist society (the Czarist political
regime was in any case incapable of offering any opportunities for such compromise, which
depends on an advanced stage of bourgeois power). As a result of this intransigence, the Bolsheviks
ended up becoming the sole practitioners of the profession of totalitarian social domination.

99 With the war and the collapse of international social democracy in the face of that war, the
authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks was able to spread its influence all over the
world. The bloody end of the democratic illusions of the workers movement transformed the entire
world into a Russia, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary breakthrough engendered
by this period of crisis, offered its hierarchical and ideological model to the proletariat of all
countries, urging them to adopt it in order to “speak Russian” to their own ruling classes. Lenin did
not reproach the Marxism of the Second International for being a revolutionary ideology, but for
cessing to be a revolutionary ideology.
The historical moment when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world marks the definitive inauguration of the state of affairs that is at the heart of the modern spectacle’s domination: the representation of the working class has become an enemy of the working class.

“In all previous revolutions,” wrote Rosa Luxemburg in Die Rote Fahne of 21 December 1918, “the combatants faced each other openly and directly — class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops protecting the old order are not fighting under the insignia of the ruling class, but under the banner of a social-democratic party. If the central question of revolution was posed openly and honestly — Capitalism or socialism? — the great mass of the proletariat would today have no doubts or hesitations.” Thus, a few days before its destruction, the radical current of the German proletariat discovered the secret of the new conditions engendered by the whole process that had gone before (a development to which the representation of the working class had greatly contributed): the spectacular organization of the ruling order’s defense, the social reign of appearances where no “central question” can any longer be posed “openly and honestly.” The revolutionary representation of the proletariat had at this stage become both the primary cause and the central result of the general falsification of society.

The organization of the proletariat in accordance with the Bolshevist model resulted from the backwardness of Russia and from the abandonment of revolutionary struggle by the workers movements of the advanced countries. These same backward conditions also tended to foster the counterrevolutionary aspects which that form of organization had unconsciously contained from its inception. The repeated failure of the mass of the European workers movement to take advantage of the golden opportunities of the 1918-1920 period (a failure which included the violent destruction of its own radical minority) favored the consolidation of the Bolshevist development and enabled that fraudulent outcome to present itself to the world as the only possible proletarian solution. By seizing a state monopoly as sole representative and defender of working-class power, the Bolshevik Party justified itself and became what it already was: the party of the owners of the proletariat, owners who essentially eliminated earlier forms of property.

For twenty years the various tendencies of Russian social democracy had engaged in an unresolved debate over all the conditions that might bear on the overthrow of Czarism — the weakness of the bourgeoisie; the preponderance of the peasant majority; and the potentially decisive role of a proletariat which was concentrated and combative but which constituted only a small part of the population. This debate was eventually resolved in practice by a factor that had not figured in any of the hypotheses: a revolutionary bureaucracy that placed itself at the head of the proletariat, seized state power, and proceeded to impose a new form of class domination. A strictly bourgeois revolution had been impossible; talk of a “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants” was meaningless verbiage; and the proletarian power of the Soviets could not simultaneously maintain itself against the class of small landowners, against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation which had become externalized and alienated in the form of a working-class party that maintained total control over the state, the economy, the means of expression, and soon even over people’s thoughts. Trotsky’s and Parvus’s theory of permanent revolution, which Lenin adopted in April 1917, was the only theory that proved true for countries with underdeveloped bourgeoisies; but even there it became true only after the unknown factor of bureaucratic class power came into the picture. In the numerous arguments within the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was the most consistent advocate of concentrating dictatorial power in the hands of this supreme ideological representation. Lenin was right every time in the sense that he invariably supported the solution implied by earlier choices of the minority that now exercised absolute power: the democracy that was kept from peasants by means as a para-state authority in the course of struggle may seek a stabilizing compromise by merging with a weak national bourgeoisie. Finally, in the former colonies of black Africa that remain openly tied to the American and European bourgeoisie, a local bourgeoisie constitutes itself (usually based on the power of traditional tribal chiefs) through its possession of the state. Foreign imperialism remains the real master of the economy of these countries, but at a certain stage its native agents are rewarded for their sale of local products by being granted possession of a local state — a state that is independent from the local masses but not from imperialism. Incapable of accumulating capital, this artificial bourgeoisie does nothing but squander the surplus value it extracts from local labor and the subsidies it receives from protector states and international monopolies. Because of the obvious inability of these bourgeois classes to fulfill the normal economic functions of a bourgeoisie, they soon find themselves challenged by oppositional movements based on the bureaucratic model (more or less adapted to particular local conditions). But if such bureaucracies succeed in their fundamental project of industrialization, they produce the historical conditions for their own defeat: by accumulating capital they also accumulate a proletariat, thus creating their own negation in countries where that negation had not previously existed.

In the course of this complex and terrible evolution which has brought the era of class struggles to a new set of conditions, the proletariat of the industrial countries has lost its ability to assert its own independent perspective. In a fundamental sense, it has also lost its illusions. But it has not lost its being. The proletariat has not been eliminated. It remains irreducibly present within the intensified alienation of modern capitalism. It consists of that vast majority of workers who have lost all power over their lives and who, once they become aware of this, redefine themselves as the proletariat, the force working to negate this society from within. This proletariat is being objectively reinforced by the virtual elimination of the peasantry and by the increasing degree to which the “service” sectors and intellectual professions are being subjected to factorylike working conditions. Subjectively, however, this proletariat is still far removed from any practical class consciousness, and this goes not only for white-collar workers but also for blue-collar workers, who have yet to become aware of any perspective beyond the impotence and mystifications of the old politics. But when this proletariat discovers that its own externalized power contributes to the constant reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer only in the form of its alienated labor but also in the form of the trade unions, political parties, and state powers that it created in its effort to liberate itself, it also discovers through concrete historical experience that it is the class that must totally oppose all rigidified externalizations and all specializations of power. It bears a revolution that cannot leave anything outside itself, a revolution embodying the permanent domination of the present over the past and a total critique of separation; and it must discover the appropriate forms of action to carry out this revolution. No quantitative amelioration of its impoverishment, no illusory participation in a hierarchized system, can provide a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, because the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong it has suffered, nor in the righting of any particular wrong. It cannot recognize itself even in the righting of many such wrongs, but only in the righting of the absolute wrong of being excluded from any real life.

New signs of negation are proliferating in the most economically advanced countries. Although these signs are misunderstood and falsified by the spectacle, they are sufficiently advanced proof that a new period has begun. We have already seen the failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism; now we are witnessing the failure of capitalist abundance. On one hand, anti-union struggles of Western workers are being repressed first of all by the unions; on the other, rebellious youth are raising new protests, protests which are still vague and confused but which clearly imply a rejection of art, of everyday life, and of the old specialized politics. These are two sides of a new spontaneous struggle that is at first taking on a criminal appearance. They foreshadow a second proletarian assault against class society. As the lost children of this as yet immobile army reappear on this
The only current partisans of the Leninist illusion are the various Trotskyist tendencies, which stubbornly persist in identifying the proletarian project with an ideologically based hierarchical organization despite all the historical experiences that have refuted that perspective. The distance that separates Trotskyism from a revolutionary critique of present-day society is related to the respectful distance the Trotskyists maintain regarding positions that were already mistaken when they were acted on in real struggles. Trotsky remained fundamentally loyal to the upper bureaucracy until 1927, while striving to gain control of it so as to make it a genuine Bolshevik foreign policy. (It is well known, for example, that in order to help conceal Lenin’s famous “Testament” he went so far as to slanderously disavow his own supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public.)

Trotsky was doomed by his basic perspective, because once the bureaucracy became aware that it had evolved into a counterrevolutionary class on the domestic front, it was bound to opt for a similarly counterrevolutionary role in other countries (though still, of course, in the name of revolution). Trotsky’s subsequent efforts to create a Fourth International reflect the same inconsistency. Once he had become an unconditional partisan of the Bolshevik form of organization (which he did during the second Russian revolution), he refused for the rest of his life to recognize that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class. When Lukács, in 1923, presented this same organizational form as the long-sought link between theory and practice, in which proletarians cease being mere “spectators” of the events that occur in their organization and begin consciously choosing and experiencing those events, he was describing as merits of the Bolshevik Party everything that that party was not. Despite his profound theoretical work, Lukács remained an ideologue, speaking in the name of the power that was most grossly alien to the proletarian movement, yet believing and giving his audience to believe that he found himself completely at home with it. As subsequent events demonstrated how that power disavows and suppresses its lackeys, Lukács’s endless self-repudiations revealed with caricatural clarity that he had identified with the total opposite of himself and of everything he had argued for in History and Class Consciousness. No one other than Lukács illustrates the validity of the fundamental rule for assessing all the intellectuals of this century: What they respect is a precise gauge of their own degradation. Yet Lenin had hardly encouraged these sorts of illusions about his activities. On the contrary, he acknowledged that “a political party cannot examine its members to see if there are contradictions between their philosophy and the party program.” The party whose idealized portrait Lukács had so inopportunely drawn was in reality suited for only one very specific and limited task: the seizure of state power.

Since the neo-Leninist illusion carried on by present-day Trotskyism is constantly being contradicted by the reality of modern capitalist societies (both bourgeois and bureaucratic), it is not surprising that it gets its most favorable reception in the nominally independent “underdeveloped” countries, where the local ruling classes’ versions of bureaucratic state socialism end up amounting to little more than a mere ideology of economic development. The hybrid composition of these ruling classes is more or less clearly related to their position within the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between those two poles of capitalist power, along with their numerous ideological compromises (notably with Islam) stemming from their heterogeneous social bases, end up removing from these degraded versions of ideological socialism everything serious except the police. One type of bureaucracy establishes itself by forging an organization capable of combining national struggle with agrarian peasant revolt; it then, as in China, tends to apply the Stalinist model of industrialization in societies that are even less developed than Russia was in 1917. A bureaucracy able to industrialize the nation may also develop out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened in Egypt. In other situations, such as the aftermath of the Algerian war of independence, a bureaucracy that has established itself of the state would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to denying it to Communist union leaders and to party members in general, and finally to the highest ranks of the party hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being crushed by arms and buried under a barrage of slander, Lenin attacked the radical bureaucrats who had formed a “Workers’ Opposition” faction with the following ultimatum, the logic of which Stalin would later extend to an absolute division of the world: “You can stand here with us, or against us out there with a gun in your hand, but not within some opposition. . . . We’ve had enough opposition.”

After Kronstadt, the bureaucracy consolidated its power as sole owner of a system of state capitalism — internally by means of a temporary alliance with the peasantry (the “New Economic Policy”) and externally by using the workers regimented into the bureaucratic parties of the Third International as a backup force for Russian diplomacy, sabotaging the entire revolutionary movement and supporting bourgeois governments whose support it in turn hoped to secure in the sphere of international politics (the Kuomintang regime in the China of 1925-27, the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, etc.). The Russian bureaucracy then carried this consolidation of power to the next stage by subjecting the peasantry to a reign of terror, implementing the most brutal primitive accumulation of capital in history. The industrialization of the Stalin era revealed the bureaucracy’s ultimate function: continuing the reign of the economy by preserving the essence of market society, commodified labor. It also demonstrated the independence of the economy: the economy has come to dominate society so completely that it has proved capable of recreating the class domination it needs for its own continued operation; that is, the bourgeoisie has created an independent power that is capable of maintaining itself even without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy was not “the last owning class in history” in Bruno Rizzi’s sense; it was merely a substitute ruling class for the commodity economy. A tottering capitalist property system was replaced by a cruder substitute ruling class. The hybrid composition of these ruling classes is more or less clearly related to their position within the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between those two poles of capitalist power, along with their numerous ideological compromises (notably with Islam) stemming from their heterogeneous social bases, end up removing from these degraded versions of ideological socialism everything serious except the police. One type of bureaucracy establishes itself by forging an organization capable of combining national struggle with agrarian peasant revolt; it then, as in China, tends to apply the Stalinist model of industrialization in societies that are even less developed than Russia was in 1917. A bureaucracy able to industrialize the nation may also develop out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened in Egypt. In other situations, such as the aftermath of the Algerian war of independence, a bureaucracy that has established itself of the state would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to denying it to Communist union leaders and to party members in general, and finally to the highest ranks of the party hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being crushed by arms and buried under a barrage of slander, Lenin attacked the radical bureaucrats who had formed a “Workers’ Opposition” faction with the following ultimatum, the logic of which Stalin would later extend to an absolute division of the world: “You can stand here with us, or against us out there with a gun in your hand, but not within some opposition. . . . We’ve had enough opposition.”

Leninism was the highest voluntaristic expression of revolutionary ideology; it was a coherence of the separate, governing a reality that resisted it. With the advent of Stalinism, revolutionary ideology returned to its fundamental incoherence. At that point, ideology was no longer a weapon, it had become an end in itself. But a lie that can no longer be challenged becomes insane. The totalitarian ideological pronouncement obliterates reality as well as purpose; nothing exists but what it says exists. Although this crude form of the spectacle has been confined to certain underdeveloped regions, it has nevertheless played an essential role in the spectacle’s global development. This particular materialization of ideology did not transform the world economically, as did advanced capitalism; it simply used police-state methods to transform people’s relations of production.

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The ruling totalitarian-ideological class is the ruler of a world turned upside down. The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. It is modest only on this one point, however, because this officially nonexistent bureaucracy simultaneously attributes the crowning achievements of history to its own infallible leadership. Though its existence is everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy must be invisible as a class. As a result, all social life becomes insane. The social organization of total falsehood stems from this fundamental contradiction.
Stalinism was also a reign of terror within the bureaucratic class. The terrorism on which this class’s power was based inevitably came to strike the class itself, because this class had no juridical legitimacy, no legally recognized status as an owning class which could be extended to each of its members. Its ownership had to be masked because it was based on false consciousness. This false consciousness can maintain its total power only by means of a total reign of terror in which all real motives are ultimately obscured. The members of the ruling bureaucratic class have the right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a fundamental lie: they have to play the role of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they have to be actors faithful to a script of ideological betrayal. Yet they cannot actually participate in this counterfeit entity unless their legitimacy is validated. No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to demonstrate that he was the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the bureaucracy’s official line is that there is no bureaucracy. Each bureaucrat is thus totally dependent on the central seal of legitimacy provided by the ruling ideology, which validates the collective participation in its “socialist regime” of all the bureaucrats it does not liquidate. Although the bureaucrats are collectively empowered to make all social decisions, the cohesion of their own class can be ensured only by the concentration of their terrorist power in a single person. In this person resides the only practical truth of the ruling lie: the power to determine an unchallengeable boundary line which is nevertheless constantly being adjusted. Stalin decides without appeal who is and who is not a member of the ruling bureaucracy — who should be considered a “proletarian in power” and who branded “a traitor in the pay of Wall Street and the Mikado.” The atomized bureaucrats can find their collective legitimacy only in the person of Stalin — the lord of the world who thus comes to see himself as the supreme being. “The lord of the world recognizes his own nature — omnipresent power — through the destructive violence he exerts against the contrasting powerlessness of his subjects.” He is the power that defines the terrain of domination, and he is also “the power that ravages that terrain.”

When ideology has become total through its possession of total power, and has changed from partial truth to totalitarian falsehood, historical thought has been so totally annihilated that history itself, even at the level of the most empirical knowledge, can no longer exist. Totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which whatever has previously happened is determined solely by its police. The project already envisioned by Napoleon of “monarchically controlling memory” has been realized in Stalinism’s constant rewriting of the past, which alters not only the interpretations of past events but even the events themselves. But the price paid for this liberation from all historical reality is the loss of the rational frame of reference that is indispensable to capitalism as a bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which whatever has previously happened is determined solely by its police. The project already envisioned by Napoleon of “monarchically controlling memory” has been realized in Stalinism’s constant rewriting of the past, which alters not only the interpretations of past events but even the events themselves. But the price paid for this liberation from all historical reality is the loss of the rational frame of reference that is indispensable to capitalism as a

The power that used to inspire terror now inspires ridicule, but this ridiculed power still defends itself with the threat of resorting to the terrorizing force it would like to be rid of. Thus, at the very time when the bureaucracy hopes to demonstrate its superiority on the terrain of capitalism it reveals itself to be a poor cousin of capitalism. Just as its actual history contradicts its façade of legality and its crudely maintained ignorance contradicts its scientific pretensions, so its attempt to vie with the bourgeoisie in the production of commodity abundance is stymied by the fact that such abundance contains its own implicit ideology, and is generally accompanied by the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular pseudoalternatives — a pseudofreedom that remains incompatible with the bureaucracy’s ideology.

The bureaucracy’s ideological title to power is already collapsing at the international level. The power that established itself nationally in the name of an ostensibly internationalist perspective is now forced to recognize that it can no longer impose its system of lies beyond its own national borders. The unequal economic development of diverse bureaucracies with competing interests that have succeeded in establishing their own “socialism” in more than one country has led to an all-out public confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie. From this point on, each bureaucracy in power will have to find its own way; and the same is true for each of the totalitarian parties aspiring to such power (notably those that still survive from the Stalinist period among certain national working classes). This international collapse has been further aggravated by the expressions of internal negation which first became visible to the outside world when the workers of East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats and demanded a “government of steel workers” — a negation which has in one case already gone to the point of sovereign workers councils in Hungary. But in the final analysis, this crumbling of the global alliance of pseudosocialist bureaucracies is also a most unfavorable development for the future of capitalist society. The bourgeoisie is in the process of losing the adversary that objectively supported it by providing an illusory unification of all opposition to the existing order. This division of labor between two mutually reinforcing forms of the spectacle
1. THE WHOLE LIFE OF THOSE SOCIETIES in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

2. Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.

3. The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated - and precisely for that reason this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.

4. The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.

5. The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm - a world view transformed into an objective force.

6. Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world - not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations - news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment - the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.

7. The phenomenon of separation is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other. Social practice, which the spectacle's autonomy challenges, is also the real totality to which the spectacle is subordinate. So deep is the rift in this totality, however, that the spectacle is able to emerge as its apparent goal. The language of the
spectacle is composed of signs of the dominant organization of production - signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization.

8. The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle's mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support. Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.

9. In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.

10. The concept of the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. Diversities and contrasts among such phenomena are the appearances of the spectacle - the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth. Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life - and as a negation of life that has invented a visual jorm jor itself.

11. In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree - to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation's agenda. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.

12. The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Evervthing that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.

13. The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.

14. The spectacular character of modern industrial society has nothing fortuitous or superficial about it; on the contrary, this society is
based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way. For the spectacle, as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all - although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself.

15. As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.

[. . .]

The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.
I THINK IT’S LIKE A BOOK ABOUT ARCHITECTURE OR ART OR SOMETHING.

SOCIETY OF THE SPEC-TACLE
ernwhile opponents. The fact is that a critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must *know how to bide its time*.

SELF-EMANCIPATION in our time is emancipation from the material bases of an inverted truth. This “historic mission to establish truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but — only and always — by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of a realized democracy — to councils in which practical theory exercises control over itself and surveys its own action. It cannot be carried out, in other words, until individuals are “directly bound to universal history”; until dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world.
Will you still know me, dearie, will you still know me?

Though published in 1967, The Society of the Spectacle was mostly written between 1963 and 1964. Translations of this book, which was published in Paris towards the end of 1967, have already appeared in about ten or so countries, and, more often than not, several have been produced in the same language by competing publishers, and nearly always they are bad. The first translations everywhere were unfaithful and incorrect, with the exception of Portugal and possibly Denmark. The translations published in Dutch and German are good in their second versions, even though the German publisher on this occasion neglected to correct a large number of mistakes in the printing. In English and Spanish the third editions had to be awaited in order to know what I had really written. There was nothing worse than the situation in Italy, however, where, as early as 1968, the publisher De Donato put out the most monstrous one of all, which has only been partially improved upon by the two rival translations that followed. Moreover, Paolo Salvadori, having gone to find those responsible for this excess in their offices, had hit them and had even literally spat in their faces, for such is naturally the way good translators act when they meet bad ones. It suffices to say that the fourth Italian translation, which is by Salvadori, is excellent.

This extreme deficiency of so many translations, which, with the exception of the four or five better ones, were not submitted to me [prior to publication], does not mean

1 IN CLINICAL PICTURES of schizophrenia, according to Gabel, “a degradation of the dialectic of the totality (of which dissociation is the extreme form) and a degradation in the dialectic of becoming (of which catatonia is the extreme form) seem to be intimately interwoven.” Imprisoned in a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle’s screen, the consciousness of the spectactor has only figmentary interlocutors which subject it to a one-way discourse on their commodities and the politics of those commodities. The sole mirror of this consciousness is the spectacle in all its breadth, where what is staged is a false way out of a generalized autism.

2 THE SPECTACLE ERASES the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed; it likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate. The recognition and consumption of commodities are at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible. The need to imitate that the consumer experiences is indeed a truly infantile need, one determined by every aspect of his fundamental dispossession. In terms used by Gabel to describe quite another level of pathology, “the abnormal need for representation here compensates for a torturing feeling of being at the margin of existence.”

220 WHEREAS THE LOGIC of false consciousness cannot accede to any genuine self-knowledge, the quest for the critical truth of the spectacle must also be a true critique. This quest calls for commitment to a practical struggle alongside the spectacle’s irremovable enemies, as well as a readiness to withhold commitment where those enemies are not active. By eagerly embracing the machinations of reformism or making common cause with pseudo-revolutionary dregs, those driven by the abstract wish for immediate efficacy obey only the laws of the dominant forms of thought, and adopt the exclusive viewpoint of actuality. In this way delusion is able to reemerge within the camp of its
“new potentiality of fraud” concentrated within it has its basis in that form of production whereby “with the mass of objects grows the mass of alien powers to which man is subjected.” This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. “The need for money is for that reason the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates” (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). The principle which Hegel enunciated in the Jenenser Realphilosophie as that of money — “the life, moving of itself, of that which is dead” — has now been extended by the spectacle to the entirety of social life.

216

In contrast to the project outlined in the Theses on Feuerbach — the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism — the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudo-concreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives of the world as representation, not as activity — and which in the last reckoning idealizes matter — has found fulfillment in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatically masters of social life. Correlatively, idealism’s imaginary activity likewise finds its fulfillment in the spectacle, this through the technical mediation of signs and signals — which in the last reckoning endow an abstract ideal with material form.

217

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia drawn by Joseph Gabel in his False Consciousness should be seen in the context of this economic process of materialization of ideology. What ideology already was, society has now become. A blocked practice and its corollary, an antdialectical false consciousness, are imposed at every moment on an everyday life in thrall to the spectacle — an everyday life that should be understood as the systematic organization of a breakdown in the faculty of encounter, and the replacement of that faculty by a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, or an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality. Here ideology is at home; here separation has built its world.

For Debord’s comments about food, especially meat, see his 1981 essay Hunger Reducer.

Yet this current practice of most publishers is ill-adapted in the case of The Society of the Spectacle, which interests
quite another public, for another use. Various kinds of books exist in a clearly more distinct way than before. Many are not even opened; few are copied on to walls. These latter derive their popularity and their power of conviction precisely from the fact that the despised representatives of the spectacle do not speak of them, or only mention them in passing a few commonplace remarks about them. Individuals who will have to stake their lives, beginning from a certain description of historical forces and their use, of course have the wish to examine the documents for themselves and in rigorously exact translations. Undoubtedly, in the current conditions of the overmultiplied production and the overconcentrated distribution of books, the vast majority of the titles are successful or, more often, unsuccessful for the first few weeks after their publication. The ungraded products of current-day publishing bases its policy of hasty arbitrariness and fait accompli on this, which is suitable enough for those books that will be spoken about, probably any old way and only once. This privilege is denied to it here, and it is altogether futile to translate my book in a slap–dash manner, since the task will always be started over again by others, and bad translations will be unceasingly supplanted by better ones.

A French journalist who had recently worded a thick volume, which was proclaimed appropriate for renewing the entire debate of ideas, attributed his failure a few months later to the fact that he lacked readers rather than ideas. He then declared that we are in a society where no one reads, and that if Marx were to publish Capital nowadays, he would appear one evening on a literary television programme, explaining his intentions, and the next day it would no longer be spoken about. This ludicrous error stinks of the milieu from which it originates. Obviously, if nowadays anyone were to publish a veritable book of social critique, they would absolutely abstain from appearing on television, and from other colloquies of the same kind as well, so that ten or even twenty years later it would still be spoken about.

As a matter of fact, I believe that there is nobody in the world capable of being interested in my book apart from those who are enemies of the existing social order and who

IDEOLOGY IS THE foundation of the thought of a class society within the conflictual course of history. Ideological entities have never been mere fictions — rather, they are a distorted consciousness of reality, and, as such, real factors retroactively producing real distorting effects; which is all the more reason why that materialization of ideology, in the form of the spectacle, which is precipitated by the concrete success of an autonomous economic system of production, results in the virtual identification with social reality itself of an ideology that manages to remold the whole of the real to its own specifications.

ONCE IDEOLOGY, which is the abstract will to universality and the illusion thereof, finds itself legitimated in modern society by universal abstraction and by the effective dictatorship of illusion, then it is no longer the voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but rather its triumph. The claims of ideology now take on a sort of flat, positivistic exactness: ideology is no longer a historical choice, but simply an assertion of the obvious. Names of particular ideologies have vanished. The portion of properly ideological labor serving the system may no longer be conceived of other than in terms of an “epistemological base” supposedly transcending all specific ideological phenomena. Ideology in material form is itself without a name, just as it is without a formulable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of ideologies, plural, is over.

IDEOLOGY, WHOSE WHOLE internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls “total ideology” — the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as the pseudo-knowledge of a frozen whole, as a totalitarian worldview — has now fulfilled itself in the immobilized spectacle of non-history. Its fulfillment is also its dissolution into society as a whole. Come the practical dissolution of that society itself, ideology — the last unreason standing in the way of historical life — must likewise disappear.

THE SPECTACLE IS the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. Materially, the spectacle is “the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man.” The
Ideology in Material Form

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or "recognized."

— Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind

Allusion to the title by Goya: "The sleep of reason engenders monsters."
Most often the commentators pretended not to understand to what usage a book can be destined if it will never be able to be classified into any of the categories of the intellectual productions that the dominant society wants to take into consideration, and if it was not written from the point of view of any of the specialized trades that it encourages. Thus, the intentions of the author seemed obscure. However, there is nothing mysterious about them. Clausewitz remarked in *The 1815 French Campaign*: “The essential of all strategic critique is to place oneself exactly at the standpoint of the actors; it is true that this is often quite difficult to do. The great majority of strategic critiques would disappear completely or would be reduced to very slight distinctions of comprehension if writers would or could place themselves, in thought, in all the circumstances in which the actors found themselves.”

In 1967 I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory. The SI was at this time the extremist group that had done the most to bring back revolutionary contestation to modern society; and it was easy to see that this group, having imposed its victory on the terrain of critical theory, and having skillfully followed through on the terrain of practical agitation, was then drawing near the culminating point of its historical action. So it was a question of such a book being present in the troubles that were soon to come and that would pass it on after them to the vast subversive sequel that these troubles could not fail to open up.

One knows of the strong tendency of men [sic] to uselessly repeat simplified fragments of the old revolutionary theories whose wear and tear remains hidden from them by the simple fact that they do not try to apply them in any effective struggle to transform the conditions in which they really find themselves; in this way, they scarcely understand any better how these theories have been able, with varying fortunes, to be brought into action in the conflicts of other days. In spite of this, there is no doubt for anyone who examines the question coldly that those who really want to shake an established society must formulate a theory that fundamentally explains it, or
by contrast, is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. Détournement founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.

**Whatever is explicitly presented as détournement** within formulated theory serves to deny any durable autonomous existence to the sphere of theory merely formulated. The fact that the violence of détournement itself mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order is a reminder that the existence of the theoretical domain is nothing in itself, that it can only come to self-knowledge in conjunction with historical action, and that it can only be truly faithful by virtue of history’s corrective judgment upon it.

**Only the real** negation of culture can inherit culture’s meaning. Such negation can no longer remain *cultural*. It is what remains, in some manner, at the level of culture — but it has a quite different sense.

**In the language** of contradiction, the critique of culture manifests itself as *unified*: unified in that it dominates the whole of culture — culture as knowledge as well as culture as poetry; unified, too, in that it is no longer separable from the critique of the social totality. It is this unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a unified social practice.

> “This leads one to understand that a theory, even a false one, that has the air of being sufficiently true to incite the revolt of the proletarians would already be a good thing. It is in this sense that one can say that subversion can turn to account, in an instant, someone who “has the air” of being a revolutionary like Vaneigem, but not like Perniola!” Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori dated 7 February 1979.

> “Evoking the phrase of Saint-Just: ‘The war for freedom must be fought with anger.’ Anger is not ‘rabbia’ [rage]: it is a little less violent; it is more justified.” Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori dated 7 February 1979.

> A remark attributed to Mosca de’ Lamberti (1215), meaning that a vendetta should be carried through to the end, which at least has the air of giving a satisfactory explanation of it. As soon as this theory has been divulged a little (even before it comes to be exactly understood) — provided that the work of dissemination is done in confrontations that disturb the public peace — the discontent felt everywhere will be heightened and made more bitter by the sole faint knowledge of the existence of a theoretical condemnation of the order of things. And after that, it is by beginning to conduct with anger the war for freedom that all proletarians can become strategists.

Undoubtedly, a general theory calculated for this end must first avoid appearing obviously false, and so must not expose itself to the risk of being contradicted later on by the outcome of events. But it must also be a completely unacceptable theory. To the indignant stupefaction of all those who find the very centre of the existing world to be good, it must be able to denounce the centre as bad, precisely because it has exposed the existing world’s exact nature. The theory of the spectacle meets these two requirements.

The foremost merit of an exact critical theory is to make all the others seem ridiculous instantaneously. So, in 1968 — while not one of the other organized currents (which, in the movement of negation in and through which the degeneration of the current forms of domination began, came to defend their own backwardness and their limited ambitions) had in their possession a book of modern theory, nor even recognized anything new in the class power that they wished to overthrow — situationists were capable of putting forward the sole theory of the redoubtable revolt of May [1968], and were the only ones who took account of the new blazing grievances that no one had uttered. Who weeps for the consensus? We have finished it off. *Cosa fatta capo ha*.

Fifteen years previously, in 1952, four or five scarcely recommendable people from Paris decided to search for the supersession of art. It appeared then, by a fortunate consequence of a daring advance on this path, that the old defense lines that had smashed the previous offenses
of the social revolution found themselves outflanked and overturned. The chance to launch another offensive was then discovered. This supersession of art is the “North West Passage” of the geography of real life that had so often been sought for more than a century, beginning especially with auto-destructive modern poetry. The previous attempts, where so many exploiters had got lost, had never directly emerged onto such a perspective. This is probably because there still remained something in the old artistic realm for them to ravage and, above all, because the flag of revolution seemed to be brandished previously by other, more expert hands. But moreover, never had this cause undergone such a complete rout, and never had the battlefield been left so empty, than at that moment when we came to array ourselves on it. I think that the recalling of these circumstances is the best elucidation that can be brought to bear on the ideas and the style of The Society of the Spectacle. If anyone wants to read this book, they will gather that I neither slept away nor squandered the 15 years that I spent meditating on the ruination of the State.

There is not a word to be changed in this book in which, apart from three or four typographic mistakes, nothing has been corrected in the course of the dozen or so reprints it has known in France. I flatter myself to be a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without immediately being contradicted by the event, and I do not mean contradicted a hundred or a thousand times like the others, but not once. I have no doubt that the confirmation all my theses encounter ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond. The reason for this is simple: I have understood the constituent factors of the spectacle “in the course of the movement and consequently by their ephemeral aspect,” that is to say, by envisaging the whole of the historical movement that has been able to edify this order, and which is now beginning to dissolve it. On this scale, the eleven years that have gone by since 1967, and whose conflicts I have been able to know fairly closely, have been but a moment in the necessary consequence of what had been written; although, in the spectacle itself, these years have been filled by the appearance and finished article from the instrument that shapes it.” Such a theoretical consciousness of dialectical movement, which must itself bear the stamp of that movement, is manifested by the reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the diversion (or détournement) of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts. Thus the reversed genitive, as an expression of historical revolutions distilled into a form of thought, came to be considered the hallmark of Hegel’s epigrammatic style. As a proponent of the replacement of subject by predicate, following Feuerbach’s systematic practice of it, the young Marx achieved the most cogent use of this insurrectional style: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy. The device of détournement restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths — or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies. Kierkegaard too made use of détournement, and offered his own pronouncement on the subject: “But how you twist and turn, so that, just as Saft always ended up in the pantry, you inevitably always manage to introduce some little word or phrase that is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections” (Philosophical Fragments). The defining characteristic of this use of détournement is the necessity for distance to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity. As Kierkegaard acknowledges in the same work, “One further remark I wish to make, however, with respect to your many animadversions, all pointing to my having introduced borrowed expressions in the course of my exposition. That such is the case I do not deny, nor will I now conceal from you that it was done purposely, and that in the next section of this piece, if I ever write such a section, it is my intention to call the whole by its right name, and to clothe the problem in its historical costume.”

IDEAS IMPROVE. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author’s phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas.

Détournement is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework. Détournement,
so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no idea could transcend the spectacle that exists — it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle. For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people setting a practical force in motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation within society; and this negation, which constitutes the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, cannot for its part achieve self-consciousness unless it develops the critique of the spectacle, a critique that embodies the theory of negation's real conditions — the practical conditions of present-day oppression — and that also, inversely, reveals the secret of negation's potential. Such a theory expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle — for, on the basis here defined, the very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot be conceived independently of a rigorous practice — we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole.

CRITICAL THEORY has to be communicated in its own language — the language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some "writing degree zero" — just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

EVEN THE STYLE of exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination to the canons of the prevailing language, and to sensibilities molded by those canons, because it includes in its positive use of existing concepts a simultaneous recognition of their rediscovered fluidity, of their inevitable destruction.

THIS STYLE, which embodies its own critique, must express the mastery of the critique in hand over all its predecessors. The mode of exposition of dialectical theory will thus itself exemplify the negative spirit it contains. The truth, says Hegel, is not "detached... like a replacement of six or seven generations of thinkers, each more definitive than the others. During this time, the spectacle has done nothing but meet more exactly its concept, and the real movement of its negation has done nothing but spread itself extensively and intensively.

In fact, it fell to spectacular society itself to add something of which this book, I think, had no need: heavier and more convincing proofs and examples. We have been able to see the falsification, like a sticky fog that accumulates at the ground level of everyday existence, thicken and descend down to the fabrication of the most trivial things. We have been able to see the technical and police control of men and of the natural forces aspire to the absolute, and even up to "telematic madness, while its mistakes are growing just as quickly as its means. We have been able to see the State lie develop in itself and for itself, having so well forgotten its conflictual link with truth and plausibility that it can forget and replace itself from hour to hour. Around the time of the kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro, Italy had the opportunity to contemplate this technique at the highest degree it has ever reached, and which, however, would soon be surpassed, here and elsewhere. The Italian authorities' version of this event, aggravated rather than ameliorated by a hundred successive alterations, and which all commentators made it their duty to acknowledge in public, was not credible for a single instant. Its intention was not to be believed, but to be the only one in the shop window, and, afterwards, to be forgotten exactly like a bad book.

The kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro was a mythological opera with great machinations, where terrorist heroes are, by turns, foxes so as to ensnare their prey, lions so as to fear nobody as long as they retain it, and stool-pigeons so as not to draw from this coup d'etat anything harmful to the regime they aspire to defy. We are told they [the Red Brigades] have the luck of having to deal with the most incapable of police, and that, besides, they were capable of infiltrating its highest spheres without hindrance. This explanation is hardly dialectical. A seditious organization that would put certain of its
members in contact with the security services of the State — unless it had them worm their way into it a number of years previously, in order for them to loyally undertake their task when a great opportunity arises for them to make use of — should expect that its manipulators would be in turn sometimes manipulated, and would be thus deprived of this Olympian assurance of impunity that characterizes the Chief of Staff of the “Red Brigade.” But the Italian State has something better to say, with the unanimous approval of those who support it. Like any other State, it has thought of infiltrating agents of its special services into the clandestine terrorist networks, where it is so easy for them to ensure for themselves a rapid career track up to leadership positions, from which they bring about the fall of their superiors — as did Malinowski, the man who deceived even the cunning Lenin on behalf of the Czarist Okhrana, and Avez, who, once at the head of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party’s “combat organization,” carried this mastery to the point of instigating the assassination of Stolypin, the Prime Minister. One single unfortunate coincidence came to interfere with the goodwill of the State: its special services had just been dissolved. Up to now, a secret service had never been dissolved like, for example, the lading of a giant oil tanker in some coastal waters, or a fraction of the modern industrial production in Seveso. While keeping its archives, its informers and its practicing officers, the secret service simply changed its name. It is thus that in Italy, the S.I.M. (Military Intelligence Service of the fascist regime, so well known for its sabotages and its assassinations abroad) became the S.I.D. (the Defense Intelligence Service) under the Christian-Democratic regime. Moreover, when a kind of robot-doctrine of the “Red Brigade” — a gloomy caricature of what one would be presumed to think and carry out if one were to advocate the disappearance of the State — had been programmed on a computer, a slip of which (how true it is that these machines depend on the unconscious of those who feed data into them!) has caused these same initials — S.I.M., as in the “International Society of Multinationals” — to be attributed to the only pseudo-concept that the “Red Brigade” repeats automatically. This S.I.D., “steeped in

THE CLAIM THAT a brief freeze in historical time is in fact a definitive stability — such is, both consciously and unconsciously expressed, the undoubted basis of the current tendency toward “structuralist” system building. The perspective adopted by the anti-historical thought of structuralism is that of the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never disappear. This fantasy of a preexisting unconscious structure’s hegemony over all social practice is illegitimately derived from linguistic and anthropological structural models — even from models of the functioning of capitalism — that are misapplied even in their original contexts; and the only reason why this has occurred is that an academic approach fit for complacent middle-range managers, a mode of thought completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system, crudely reduces all reality to the existence of that system.

IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND structuralist categories, it should always be borne in mind, as in the case of any historical social science, that categories express not only the forms but also the conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge a man’s value according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge — or admire — this specific society by taking the discourse it addresses to itself as necessarily true. “One cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life.” Structures are the progeny of the power that is in place. Structuralism is a thought underwritten by the State, a thought that conceives of the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its fashion of studying the code of messages in itself is merely the product, and the acknowledgment, of a society where communication has the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Thus it is not structuralism that serves to prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; but, on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its massive reality, that validates the chill dream of structuralism.

WITHOUT A DOUBT, the critical concept of the spectacle is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything in the abstract —
never arrives at a concept of the spectacle because he mistakenly feels able to treat private life, like something he calls an “honest product,” as quite independent of what he sees as a disastrous distortion or “exaggeration.” What he fails to grasp is that the commodity form itself lays down laws whose “honest” application gives rise not only to private life as a distinct reality but also to that reality’s subsequent conquest by the social consumption of images.

BOORSTIN TREATS the excesses of a world that has become alien to us as excesses alien to our world. The “normal” basis of social life to which he refers implicitly when he describes the superficial reign of images, in terms of psychological and moral judgments, as the product of “our ever more extravagant expectations,” has no reality at all, however, either in his book or in the historical period in which he lives. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past — even in a past of religious passivity — he has no way of comprehending the true depth of society’s dependence on images. The truth of that society is nothing less than its negation.

A SOCIOLOGY THAT believes it possible to isolate an industrial rationality, functioning on its own, from social life as a whole, is liable likewise to view the technology of reproduction and communication as independent of overall industrial development. Thus Boorstin accounts for the situation he portrays in terms of an unfortunate and quasi-serendipitous coming together of too vast a technology of image-diffusion on the one hand, and, on the other, too great an appetite for sensationalism on the part of today’s public. The spectacle, in this view, would have to be attributed to man’s “spectatorial” inclinations. Boorstin cannot see that the proliferation of prefabricated “pseudo-events” — which he deplors — flows from the simple fact that, in face of the massive realities of present-day social existence, individuals do not actually experience events. Because history itself is the specter haunting modern society, pseudo-history has to be fabricated at every level of the consumption of life; otherwise, the equilibrium of the frozen time that presently holds sway could not be preserved.

11 “Allusion to Machiavelli, who actually said, ‘He who founds a tyranny and does not kill Brutus, or he who founds a republic and does not kill Brutus along with his sons, will not maintain his rule for long.’” Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori dated 7 February 1979.


13 Italian blood,” had to be dissolved recently because, as the State acknowledges post festum, it was the organization that since 1969 had carried out directly, most often but not always with bombs, this long series of massacres that were imputed (according to the time of year) to anarchists, neo-fascists or situationists. Now that the “Red Brigade” does exactly this same work, and, for once, with a distinctly superior operational value, the S.I.D. cannot combat it, since it has been dissolved. In any secret service worthy of the name, even its dissolution would be secret. Hence one cannot distinguish what proportion of units in the S.I.D. was permitted an honorable retirement, what other proportion was assigned to the “Red Brigade” or perhaps lent to the Shah of Iran to burn down a cinema in Abadan, and what other proportion was discreetly exterminated by a State probably indignant to learn that sometimes its instructions have been exceeded, a State one knows that will never hesitate to kill the sons of Brutus11 in order to make its laws respected, since its intransigent refusal to envisage even the most minimal concession to save Moro has proved at last that it had all the staunch virtues of republican Rome.

Giorgio Bocca — who is considered the best analyst of the Italian press, and who was in 1975 the first dupe of Censor’s Veritable Report12, immediately dragging along with him the entire nation, or at least the qualified strata that writes in newspapers — has not been discouraged from the profession by this awkward demonstration of his foolishness. And maybe it’s a blessing for him that it was then proved by such scientific experimentation, because, if not, one could have been fully assured that it was either out of venality or fear that in May 1978 he wrote his book Moro, Una tragedia italiana, in which he hastens to swallow, without missing one, the mystifications in circulation, and spews them up again on the spot, declaring that they are excellent. For one single moment he is brought to recall the center of the question, but of course upside-down, when he writes that:

Today things have changed; with the red terror behind them, the extremist working
class fringes can oppose, or attempt to oppose, trade union politics. Anyone who was at an assembly of workers in a factory like Alfa Romeo of Arese could have seen that the group of extremists, which comprises no more than a hundred individuals, is nevertheless capable of placing itself in the front row and of shouting accusations and insults that the Communist Party must bear.

Nothing is more normal than for revolutionary workers to insult Stalinists, thus gaining the support of nearly all their comrades, since they want to make a revolution. Do they not know, having been taught by their long experience, that the preliminary step is to expel Stalinists from meetings? Not being able to do this is why the revolution failed in 1968 in France and in 1975 in Portugal. What is senseless and odious is to pretend that these “extremist working class fringes” can reach this necessary stage because they have terrorists “behind them.” Quite to the contrary, it is because a large number of Italian workers have escaped being enrolled by the Stalinist trade union police that the “Red Brigade,” whose illogical and blind terrorism could only embarrass them, was set in motion, and that the mass media seized the opportunity to recognize in the “brigade” their advanced detachment of troops and their disquieting leaders beyond the shadow of a doubt. Bocca insinuates that Stalinists are compelled to put up with the insults that they have so richly deserved everywhere for the past sixty years, because if they did not, they would be physically threatened by terrorists that working class autonomy would hold in reserve. This is nothing but a particularly foul boccasserie, since everybody knows that at that time and long afterwards, the “Red Brigade” took great care not to attack Stalinists personally. Although they want to give this appearance, it is not according to chance that the “Red Brigade” chooses its periods of activity, nor out of its own inclinations, its victims. In such a climate as this, we inevitably note the broadening of a peripheral layer of sincere small-time terrorism that is more or less watched over and temporarily tolerated, like a fish preserve threatened by terrorists that working class autonomy would hold in reserve.

A NEW DIVISION of tasks occurs within the specialized thought of the spectacular system in response to the new problems presented by the perfecting of this system itself: in the first place modern sociology undertakes a spectacular critique of the spectacle, studying separation with the sole aid of separation’s own conceptual and material tools; meanwhile, from within the various disciplines in which structuralism has taken root, an apologetics of the spectacle is disseminated as the thought of non-thought, as an authorized amnesia with respect to historical practice. As forms of enslaved thought, however, there is nothing to choose between the fake despair of a nondialectical critique on the one hand and the fake optimism of a plain and simple boosting of the system on the other.

THERE IS A SCHOOL of sociology, originating in the United States, which has begun to raise questions about the conditions of existence created by modern social development. But while this approach has been able to gather much empirical data, it is quite unable to grasp the true nature of its chosen object, because it cannot recognize the critique immanent to that object. The sincerely reformist orientation of this sociology has no criteria aside from morality, common sense and other such yardsticks — all utterly inadequate for dealing with the matter at hand. Because it is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, this mode of criticism is obliged to concentrate on describing a sort of surplus negativity that it views as a regrettable irritation, or an irrational parasitic infestation, affecting the surface of that world. An outraged goodwill of this kind, which even on its own terms can do nothing except put all the blame on the system’s external consequences, can see itself as critical only by ignoring the essentially apologetic character of its assumptions and method.

PEOPLE WHO DENOUNCE incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic abundance do not understand the purpose of waste. It is distinctly ungrateful of them to condemn, in the name of economic rationality, those faithful (albeit irrational) guardians without whom the power of that same economic rationality would collapse. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book The Image describes the spectacular consumption of commodities in America,
to reconstruct a complex neo-artistic environment out of flotsam and jetsam; a good example of this is urbanism’s striving to incorporate old scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technological forms. All of which shows how a general project of advanced capitalism is translated onto the plane of spectacular pseudo-culture — that project being the remolding of the fragmented worker into “a personality well integrated into the group” (cf. recent American sociology — Riesman, Whyte, et al.). Wherever one looks, one encounters this same intent: to restructure society without community.

A CULTURE NOW wholly commodity was bound to become the star commodity of the society of the spectacle. Clark Kerr, an ideologue at the cutting edge of this trend, reckons that the whole complex system of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge is already equivalent to 29 percent of the annual gross national product of the United States, and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will become the driving force of the American economy, so assuming the role of the automobile industry in the first half, or that of the railroads in the late nineteenth century.

THE TASK OF the complex of claims still evolving as spectacular thought is to justify a society with no justification, and ultimately to establish itself as a general science of false consciousness. This thought is entirely determined by the fact that it cannot and does not wish to apprehend its own material foundation in the spectacular system.

THE OFFICIAL THOUGHT of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized subcommunication that it has to defend. It does not see that conflict is at the root of every feature of its universe. Spectacular power, which is absolute within the unchallengable internal logic of the spectacle’s language, corrupts its specialists absolutely. They are corrupted by their experience of contempt, and by the success of that contempt, for the contempt they feel is confirmed by their acquaintanceship with that genuinely contemptible individual — the spectator.

in which some culprits can always be hauled out in order to be displayed on a platter, but the “striking force” of the central interventions could only have been comprised of professionals, which corroborates every detail of their style.

Italian capitalism, and its governmental personnel along with it, is very divided on the really vital and eminently uncertain question of the utilization of Stalinists. Certain modern sectors of big private capital are, or have been, resolutely in favor of utilizing Stalinists; other sectors, which many managers of semi-statist entrepreneurial capital support, are more hostile. High State personnel enjoy a wide autonomy of maneuver, because the decisions of the captain override those of the ship-owner when the boat is sinking. But these personnel are themselves divided on this question. The future of each clan depends on the way in which they will know how to impose their reasons, by proving them in practice. Moro believed in the “historic compromise,” that is to say, in the capacity of the Stalinists to finally smash the movement of revolutionary workers. Another tendency, which is for the moment in the position of giving orders to the “Red Brigade” supervisors, did not believe in it, or at least believed that the Stalinists — for the feeble services they could render, and which they will render anyway — are not to be handled exaggeratedly with kid gloves, and that they must be given the stick more harshly, so that they do not become too insolent. It has been seen that this analysis was not without its worth: given that Moro was kidnapped as an inaugural affront to the “historic compromise” that was finally legalized by act of Parliament, the Stalinist party has continued to make a show of believing in the independence of the “Red Brigade.” The prisoner [Moro] was kept alive as long as it was thought possible to prolong the humiliation and embarrassment of friends, who were to suffer the blackmail by nobly feigning not to understand what the unknown barbarians expected of them. For all that, this was brought to a close as soon as the Stalinists bared their teeth, alluding publicly to obscure maneuvers, and Moro died deceived. In fact, the “Red Brigade” has another function of a more general interest, which is to disconcert or discredit proletarians
who really rise up against the State, and maybe one day to eliminate some of the most dangerous of them. The Stalinists approve of this function because it helps them in their heavy task. They limit the excesses of the side that proves injurious to them with veiled insinuations in public at crucial moments, and by precise and howled threats in their constant and intimate negotiations with State power. Their weapon of dissuasion\(^{13}\), is that they could, all of a sudden, tell everything they know about the “Red Brigade” from the beginning\(^{14}\). But no one is ignorant of the facts that they cannot use this weapon without smashing the “historic compromise” and that they thus sincerely wish to be able to remain as discreet about this matter as about the exploits of the rightly so-called S.I.D. in its time. What would become of the Stalinists in a revolution? So they get jostled a bit, but not too much. Ten months after Moro’s kidnapping, when the same invincible “Red Brigade” — for the first time — laid low a Stalinist trade unionist, the so-called Communist Party reacted immediately, but only on the terrain of protocol, namely, by threatening its allies in order to compel them to designate it henceforth as a party that is certainly always loyal and constructive, but which will soon be on the side of the majority, and no longer a side in the majority.

The keg always smells of herring, and a Stalinist will always be in his [sic] element wherever one detects the stink of occult state crime\(^{15}\). Why should the Stalinists be so vexed by the atmosphere of the discussions at the top of the Italian State, when they have a knife up their sleeves and a bomb under the table? Was it not in the same style that the disputes were settled between, for example, Khrushchev and Beria, Kadar and Nagy, Mao and Lin Piao? Besides, the leaders of Italian Stalinism were themselves butchers in their youth, at the time of the first “historic compromise,” when they — at the service of the democratic republic of Spain and with the other employees of the “Komintern” — undertook the counter-revolution of 1937. It was then that their own “Red Brigades” kidnapped Andres Nin and killed him in a clandestine prison.

Of these sad facts many Italians have been aware, and its demands, the further from its grasp is true self-realization. This is an art that is necessarily avant-garde; and it is an art that is not. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

**THE TWO CURRENTS** that marked the end of modern art were dadaism and surrealism. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they paralleled the proletarian revolutionary movement’s last great offensive; and the halting of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried, was the fundamental cause of their own immobilization. Historically, dadaism and surrealism are at once bound up with one another and at odds with one another. This antagonism, involvement in which constituted for each of these movements the most consistent and radical aspect of its contribution, also attested to the internal deficiency in each’s critique — namely, in both cases, a fatal one-sidedness. For dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since worked out by the situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.

**SPECTACULAR CONSUMPTION** preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle’s cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality — the communication of the incommunicable. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed. The spectacle, whose function it is to bury history in culture, presses the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense. Thus a school of neo-literature baldly admitting that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something truly new. Meanwhile, beyond the undamaged claim that the dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own, one encounters the most modern tendency of spectacular culture — and the one most closely bound up with the repressive practice of the general social organization — seeking by means of a “global approach”
and that center was *passage*, inscribed as a vulnerable equilibrium on an overall dynamic disorder. The sometimes excessive importance taken on in modern discussions of aesthetics by the concept of the baroque reflects a growing awareness of the impossibility of classicism in art: for three centuries all efforts to create a normative classicism or neoclassicism have never been more than brief, artificial projects giving voice to the official discourse of the State — whether the State of the absolute monarchy or that of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas. What eventually followed the baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, renewed its assault time after time until the fragmentation and destruction of the artistic sphere were complete. The disappearance of a historical art, which was tied to the internal communications of an elite whose semi-independent social basis lay in the relatively playful conditions still directly experienced by the last aristocracies, also testified to the fact that capitalism had thrown up the first class power self-admittedly bereft of any ontological quality; a power whose foundation in the mere running of the economy bespoke the loss of all human *mastery*. The baroque ensemble, a unity itself long lost to the world of artistic creation, recurs in a certain sense in today’s consumption of the entirety of the art of the past. The historical knowledge and recognition of all past art, along with its retrospective promotion to the rank of world art, serve to relativize it within the context of a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice at a higher level, an edifice into which even the production of a baroque art, and all its possible revivals, is bound to be melded. The very fact that such “recollections” of the history of art should have become possible amounts to the end of the world of art. Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted — and accepted as *equal in value* — for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication in *general*, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate.

**ART IN THE PERIOD** of its dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose means: ‘One always retains something of one’s origins.’ Find the Italian equivalent, but it is necessary that it is slight pejorative and vulgar. In French, ‘*le hereng*’ also connotes the ‘procurer,’ the pimp. A beautiful image for a Stalinist!” Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori dated 7 February 1979.

many more straight away took them into account. But they have never been published anywhere, because the latter have been deprived of the means of doing it and the former of the wish to do so. But it is at this stage of the analysis that one is well-founded in calling to mind a “spectacular” politics of terrorism, and not the “fact,” repeated vulgarly with subaltern finesses by so many journalists and professors, that terrorists are sometimes prompted by the desire to make themselves spoken about. Italy sums up the social contradictions of the entire world and attempts, in ways well known to us, to amalgamate in one country the repressive Holy Alliance between class power — bourgeois and bureaucratic-totalitarian — that already openly functions over the surface of the entire earth, in the economic and police solidarity of all States, although, in this too, not without some discussions and settling of accounts in the Italian manner. Being for the moment the most advanced country in the slide towards proletarian revolution, Italy is also the most modern laboratory for international counter-revolution. The other governments born of the old pre-spectacular bourgeois democracy look with admiration at the Italian State for the impassiveness that it manages to maintain, thought it is at the center of all degradations, and for the tranquil dignity with which it wallows in the mud. These are lessons that they will have to apply in their respective home countries for a long time to come.

In fact, governments and the numerous subordinate powers that second them tend to become more modest everywhere. They already content themselves with making their funambolic and terrified management of a process that becomes unceasingly stranger and that they despair of mastering look like a peaceful and routine disposal of current affairs. And like them, on the wind of time, the spectacular commodity has been brought to an astonishing reversal of its type of lying justifications. It used to present as extraordinary — as the key to a superior and perhaps even elitist existence — goods that are quite normal and commonplace: a car, some shoes, a PhD in sociology. Today, the spectacle is compelled to present as normal
and familiar things that have become quite extraordinary. Is this bread? wine? a tomato? an egg? a house? a town? The answer to all these questions in “surely not,” since a sequence of internal transformations — economically useful in the short-term to those who control the means of production — has managed to retain the name and a good part of the appearance of these things, and yet has withheld the taste and the content from them. However, one is assured that the various consumable goods indisputably answer to their traditional names, and the fact that nothing else exists is offered as proof, and thus there is no longer any possible comparison. In the same way that very few people know where to find the genuine in the places where they still exist, the false can legally replace the name of the true, which has meanwhile died out. And the same principle that governs food and people’s habitats reaches everywhere, to books and to the latest appearance of democratic debate that the spectacle wants shown.

The essential contradiction of spectacular domination in crisis is that it has failed on its strongest point — certain paltry material satisfactions that excluded many other satisfactions, but which were presumed to be sufficient to procure the continued adhesion of the masses of producers/consumers. And it is exactly this material satisfaction that spectacular domination has polluted and ceased to supply. The society of the spectacle began everywhere in coercion, deceit and blood, but it promised a happy path. It believed itself to be loved. Now it no longer says “What appears is good; what is good appears”; now it says simple “It is so.” The society of the spectacle admits frankly that it is no longer essentially reformable, though change is its very nature (the transmutation of everything for the worst). It has lost all its general illusions about itself.

All the experts of power and all their computers are convened in permanent, multi-disciplinary consultations, if not in order to find the means to cure a sick society, then at least in order to retain the appearance of survival for as long as it will be able to do so, and even beyond the state of coma, as did Franco and modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art’s declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art.

The fact that the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art’s decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses positively. What it expresses negatively is that a new common language has yet to be found — not, this time, in the form of unilaterally arrived-at conclusions like those which, from the viewpoint of historical art, always came on the scene too late, speaking to others of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable — but rather in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it. The point is to take effective possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely represented.

When a newly independent art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art’s brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.

The historical time that invaded art in fact found its first expression in the artistic sphere, beginning with the baroque. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its center with the demise of the last mythic order recognized by the Middle Ages, an order founded, both cosically and from the point of view of earthly government, on the unity between Christianity and the ghost of an Empire. An art of change was obliged to embody the principle of the ephemeral that it recognized in the world. In the words of Eugenio d’Ors, it chose “life as opposed to eternity.” Theater and festival, or theatrical festival — these were the essential moments of the baroque, moments wherein all specific artistic expression derived its meaning from its reference to the décor of a constructed space, to a construction that had to constitute its own unifying center;
within its own domain. The lack of rationality in a separated culture is what dooms it to disappear, for that culture itself embodies a call for the victory of the rational.

183

CULTURE ISSUED from a history that had dissolved the way of life of the old world, yet culture as a separate sphere is as yet no more than an intelligence and a sensory communication which, in a partially historical society, must themselves remain partial. Culture is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

184

THE END OF THE HISTORY of culture manifests itself under two antagonistic aspects: the project of culture's self-transcendence as part of total history, and its management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency has cast its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defense of class power.

185

EACH OF THE TWO aspects of the end of culture has a unitary existence, as much in all spheres of knowledge as in all spheres of sensory representation — that is, in all spheres of what was formerly understood as art in the most general sense. The first aspect enshrines an opposition between, on the one hand, the accumulation of a fragmentary knowledge which becomes useless in that any endorsement of existing conditions must eventually entail a rejection of that knowledge itself, and, on the other hand, the theory of practice, which alone has access, not only to the truth of all the knowledge in question, but also to the secret of its use. The second aspect enshrines an opposition between the critical self-destruction of society’s old common language and its artificial reconstruction, within the commodity spectacle, as the illusory representation of non-life.

186

ONCE SOCIETY HAS LOST the community that myth was formerly able to ensure, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a truly common language until such time as the divided character of an inactive community is superseded by the inauguration of a real historical community. As soon as art — which constituted that former common language of social inaction — establishes itself as independent in the Boumediene.

16 “And life is not death / And death is not life / The song has already ended.”

17 Karl Marx, Preface to the first edition of Capital. “It has been counted and counted, weighed and divided” (Book of Daniel, V, 8).

18 Anyone who will read this book attentively will see that it gives no kind of assurances about the victory of the revolution or the duration of its operations or the rough roads it will have to travel, and still less about its capacity — sometimes rashly boasted of — to bring perfect happiness to everyone. Less than any other, my conception which is historical and strategic — can only hold that life should be a trouble-free and evil-free idyll, for the sole reason that it would be pleasant for us, and that the evil doings of a few owners and leaders alone create the unhappiness of the masses. Each person is the offspring of their works; as passivity makes it bed, so it shall lie in it. The most significant result of the catastrophic decomposition of class society is that, for the first time in history, the old problem of knowing if men [sic] as a whole really love freedom finds itself superseded, because now they are going to be compelled to love it.

It is fair to recognize the difficulty and the immensity of the tasks of the revolution that wants to create and maintain a classless society. It can begin easily enough wherever autonomous proletarian assemblies, not recognizing any authority outside themselves or the property of anyone whatsoever, placing their will above all laws and specializations, abolish the separation of individual, the commodity economy and the State. But it will only triumph by imposing itself universally, without leaving a patch of territory to any form of alienated society that still exists. There we will see again an Athens or a Florence that reaches to all the corners of the world, a city from which no one will be rejected and which, having brought down all of its enemies, will at last be able to surrender itself joyously to the true divisions and never-ending confrontations of historical life.

Who can still believe in some less radically realistic issue? Under each result and under each project of an unfortunate and ridiculous present, we see inscribed the
Mene, Tekel, Upharsin that announces the inevitable fall of all cities of illusion. The days of this society are numbered; its reasons and its merits have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting; its inhabitants are divided into two sides, one of which wants this society to disappear.

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge, and of representations of lived experience, within a historical society divided into classes; what this amounts to is that culture is the power to generalize, existing apart, as an intellectual division of labor and as the intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society, according to Hegel, “when the power to unify disappeared from the life of man, and opposites lost their connection and living interaction, and became autonomous” (“The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling”). In thus gaining its independence, culture was embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that was at the same time the beginning of the decline of its independence. The history that brought culture’s relative autonomy into being, along with ideological illusions concerning that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And the whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of culture’s insufficiency, as a march toward culture’s self-abolition. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In the course of this search, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

The struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, is predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation. Cultural innovation is impelled solely, however, by that total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends toward the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions — and hence toward the suppression of all separations.

The sudden expansion of society’s knowledge, including — as the heart of culture — an understanding of history, brought about the irreversible self-knowledge that found expression in the abolition of God. This “prerequisite of every critique,” however, was also the first task of a critique without end. In a situation where there are no longer any tenable rules of action, culture’s every result propels it toward its own dissolution. Just like philosophy the moment it achieved its full independence, every discipline, once it becomes autonomous, is bound to collapse — in the first place as an attempt to offer a coherent account of the social totality, and eventually even as a partial methodology viable
Do you seriously think we shall live long enough to see a political revolution? — we, the contemporaries of these Germans? My friend, you believe what you want to believe…. Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history — and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever papers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy.…. 

— Ruge to Marx, March 1843
action and becoming a creative historical force are equally characteristic of these modern producers, for whom the movement of a world of their own making is every bit as inaccessible as were the natural rhythms of work for an earlier agrarian society. The traditional peasantry was the unshakeable basis of “Oriental despotism,” and its very scatteredness called forth bureaucratic centralization; the new peasantry that has emerged as the product of the growth of modern state bureaucracy differs from the old in that its apathy has had to be historically manufactured and maintained: natural ignorance has given way to the organized spectacle of error. The “new towns” of the technological pseudo-peasantry are the clearest of indications, inscribed on the land, of the break with historical time on which they are founded; their motto might well be: “On this spot nothing will ever happen — and nothing ever has.” Quite obviously, it is precisely because the liberation of history, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred, that the forces of historical absence have set about designing their own exclusive landscape there.

The same history that threatens this twilight world is capable of subjecting space to a directly experienced time. The proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic journey will be restored to us, along with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.

The most revolutionary idea concerning city planning derives neither from urbanism, nor from technology, nor from aesthetics. I refer to the decision to reconstruct the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of established workers’ councils — the needs, in other words, of the anti-State dictatorship of the proletariat, the needs of dialogue invested with executive power. The power of workers’ councils can be effective only if it transforms the totality of existing conditions, and it cannot assign itself any lesser a task if it aspires to be recognized — and to recognize itself — in a world of its own design.
**THE HISTORY OF** the economy, whose development has turned entirely on the opposition between town and country, has progressed so far that it has now succeeded in abolishing both of these poles. The present *paralysis* of overall historical development, due to the exclusive pursuit of the economy’s independent goals, means that the moment when town and country begin to disappear, so far from marking the transcendence of the split between them, marks instead their simultaneous collapse. The reciprocal erosion of town and country that has resulted from the faltering of the historical movement by whose means existing urban reality should have been superseded is clearly reflected in the bits and pieces of both that are strewn across the most advanced portions of the industrialized world.

**UNIVERSAL HISTORY WAS BORN** in cities, and attained its majority with the town’s decisive victory over the country. Marx considered that one of the bourgeoisie’s great merits as a revolutionary class was the fact that it “subjected the country to the rule of the towns” — whose very air made one free. But while the history of cities is certainly a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny, of State administration controlling not only the country but also the city itself. The towns may have supplied the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom, but up to now they have not taken possession of that freedom. The city is the *locus of history* because it embodies at once a concentration of social power, which is what makes the historical enterprise possible, and a consciousness of the past. The present urge to destroy cities is thus merely another index of the belatedness of the economy’s subordination to historical consciousness, the tardiness of a unification that will enable society to recapture its alienated powers.

**THE COUNTRY DEMONSTRATES** just the opposite fact — “isolation and separation” (*The German Ideology*). As it destroys the cities, urbanism institutes a *pseudo-countryside* devoid not only of the natural relationships of the country of former times but also of the direct (and directly contested) relationships of the historical cities. The forms of habitation and the spectacular control of today’s “planned environment” have created a new, artificial peasantry. The geographic dispersal and narrow-mindedness that always prevented the peasantry from undertaking independent

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**contents**

1. The Culmination of Separation 24
2. The Commodity as Spectacle 34
3. Unity and Division Within Appearances 42
4. The Proletariat as Subject and Representation 52
5. Time and History 82
6. Spectacular Time 94
7. Environmental Planning 102
8. Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere 108
9. Ideology in Material Form 122
But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

— Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of The Essence of Christianity

In all previous periods, architectural innovation served the ruling class exclusively; now for the first time there is such a thing as a new architecture specifically for the poor. Both formal poverty and the immense extension of this new experience in housing are the result of its mass character, dictated at once by its ultimate ends and by the modern conditions of construction. At the core of these conditions we naturally find an authoritarian decision-making process that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction. The same architecture appears everywhere just as soon as industrialization begins, even in the countries that are the furthest behind in this regard, for even these are considered a fertile terrain for the implantation of the new type of social existence. The threshold crossed in the growth of society’s material power, and the corresponding lag in the conscious appropriation of this power, are just as clearly manifested in urbanism as they are, say, in the spheres of nuclear weapons or of the management of births (where the possibility of manipulated heredity is already on the horizon).

We already live in the era of the self-destruction of the urban environment. The explosion of cities into the countryside, covering it with what Mumford calls “formless masses” of urban debris, is presided over in unmediated fashion by the requirements of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile, the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance, has left its mark on the landscape in the dominance of freeways that bypass the old urban centers and promote an ever greater dispersal. Meanwhile, instants of incomplete reorganization of the urban fabric briefly crystallize around the “distribution factories” — giant shopping centers created ex nihilo and surrounded by acres of parking space; but even these temples of frenetic consumption are subject to the irresistible centrifugal trend, and when, as partial reconstructions of the city, they in turn become overtaxed secondary centers, they are likewise cast aside. The technical organization of consumption is thus merely the herald of that general process of dissolution which brings the city to the point where it consumes itself.
THE REQUIREMENT OF capitalism that is met by urbanism in the form of a freezing of life might be described, in Hegelian terms, as an absolute predominance of “tranquil side-by-sideness” in space over “restless becoming in the progression of time.”

IT IS TRUE THAT all the capitalist economy’s technical forces should be understood as effecting separations, but in the case of urbanism we are dealing with the fitting out of the general basis of those forces, with the readying of the ground in preparation for their deployment — in a word, with the technology of separation itself.

URBANISM IS THE MODERN way of tackling the ongoing need to safeguard class power by ensuring the atomization of workers dangerously massed together by the conditions of urban production. The unremitting struggle that has had to be waged against the possibility of workers coming together in whatever manner has found a perfect field of action in urbanism. The effort of all established powers, since the experience of the French Revolution, to augment their means of keeping order in the street has eventually culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Evoking a “civilization . . . moving along a one-way road,” Lewis Mumford, in The City in History, points out that with the advent of long-distance mass communications, the isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control. But the general trend toward isolation, which is the essential reality of urbanism, must also embody a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. Such an integration into the system must recapture isolated individuals as individuals isolated together. Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps and housing developments — all are expressly oriented to the goals of a pseudo-community of this kind. These imperatives pursue the isolated individual right into the family cell, where the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle’s message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images — images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation.

THE WHOLE LIFE of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

IMAGES DETACHED FROM every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.

THE SPECTACLE APPEARS at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated — and precisely for that reason — this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.

THE SPECTACLE IS NOT a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.

THE SPECTACLE CANNOT be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm — a world view
transformed into an objective force.

6

UNDERSTOOD IN ITS TOTALITY, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world — not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations — news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment — the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.

7

THE PHENOMENON OF SEPARATION is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other. Social practice, which the spectacle’s autonomy challenges, is also the real totality to which the spectacle is subordinate. So deep is the rift in this totality, however, that the spectacle is able to emerge as its apparent goal. The language of the spectacle is composed of signs of the dominant organization of production — signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization.

8

THE SPECTACLE CANNOT be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support. Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This

THE CAPITALIST PRODUCTION system has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is also a process, at once extensive and intensive, of *trivialization*. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market inevitably shattered all regional and legal barriers, as well as all those corporative restrictions that served in the Middle Ages to preserve the quality of craft production, so too it was bound to dissipate the independence and quality of *places*. The power to homogenize is the heavy artillery that has battered down all Chinese walls.

166

IF HENCEFORWARD the free space of commodities is subject at every moment to modification and reconstruction, this is so that it may become ever more identical to itself, and achieve as nearly as possible a perfectly static monotony.

167

THIS SOCIETY ELIMINATES geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation.

168

HUMAN CIRCULATION considered as something to be consumed — tourism — is a by-product of the circulation of commodities; basically, tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made trite. The economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places’ interchangeability. The same modernization that has deprived travel of its temporal aspect has likewise deprived it of the reality of space.

169

A SOCIETY THAT molds its entire surroundings has necessarily evolved its own techniques for working on the material basis of this set of tasks. That material basis is the society’s actual territory. Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into its own peculiar decor.
Environment Planning

And he who becomes master of a city used to being free and does not destroy her can expect to be destroyed by her, because always she has as pretext in rebellion the name of liberty and her old customs, which never through either length of time or benefits are forgotten, and in spite of anything that can be done or foreseen, unless citizens are disunited or dispersed, they do not forget that name and those institutions....

— Machiavelli, The Prince

reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.

9

IN A WORLD THAT really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.

10

THE CONCEPT OF the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. Diversities and contrasts among such phenomena are the appearances of the spectacle — the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth. Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle’s essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life — and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself.

11

IN ORDER TO DESCRIBE the spectacle, its formation, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree — to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation’s agenda. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.

12

THE SPECTACLE MANIFESTS itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.” The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.

13

THE SPECTACLE IS essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the
THE SPECTACULAR CHARACTER of modern industrial society has nothing fortuitous or superficial about it; on the contrary, this society is based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way. For the spectacle, as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all — although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself.

AS THE INDISPENSIBLE PACKAGING for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.

THE SPECTACLE SUBJECTS living human beings to its will to the extent that the economy has brought them under its sway. For the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself — at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.

AN EARLIER STAGE in the economy’s domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective “having” must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate raison d’être from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality is not that it is allowed to appear.

FOR ONE TO WHOM the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings — tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior. Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized
THE WORLD ALREADY has the dream of a such a time; it has yet to come into possession of the consciousness that will allow it to experience its reality.

mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction. This is not to say, however, that the spectacle itself is perceptible to the naked eye — even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle re-establishes its rule.

THE SPECTACLE IS HEIR to all the weakness of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision. Indeed the spectacle reposes on an incessant deployment of the very technical rationality to which that philosophical tradition gave rise. So far from realizing philosophy, the spectacle philosophizes reality, and turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation.

PHILOSOPHY IS AT ONCE the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrested from them — but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. It is thus the most earthbound aspects of life that have become the most impenetrable and rarefied. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a “world beyond” — and the perfection of separation within human beings.

SO LONG AS THE REALM of necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep. The
spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.

The fact that the practical power of modern society has detached itself from itself and established itself in the spectacle as an independent realm can only be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness already present in that powerful practice.

At the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power. The specialized role played by the spectacle is that of spokesman for all other activities, a sort of diplomatic representative of hierarchical society at its own court, and the source of the only discourse which that society allows itself to hear. Thus the most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic.

By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relationships conceals their true character as relationships between human beings and between classes; a second Nature thus seems to impose inescapable laws upon our environment. But the spectacle is by no means the inevitable outcome of a technical development perceived as natural; on the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle — understood in the limited sense of those “mass media” that are its most stuifling superficial manifestation — seems at times to be invading society in the shape of a mere apparatus, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that it answers precisely to the needs of the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social requirements of the age which develops such techniques can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such “instant” communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially one-way; the concentration of the media thus amounts to the monopolization by the administrators of the existing system of the means to pursue their particular form of administration. The social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is inseparable from the modern State, which, as the product of the social division of labor and the
forgotten, thanks to the precipitation with which the spectacle’s pulsing machinery replaces one by the next. At the same time, everything really lived has no relation to society’s official version of irreversible time, and is directly opposed to the pseudo-cyclical rhythm of that time’s consumable by-products. Such individual lived experience of a cut-off everyday life remains bereft of language or concept, and it lacks any critical access to its own antecedents, which are nowhere recorded. It cannot be communicated. And it is misunderstood and forgotten to the benefit of the spectacle’s false memory of the unmemorable.

158

THE SPECTACLE, BEING the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a false consciousness of time.

159

A PREREQUISITE TO the enrollment of the workers as “free” producers and consumers of time-as-commodity was the violent expropriation of their time. The spectacular restoration of time was only possible on the basis of this initial dispossession of the producers.

160

THE IRREDUCIBLY BIOLOGICAL element that labor retains — evident as much in our dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking as in the marks of a lifetime’s wear and tear, which attest to the irreversible time of the individual — is treated by the modern production system as a strictly secondary consideration. Such factors are consequently ignored in the official discourse of this system as it advances, and as it generates the consumable trophies that translate its triumphant forward march into accessible terms. Immobilized at the distorted center of the movement of its world, the consciousness of the spectator can have no sense of an individual life moving toward self-realization, or toward death. Someone who has given up the idea of living life will surely never be able to embrace death. Promoters of life insurance merely intimate that it is reprehensible to die without first arranging for the system’s adjustment to the economic loss one’s death will incur; and the promoters of the “American way of death” dwell solely on how much of the appearance of life can be maintained in the individual’s encounter with death. Elsewhere under advertising’s bombardments it is simply forbidden to get old. Anybody and everybody is urged to economize

organ of class rule, is the general form of all social division.

25

SEPERATION IS THE alpha and omega of the spectacle. Religious contemplation in its earliest form was the outcome of the establishment of the social division of labor and the formation of classes. Power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning. In former times the category of the sacred justified the cosmic and ontological ordering of things that best served the interests of the masters, expounding upon and embellishing what society could not deliver. Thus power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect, but mass allegiance to frozen religious imagery was originally a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity that was still widely felt to be a universal fact of life. The modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible. The spectacle preserves unconsciousness as practical changes in the conditions of existence proceed. The spectacle is self-generated, and it makes up its own rules: it is a specious form of the sacred. And it makes no secret of what it is, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater comminution of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. In the course of this development all community and critical awareness have ceased to be; nor have those forces, which were able — by separating — to grow enormously in strength, yet found a way to reunite.

26

THE GENERALIZED SEPERATION of worker and product has spelled the end of any comprehensive view of the job done, as well as the end of direct personal communication between producers. As the accumulation of alienated products proceeds, and as the productive process gets more concentrated, consistency and communication become the exclusive assets of the system’s managers. The triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the proletarianization of the world.

27

OWNING TO THE VERY success of this separated system of production, whose product is separation itself, that fundamental area of experience which was associated in earlier societies with an individual’s principal
work is being transformed — at least at the leading edge of the system’s evolution — into a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity; it remains in thrall to that activity, in an uneasy and worshipful subjection to production’s needs and results; indeed it is itself a product of the rationality of production. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned — a corollary of the fact that all real activity has been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. So what is referred to as “liberation from work,” that is, increased leisure time, is a liberation neither within labor itself nor from the world labor has brought into being.

28

THE REIGNING ECONOMIC system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of “the lonely crowd.” The spectacle is continually rediscovering its own basic assumptions — and each time in a more concrete manner.

29

THE ORIGIN OF THE spectacle lies in the world’s loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been: the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction. The spectacle divides the world into two parts, one of which is held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world. The spectacle is simply the common language that bridges this division. Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness.

30

THE SPECTATOR’S ALIENATION from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting explicitly presented as a moment of authentic life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. Yet even in such special moments, ostensibly moments of life, the only thing being generated, the only thing to be seen and reproduced, is the spectacle — albeit at a higher-than-usual level of intensity. And what has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more authentically spectacular.

154

OUR EPOCH, WHICH PRESENTS its time to itself as essentially made up of many frequently recurring festivities, is actually an epoch without festival. Those moments when, under the reign of cyclical time, the community would participate in a luxurious expenditure of life, are strictly unavailable to a society where neither community nor luxury exists. Mass pseudo-festivals, with their travesty of dialogue and their parody of the gift, may incite people to excessive spending, but they produce only a disillusion — which is invariably in turn offset by further false promises. The self-appropriation of the time of modern survival can only be reinforced, in the spectacle, by reduction in its use value. The reality of time has been replaced by its publicity.

155

IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES the consumption of cyclical time was consistent with the actual labor of those societies. By contrast, the consumption of pseudo-cyclical time in developed economies is at odds with the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the time of a motionless illusion authentically experienced; spectacular time is the time of a real transformation experienced as illusion.

156

INNOVATION IS EVER PRESENT in the process of the production of things. This is not true of consumption, which is never anything but more of the same. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in spectacular time the past continues to dominate the present.

157

ANOTHER ASPECT of the lack of historical life in general is that the individual life is still not historical. The pseudo-events that vie for attention in the spectacle’s dramatizations have not been lived by those who are thus informed about them. In any case they are quickly
pseudo-cyclical time is a time transformed by industry. The time founded on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, recombining everything which, during the period of the old unitary society’s disintegration, had become distinct: private life, economic life, political life. The entirety of the consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as raw material for the production of a diversity of new products to be put on the market as socially controlled uses of time. “A product, though ready for immediate consumption, may nevertheless serve as raw material for a further product” (Capital).

In its most advanced sectors, a highly concentrated capitalism has begun selling “fully equipped” blocks of time, each of which is a complete commodity combining a variety of other commodities. This is the logic behind the appearance, within an expanding economy of “services” and leisure activities, of the “all-inclusive” purchase of spectacular forms of housing, of collective pseudo-travel, of participation in cultural consumption and even of sociability itself, in the form of “exciting conversations,” “meetings with celebrities” and suchlike. Spectacular commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody. And, not surprisingly, they are also paradigmatic of modern sales techniques in that they may be bought on credit.

Consumable pseudo-cyclical time is the time of the spectacle: in the narrow sense, as the time appropriate to the consumption of images, and, in the broadest sense, as the image of the consumption of time. The time appropriate to the consumption of images, the medium of all commodities, is at once the chosen field of operations of the mechanisms of the spectacle and the goal that these mechanisms hold up overall as the locus and central representation of every individual act of consumption; as we know, modern society’s obsession with saving time, whether by means of faster transport or by means of powdered soup, has the positive result that the average American spends three to six hours daily watching television. The social image of the consumption of time is for its part exclusively dominated by leisure time and vacations — moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, at a distance, and as desirable by definition. This particular commodity is subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.

Workers do not produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves. The success of this production, that is, the abundance it generates, is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. All time, all space, becomes foreign to them as their own alienated products accumulate. The spectacle is a map of this new world — a map drawn to the scale of the territory itself. In this way the very powers that have been snatched from us reveal themselves to us in their full force.

The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic growth corresponds almost entirely to the growth of this particular sector of industrial production. If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy, it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception.

Though separated from his product, man is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life.

The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.
II. The Commodity as Spectacle

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the resification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this resification finds expression.... As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized man’s lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

— Lukács, History and Class Consciousness

THE TIME OF PRODUCTION, time-as-commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability. It is under the rule of time-as-commodity that “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most time’s carcass” (*The Poverty of Philosophy*). This is time devalued — the complete inversion of time as “the sphere of human development.”

THE GENERAL TIME of human non-development also has a complementary aspect, that of a consumable time which, on the basis of a determinate form of production, presents itself in the everyday life of society as a pseudo-cyclical time.

PSEUDO-CYCLICAL TIME is in fact merely the consumable disguise of the time-as-commodity of the production system, and it exhibits the essential traits of that time: homogeneous and exchangeable units, and the suppression of any qualitative dimension. But as a by-product of time-as-commodity intended to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life it necessarily finds itself laden with false attributions of value, and it must manifest itself as a succession of artificially distinct moments.

PSEUDO-CYCLICAL TIME typifies the consumption of modern economic survival — of that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labor. It is therefore quite “natural” that pseudo-cyclical time should echo the old cyclical rhythms that governed survival in pre-industrial societies. It builds, in fact, on the natural vestiges of cyclical time, while also using these as models on which to base new but homologous variants: day and night, weekly work and weekly rest, the cycle of vacations and so on.
VI. Spectacular Time

We have nothing that is ours except time, which even those without a roof can enjoy.

— Baltasar Gracián, *Oráculo manual y Arte de prudencia*

35

The self-movement of the spectacle consists in this: it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form—as things that, being the negative expression of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties.

36

Here we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are “at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.” This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible.

37

The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience. The commodity world is thus shown as it really is, for its logic is one with men’s estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce.

38

The loss of quality so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle, from the objects it lauds to the behavior it regulates, merely echoes the basic traits of a real production process that shuns reality. The commodity form is characterized exclusively by self-equivalence—it is exclusively quantitative in nature: the quantitative is what it develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative.

39

Despite the fact that it excludes quality, this development is still subject, qua development, to the qualitative. Thus the spectacle betrays the fact that it must eventually break the bounds of its own abundance. Though this is not true locally, except here and there, it is already true at the universal level which was the commodity’s original standard—a standard that it has been able to live up to by turning the whole planet
into a single world market.

40

THE DEVELOPMENT of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups (understood as the conditions of survival and their extension); this development has been the basis of all human enterprise. The realm of commodities has meant the constitution, within a natural economy, of a surplus survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of a variety of products among independent producers, was long able to retain an artisanal aspect embodied in a marginal economic activity where its quantitative essence was masked. Wherever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale trade and capital accumulation, however, such production successfully established total hegemony over the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity, throughout this campaign of conquest, had shown itself to be — namely, a process of quantitative development. The unceasing deployment of economic power in the shape of commodities has transfigured human labor into labor-as-commodity, into wage-labor, and eventually given rise to an abundance thanks to which the basic problem of survival, though solved, is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level. Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they still must be liberated from their liberators. The independence of the commodity has spread to the entire economy over which the commodity now reigns. The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy. The pseudo–nature in which labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain in its service indefinitely, and inasmuch as this estranged activity is answerable only to itself it is able in turn to enroll all socially permissible efforts and projects under its banner. In these circumstances an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an augmented survival.

41

THE COMMODITY’S DOMINION over the economy was at first exercised in a covert manner. The economy itself, the material basis of social life, was neither perceived nor understood — not properly known precisely because of its “familiarity.” In a society where concrete commodities were few and far between, it was the dominance of money that seemed the world over as the same day is merely the time of economic production — time cut up into equal abstract fragments. Unified irreversible time still belongs to the world market — and, by extension, to the world spectacle.

146

THE IRREVERSIBLE TIME of production is first and foremost the measure of commodities. The time officially promoted all around the world as the general time of society, since it signifies nothing beyond those special interests which constitute it, is therefore not general in character, but particular.
the bourgeoisie unveiled irreversible historical time and imposed it on society only to deprive society of its use. Once there was history, but “there is no longer any history” — because the class of owners of the economy, who cannot break with economic history, must repress any other use of irreversible time as representing an immediate threat to itself. The ruling class, made up of specialists in the ownership of things who for that very reason are themselves owned by things, is obliged to tie its fate to the maintenance of a reified history and to the permanent preservation of a new historical immobility. Meanwhile the worker, at the base of society, is for the first time not materially estranged from history, for now the irreversible is generated from below. By demanding to live the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and every attempt to carry this project through — though all up to now have gone down to defeat — signals a possible point of departure for a new historical life.

The irreversible time of a bourgeoisie that had just seized power was called by its own name, and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of generalized freedom that had served to overthrow the last relics of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all traditional forms of social organization, was already unable completely to conceal the real goal that it had thus draped in Roman costume — namely, generalized freedom of trade. The society of the commodity, soon discovering that it must reinstate the passivity which it had to shake to its foundations in order to inaugurate its own unchallenged rule, now found that, for its purposes, “Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract was the most fitting form of religion” (Capital). So the bourgeoisie concluded a pact with this religion, an arrangement reflected in its presentation of time: the Revolutionary calendar was abandoned and irreversible time was returned to the straitjacket of a duly extended Christian Era.

The development of capitalism meant the unification of irreversible time on a world scale. Universal history became a reality because the entire globe was brought under the sway of this time’s progression. But a history that is thus the same everywhere at once has as yet amounted to nothing more than an intrahistorical refusal of history. What appears to play the role of emissary, invested with full authority by an unknown power. With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that revolution’s manufacturing system, and mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life. It was at this moment too that political economy established itself as at once the dominant science and the science of domination.
great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The *humanity of the commodity* finally attends to the workers’ “leisure and humanity” for the simple reason that political economy as such now can — and must — bring these spheres under its sway. Thus it is that the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the “perfected denial of man.”

**THE SPECTACLE** is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

**AUTOMATION,** which is at once the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, confronts the world of the commodity with a contradiction that it must somehow resolve: the same technical infrastructure that is capable of abolishing labor must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity — and indeed as the sole generator of commodities. If automation, or for that matter any mechanisms, even less radical ones, that can increase productivity, are to be prevented from reducing socially necessary labor—time to an unacceptably low level, new forms of employment have to be created. A happy solution presents itself in the growth of the tertiary or service sector in response to the immense strain on the supply lines of the army responsible for distributing and hyping the commodities of the moment. The coincidence is neat: on the one hand, the system is faced with the necessity of reintegrating newly redundant labor; on the other, the very factitiousness of the needs associated with the commodities on offer calls out a whole battery of reserve forces.

**EXCHANGE VALUE** could only have arisen as the proxy of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the preconditions for its establishment as an autonomous power. By activating all human use value and monopolizing that value’s fulfillment, exchange value eventually gained the upper hand. The process of exchange became the chintzy trappings of a bleak State administration whose apex was the “profession of king”; and all individual historical freedom had had to consent to this sacrifice. The free play of the feudal lords’ irreversible time had exhausted itself in their last, lost battles: in the Fronde, or in the Scots’ uprising in support of Charles Edward. The world had a new foundation.

**THE VICTORY** of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time — the time corresponding to the economic form of production, which transformed society permanently, and from top to bottom. So long as agriculture was the chief type of labor, cyclical time retained its deep-down hold over society and tended to nourish those combined forces of tradition which slowed down the movement of history. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economic revolution eliminated all such vestiges throughout the world. History, which had hitherto appeared to express nothing more than the activity of individual members of the ruling class, and had thus been conceived of as a chronology of events, was now perceived in its general movement — an inexorable movement that crushed individuals before it. By discovering its basis in political economy, history became aware of the existence of what had been its unconscious. This unconscious, however, continued to exist as such — and history still could not draw it out into the full light of day. This blind prehistory, a new fatality that no one controls, is the only thing that the commodity economy has democratized.

**THOUGH EVER-PRESENT** in society’s depths, history tended to be invisible at its surface. The triumph of irreversible time was also its metamorphosis into the *time of things*, because the weapon that had ensured its victory was, precisely, the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity. The main product that economic development transformed from a luxurious rarity to a commonly consumed item was thus history itself — but only in the form of the history of that abstract movement which dominated any qualitative use of life. Whereas the cyclical time of an earlier era had supported an ever-increasing measure of historical time lived by individuals and groups, irreversible time’s reign over production would tend socially to eliminate all such lived time.
revolution as their own handiwork. The fact that they made their action conditional upon an external sign of God’s will was a translation onto the level of thought of the tendency of insurgent peasants to follow outside leaders. The peasant class could achieve a clear consciousness neither of the workings of society nor of the way to conduct its own struggle, and it was because it lacked these prerequisites of unity in its action and consciousness that the peasantry formulated its project and waged its wars according to the imagery of an earthly paradise.

THE RENAISSANCE EMBODIED the new form of possession of historical life. Seeking its heritage and its juridical basis in Antiquity, it was the bearer of a joyous break with eternity. The irreversible time of the Renaissance was that of an infinite accumulation of knowledge, while the historical consciousness generated by the experience of democratic communities, as of the effects of those forces that had brought on their ruin, was now, with Machiavelli, able to resume its reflection upon secular power, and say the unsayable about the State. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the arts of festival, life came to recognize itself as the enjoyment of the passing of time. But this enjoyment of transience would turn out to be transient itself. The song of Lorenzo de’ Medici, which Burckhardt considered “the very spirit of the Renaissance,” is the eulogy delivered upon itself by this fragile historical feast: “Quant’è bella giovinezza / Che si fugge tuttavia.”

THE TIRELESS PURSUIT of a monopoly of historical life by the absolute-monarchist State, a transitional form along the way to complete domination by the bourgeois class, clearly illuminates the highest expression of the bourgeoisie’s new irreversible time. The time with which the bourgeoisie was inextricably bound up was labor-time, now at last emancipated from the cyclical realm. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, work became *that work which transforms historical conditions*. The bourgeoisie was the first ruling class for which labor was a value. By abolishing all social privilege, and by recognizing no value unrelated to the exploitation of labor, the bourgeoisie effectively conflated its own value qua ruling class with labor, and made the progress of labor the only measure of its own progress. The class that accumulated commodities and capital continually modified nature by modifying labor itself — by unleashing labor’s productivity. All social life was by this time concentrated in the ornamented poverty of the Court — in indistinguishable from any conceivable utility, thereby placing use value at its mercy. Starting out as the condottiere of use value, exchange value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own.

THE FALLING RATE of use value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy, gives rise to a new form of privation within the realm of augmented survival; this is not to say that this realm is emancipated from the old poverty: on the contrary, it requires the vast majority to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of its ends — a requirement to which, as everyone knows, one must either submit or die. It is the reality of this situation — the fact that, even in its most impoverished form (food, shelter), use value has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival — that is the real basis for the general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form.

USE VALE was formerly implicit in exchange value. In terms of the spectacle’s topsy-turvy logic, however, it has to be explicit — for the very reason that its own effective existence has been eroded by the overdevelopment of the commodity economy, and that a counterfeit life calls for a pseudojustification.

THE SPECTACLE is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money in its familiar form has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence, that is, of the exchangeability of diverse goods whose uses are not otherwise compatible, the spectacle in its full development is money’s modern aspect; in the spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do. The spectacle is money *for contemplation only*, for here the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just the servant of *pseudo-use* — it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life.
WITH THE ACHIEVEMENT of a purely economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to an appearance that is in effect that labor’s product. Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production. As it accumulates, capital spreads out to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects. Society in its length and breadth becomes capital’s faithful portrait.

THE ECONOMY TRIUMPHS as an independent power inevitably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one — namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. Such an economy irrevocably breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a social unconscious that was dependent on it without knowing it. “Whatever is conscious wears out. Whatever is unconscious remains unalterable. Once freed, however, surely this too must fall into ruins?” (Freud).

BY THE TIME society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. Having grown as a subterranean force until it could emerge sovereign, the economy proceeds to lose its power. Where economic id was, there ego shall be. The subject can only arise out of society — that is, out of the struggle that society embodies. The possibility of a subject’s existing depends on the outcome of the class struggle which turns out to be the product and the producer of history’s economic foundation.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF DESIRE and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the of rural landed property and urban communes. This diversification of possible historical life reflected the gradual emergence, following the collapse of the great official enterprise of this world, namely the Crusades, of the period’s unseen contribution: a society carried along in its unconscious depths by irreversible time, the time directly experienced by the bourgeoisie in the production of commodities, the founding and expansion of the towns, the commercial discovery of the planet — in a word, the practical experimentation that obliterated any mythical organization of the cosmos once and for all.

AS THE MIDDLE AGES came to an end, the irreversible time that had invaded society was experienced by a consciousness still attached to the old order as an obsession with death. This was the melancholy of a world passing away — the last world where the security of myth could still balance history; and for this melancholy all earthly things were inevitably embarked on the path of corruption. The great European peasant revolts were likewise a response to history — a history that was wresting the peasantry from the patriarchal slumber thitherto guaranteed by the feudal order. This was the moment when a millenarian utopianism aspiring to build heaven on earth brought back to the forefront an idea that had been at the origin of semi-historical religion, when the early Christian communities, like the Judaic messianism from which they sprang, responded to the troubles and misfortunes of their time by announcing the imminent realization of God’s Kingdom, and so added an element of disquiet and subversion to ancient society. The Christianity that later shared in imperial power denounced whatever remained of this hope as mere superstition: this is the meaning of the Augustinian pronouncement — the archetype of all the satisfecits of modern ideology — according to which the established Church was itself, and had long been, that self-same hoped-for kingdom. The social revolt of the millenarian peasantry naturally defined itself as an attempt to overthrow the Church. Millenarianism unfolded, however, in a historical world — not in the realm of myth. So, contrary to what Norman Cohn believes he has demonstrated in The Pursuit of the Millennium, modern revolutionary hopes are not an irrational sequel to the religious passion of millenarianism. The exact opposite is true: millenarianism, the expression of a revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary tendency, lacking only the consciousness of being historical and nothing more. The millenarians were doomed to defeat because they could not recognize
illusion. Time remained entirely oriented toward a single final event: “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” These religions had germinated and taken root in the soil of history; even here, however, they maintained a radical opposition to history. Semi-historical religion established qualitative starting points in time — the birth of Christ, the flight of Muhammad — yet its irreversible time, introducing an effective accumulation which would take the form of conquest in Islam and that of an increase in capital in the Christianity of the Reformation, was in fact inverted in religious thought, so as to become a sort of countdown: the wait, as time ran out, for the Last Judgment, for the moment of accession to the other, true world. Eternity emerged from cyclical time; it was that time’s beyond. Eternity was also what humbled time in its mere irreversible flow — suppressing history as history continued — by positioning itself beyond irreversible time, as a pure point which cyclical time would enter only to be abolished. As Bossuet could still say: “So, by way of the passing of time, we enter eternity, which does not pass.”

137

THE MIDDLE AGES, an unfinished mythical world whose perfection lay outside itself, was the period when cyclical time, which still governed the major part of production, suffered history’s first real gnawing inroads. A measure of irreversible time now became available to everyone individually, in the form of the successive stages of life, in the form of life apprehended as a voyage, a one-way passage through a world whose meaning was elsewhere. Thus the pilgrim was the man who emerged from cyclical time to become in actuality the traveler that each individual was qua sign. Personal historical life invariably found its fulfillment within power’s orbit — either in struggles waged by power or in struggles in which power was disputed; yet power’s irreversible time was now shared to an unlimited degree within the context of the general unity that the oriented time of the Christian era ensured. This was a world of armed faith in which the activity of the masters revolved around fealty and around challenges to fealty owed. Under the feudal regime born of the coming together of “the martial organization of the army during the actual conquest” and “the action of the productive forces found in the conquered countries” (The German Ideology) — and among the factors responsible for organizing those productive forces must be included their religious language — under this regime social domination was divided up between the Church on the one hand and State power on the other, the latter being further broken down in accordance with the complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage characteristic, respectively, workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.
III. Unity and Division Within Appearances

A lively new polemic about the concepts “one divides into two” and “two fuse into one” is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that “one divides into two” is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that “two fuse into one” are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.

— Red Flag (Peking). 21 September 1964

communication. Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the memorable and the danger of forgetting: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents the results of his researches, that the great deeds of men may not be forgotten.”

134

TO REFLECT UPON HISTORY is also, inextricably, to reflect upon power. Greece was that moment when power and changes in power were first debated and understood. This occurred under a democracy of society’s masters, a system diametrically opposed to that of the despotic State, where power settled accounts only with itself, in the impenetrable obscurity of its densest point, by means of palace revolutions whose outcome, whether success or failure, invariably placed the event itself beyond discussion. The shared power of Greek communities inhered solely, however, in the expending of a social life whose production remained the separate and static domain of the slave class. The only people who lived were those who did not work. The divisions between Greek communities, and the struggle to exploit foreign cities, were the externalized expression of the principle of separation on which each of them was based internally. Greece, which dreamed of a universal history, was thus unable to unite in the face of invasion from without; it could not even manage to standardize the calendars of its constituent cities. Historical time became conscious in Greece — but it was not yet conscious of itself.

135

THE REGRESSION OF Western thought that occurred once the local conditions favoring the Greek communities had disappeared was not accompanied by any reconstruction of the old mythic structures. Clashes between Mediterranean peoples and the constitution and collapse of the Roman State gave rise instead to semi-historical religions that were to become basic components of the new consciousness of time, and the new armature of separated power.

136

MONOTOHEISTIC RELIGIONS were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time which still dominated the sphere of production and the irreversible time which was the theater of conflicts and realignments between peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were the abstract universal recognition of an irreversible time now democratized, open to all, yet still confined to the realm of
As the expression of power’s irreversible time, chronicles were a means of maintaining the voluntaristic forward progression of this time on the basis of the recording of its past: “voluntaristic,” because such an orientation is bound to collapse, along with the particular power to which it corresponds, and sink once more into the indifferent oblivion of a solely cyclical time, a time known to the peasant masses who — no matter that empires may crumble along with their chronologies — never change. Those who possessed history gave it an orientation — a direction, and also a meaning. But their history unfolded and perished apart, as a sphere leaving the underlying society unaffected precisely because it was a sphere separate from common reality. This is why, from our point of view, the history of Oriental societies may be reduced to a history of religions; all we can reconstruct from their ruins is the seemingly independent history of the illusions that once enveloped them. The masters who, protected by myth, enjoyed the private ownership of history, themselves did so at first in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; likewise, their earliest officially recognized dynasties were an imaginary reconstruction of the past. Such illusory ownership by the masters, however, was at the same time the only ownership then possible both of the common history and of their own history. The expansion of their effective historical power went hand in hand with a vulgarization of this illusory-mythical ownership. All of these consequences flowed from the simple fact that it was only to the degree that the masters made it their task to furnish cyclical time with mythic underpinnings, as in the seasonal rites of the Chinese emperors, that they themselves were relatively emancipated therefrom.

The dry, unexplained chronology which a deified authority offered to its subjects, and which was intended to be understood solely as the earthly execution of the commandments of myth, was destined to be transcended and to become conscious history. But, for this to happen, sizable groups of people had first to experience real participation in history. From such practical communication between those who had recognized one another as possessors of a unique present, who had experienced the qualitative richness of events as their own activity, their own dwelling-place — in short, their own epoch — from such communication arose the general language of historical

Like modern society itself, the spectacle is at once united and divided. In both, unity is grounded in a split. As it emerges in the spectacle, however, this contradiction is itself contradicted by virtue of a reversal of its meaning: division is presented as unity, and unity as division.

Struggles between forces, all of which have been established for the purpose of running the same socioeconomic system, are thus officially passed off as real antagonisms. In actuality these struggles partake of a real unity, and this on the world stage as well as within each nation.

This is not to say that the spectacle’s sham battles between competing versions of alienated power are not also real; they do express the system’s uneven and conflict-ridden development, as well as the relatively contradictory interests of those classes or fractions of classes that recognize the system and strive in this way to carve out a role for themselves in it. Just as the development of the most advanced economies involves clashes between different agendas, so totalitarian economic management by a state bureaucracy and the condition of those countries living under colonialism or semi-colonialism are likewise highly differentiated with respect to modes of production and power. By pointing up these great differences, while appealing to criteria of quite a different order, the spectacle is able to portray them as markers of radically distinct social systems. But from the standpoint of their actual reality as mere sectors, it is clear that the specificity of each is subsumed under a universal system as functions of a single tendency that has taken the planet for its field of operations. That tendency is capitalism.

The society that brings the spectacle into being does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely through the exercise of economic hegemony. It also dominates them in its capacity as the society of the spectacle. Modern society has thus already invested the social surface of every continent — even where the material basis of economic exploitation is still lacking — by spectacular means. It can frame the agenda of a ruling class and preside over that class’s constitution. And, much as it
proposes pseudo-goods to be coveted, it may also offer false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. As for the bureaucratic power that rules in a number of industrialized countries, it certainly has its own peculiar spectacle, but this plays an integral part in the overarching spectacle as general pseudo-negation — and hence as vital support. So even if in its local manifestations the spectacle may embody totalitarian varieties of social communication and control, when viewed from the standpoint of the system’s global functioning these are seen to be merely different aspects of a worldwide division of spectacular tasks.

58

THOUGH DESIGNED TO maintain the existing order as a whole, the division of spectacular tasks is chiefly oriented toward the actively developing pole of that order. The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of that field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market, whatever ideological or police-state barriers of a protectionist kind may be set up by local spectacles with dreams of autarky.

59

BEHIND THE GLITTER of the spectacle’s distractions, modern society lies in thrall to the global domination of a banalizing trend that also dominates it at each point where the most advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly broadened the panoply of roles and objects available to choose from. The vestiges of religion and of the family (still the chief mechanism for the passing on of class power), and thus too the vestiges of the moral repression that these institutions ensure, can now be seamlessly combined with the rhetorical advocacy of pleasure in this life. The life in question is after all produced solely as a form of pseudo-gratification which still embodies repression. A smug acceptance of what exists is likewise quite compatible with a purely spectacular rebelliousness, for the simple reason that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material.

60

MEDIA STARS ARE SPECTACULAR representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles. Stardom is a diversification in the semblance of life — the object of an identification with mere appearance which is intended to become history through the practical activity of the masters. At a superficial level this history created irreversibility; its movement constituted the very time that it used up within the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

130

SO-CALLED COLD SOCIETIES are societies that successfully slowed their participation in history down to the minimum, and maintained their conflicts with the natural and human environments, as well as their internal conflicts, in constant equilibrium. Although the vast diversity of institutions set up for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the plasticity of human nature’s self-creation, this testimony is of course only accessible to an outside observer, to an anthropologist looking back from within historical time. In each of these societies a definitive organizational structure ruled out change. The absolute conformity of their social practices, with which all human possibilities were exclusively and permanently identified, had no external limits except for the fear of falling into a formless animal condition. So, here, in order to remain human, men had to remain the same.

131

THE EMERGENCE of political power, seemingly associated with the last great technical revolutions, such as iron smelting, which occurred at the threshold of a period that was to experience no further major upheavals until the rise of modern industry, also coincided with the first signs of the dissolution of the bonds of kinship. From this moment on, the succession of the generations left the natural realm of the purely cyclical and became a purposeful succession of events, a mechanism for the transmission of power. Irreversible time was the prerogative of whoever ruled, and the prime yardstick of rulership lay in dynastic succession. The ruler’s chief weapon was the written word, which now attained its full autonomous reality as mediation between consciousnesses. This independence, however, was indistinguishable from the general independence of a separate power as the mediation whereby society was constituted. With writing came a consciousness no longer conveyed and transmitted solely within the immediate relationships of the living — an impersonal memory that was the memory of the administration of society. “Writings are the thoughts of the State,” said Novalis, “and archives are its memory.”
the location in question. A time-bound return to similar places thus gave way to the pure return of time in a single place, the repetition of a set of gestures. The shift from pastoralism to settled agriculture marked the end of an idle and contentless freedom, and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production in general, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, was the basis of cyclical time in its fullest development. Eternity, as the return of the same here below, was internal to this time. Myth was the unified mental construct whose job it was to make sure that the whole cosmic order confirmed the order that this society had in fact already set up within its own frontiers.

128

MYTH was the unified mental construct whose job it was to make sure that the whole cosmic order confirmed the order that this society had in fact already set up within its own frontiers. The agrarian mode of production in general, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, was the basis of cyclical time in its fullest development. Eternity, as the return of the same here below, was internal to this time. Myth was the unified mental construct whose job it was to make sure that the whole cosmic order confirmed the order that this society had in fact already set up within its own frontiers.

THE SOCIAL APPROPRIATION of time and the production of man by means of human labor were developments that awaited the advent of a society divided into classes. The power that built itself up on the basis of the penury of the society of cyclical time — the power, in other words, of the class which organized social labor therein and appropriated the limited surplus value to be extracted, also appropriated the temporal surplus value that resulted from its organization of social time; this class thus had sole possession of the irreversible time of the living. The only wealth that could exist in concentrated form in the sphere of power, there to be expended on extravagance and festivity, was also expended in the form of the squandering of a historical time at society’s surface. The owners of this historical surplus value were the masters of the knowledge and enjoyment of directly experienced events. Separated off from the collective organization of time that predominated as a function of the repetitive form of production which was the basis of social life, historical time flowed independently above its own, static, community. This was the time of adventure, of war, the time in which the lords of cyclical society pursued their personal histories; the time too that emerged in clashes between communities foreign to one another — perturbations in society’s unchanging order. For ordinary men, therefore, history sprang forth as an alien factor, as something they had not sought and against whose occurrence they had thought themselves secure. Yet this turning point also made possible the return of that negative human restlessness, which had been at the origin of the whole (temporarily arrested) development.

129

IN ITS ESSENCE, cyclical time was a time without conflict. Yet even in this infancy of time, conflict was present: at first, history struggled compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity. Celebrities figure various styles of life and various views of society which anyone is supposed free to embrace and pursue in a global manner. They themselves incarnations of the inaccessible results of social labor, they mimic by-products of that labor, and project these above labor so that they appear as its goal. The by-products in question are power and leisure — the power to decide and the leisure to consume which are the alpha and the omega of a process that is never questioned. In the former case, government power assumes the personified form of the pseudo-star; in the second, stars of consumption canvas for votes as pseudo-power over life lived. But, just as none of these celestial activities are truly global, neither do they offer any real choices.

61

THE INDIVIDUAL WHO in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom’s spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things. Stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying an equal access to the whole realm of consumption and deriving exactly the same satisfaction therefrom. Stars of decision, meanwhile, must possess the full range of accepted human qualities; all official differences between them are thus canceled out by the official similarity which is an inescapable implication of their supposed excellence in every sphere. Khrushchev had to become a general in order to have been responsible for the outcome of the battle of Kursk — not on the battlefield but twenty years later, as master of the State. And Kennedy the orator survived himself, so to speak, and even delivered his own funeral oration, in the sense that Theodore Sorensen still wrote speeches for Kennedy’s successor in the very style that had done so much to create the dead man’s persona. The admirable people who personify the system are indeed well known for not being what they seem to be; they have achieved greatness by embracing a level of reality lower than that of the most insignificant individual life — and everyone knows it.

62

THE FALSE CHOICE offered by spectacular abundance, based on the juxtaposition, on the one hand, of competing yet mutually reinforcing
spectacles and, on the other hand, of roles — for the most part signified by and embodied in objects — that are at once exclusive and interconnected, evolves into a contest among phantom qualities meant to elicit devotion to quantitatively triviality. Thus false conflicts of ancient vintage tend to be resuscitated — regionalisms or racisms whose job it now is to invest vulgar rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority. Hence too the never-ending succession of paltry contests — from competitive sports to elections — that are utterly incapable of arousing any truly playful feelings. Wherever the consumption of abundance has established itself, there is one spectacular antagonism which is always at the forefront of the range of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adulthood. For here an adult in the sense of someone who is master of his own life is nowhere to be found. And youth — implying change in what exists — is by no means proper to people who are young. Rather, it characterizes only the economic system, the dynamism of capitalism: it is things that rule, that are young — things themselves that vie with each other and usurp one another’s places.

WHAT SPECTACULAR ANTAGONISMS conceal is the unity of poverty. Differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice by virtue of the fact that they are all founded on real repressed contradictions. Depending on the needs of the particular stage of poverty that it is supposed at once to deny and sustain, the spectacle may be concentrated or diffuse in form. In either case, it is no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune.

THE CONCENTRATED FORM of the spectacle normally characterizes bureaucratic capitalism, though it may on occasion be borrowed as a technique for buttressing state power over more backward mixed economies, and even the most advanced capitalism may call on it in moments of crisis. Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat’s relation to the ownership of the economy as a whole is invariably mediated by the community of bureaucrats, by his membership in that community. And commodity production, less well developed in bureaucratic systems, is also concentrated in form: the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to society — en bloc — is society’s survival. The

MAN — THAT “NEGATIVE BEING who is solely to the extent that he abolishes being” — is one with time. Man’s appropriation of his own nature is at the same time the apprehension of the unfolding of the universe. “History itself,” says Marx, “is a real part of natural history, and of nature’s becoming man.” Conversely, the “natural history” in question exists effectively only through the process of a human history, through the development of the only agency capable of discovering this historical whole; one is reminded of a modern telescope, whose range enables it to track the retreat of nebulae in time toward the edge of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. The temporalization of man, as effected through the mediation of a society, is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true in historical consciousness.

THE MOVEMENT OF HISTORY properly so called (though still hidden) begins with the slow and imperceptible emergence of “the true nature of man,” of that “nature which was born of human history — of the procreative act that gave rise to human society”; but society, even when it had mastered a technology and a language, and even though by then it was already the product of its own history, remained conscious only of a perpetual present. All knowledge, which was in any case limited by the memory of society’s oldest members, was always borne by the living. Neither death nor reproduction were understood as governed by time. Time was motionless — a sort of enclosed space. When a more complex society did finally attain a consciousness of time, its reaction was to deny rather than embrace it, for it viewed time not as something passing, but as something returning. This was a static type of society that organized time, true to its immediate experience of nature, on a cyclical model.

CYCLICAL TIME was already dominant in the experience of nomadic peoples, who confronted the same conditions at each moment of their roaming; as Hegel notes, “the wandering of nomads is a merely formal one, because it is limited to uniform spaces.” Once a society became fixed in a locality, giving space content through the individualized development of specific areas, it found itself enclosed thereby within
O, gentlemen, the time of life is short!... An if we live, we live to tread on kings.

— Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I

dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and because any choice made independently of it, even the most trivial — concerning food, say, or music — amounts to a declaration of war to the death on the bureaucracy. This dictatorship must therefore be attended by permanent violence. Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which is a resume of everything that exists officially, and this is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system’s totalitarian cohesiveness. Everyone must identify magically with this absolute celebrity — or disappear. For this figure is the master of not-being-consumed, and the heroic image appropriate to the absolute exploitation constituted by primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If every Chinese has to study Mao, and in effect be Mao, this is because there is nothing else to be. The dominion of the spectacle in its concentrated form means the dominion, too, of the police.

65

THE DIFFUSE FORM of the spectacle is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each commodity considered in isolation is justified by an appeal to the grandeur of commodity production in general — a production for which the spectacle is an apologetic catalog. The claims jostling for position on the stage of the affluent economy’s integrated spectacle are not always compatible, however. Similarly, different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting approaches to the organization of society; thus the spectacular logic of the automobile argues for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of the old city centers, whereas the spectacle of the city itself calls for these same ancient sections to be turned into museums. So the already questionable satisfaction allegedly derived from the consumption of the whole is adulterated from the outset because the real consumer can only get his hands on a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven — fragments each of which naturally lacks any of the quality ascribed to the whole.

66

EACH INDIVIDUAL COMMODITY fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others and aspires to impose its presence everywhere as though it were alone. The spectacle is the epic poem of this strife — a strife that no fall of Ilium can bring to an end. Of arms and the man the spectacle does not sing, but rather of passions and the commodity. Within this blind struggle each commodity, following where passion
leads, unconsciously actualizes something of a higher order than itself: the commodity’s becoming worldly coincides with the world’s being transformed into commodities. So it is that, thanks to the cunning of the commodity, whereas all particular commodities wear themselves out in the fight, the commodity as abstract form continues on its way to absolute self-realization.

67

THE SATISFACTION THAT the commodity in its abundance can no longer supply by virtue of its use value is now sought in an acknowledgment of its value qua commodity. A use of the commodity arises that is sufficient unto itself; what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honor of the commodity’s sovereign freedom. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fueled and boosted by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed. A film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right. Keychains that are not paid for but come as free gifts with the purchase of some luxury product, or are then traded back and forth in a sphere far removed from that of their original use, bear eloquent witness to a mystical self-abandonment to the transcendent spirit of the commodity. Someone who collects keychains that have recently been manufactured for the sole purpose of being collected might be said to be accumulating the commodity’s indulgences — the glorious tokens of the commodity’s immanent presence among the faithful. In this way reified man proclaims his intimacy with the commodity. Following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism, with its transported convictionaries and miraculous cures, the fetishism of the commodity also achieves its moment of acute fervor. The only use still in evidence here, meanwhile, is the basic use of submission.

68

IT IS DOUBTFUL impossible to contrast the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism with any authentic need or desire that is not itself equally determined by society and its history. But the commodity in the stage of its abundance attests to an absolute break in the organic development of social needs. The commodity’s mechanical accumulation unleashes a limitless artificiality in face of which all living desire is disarmed. The cumulative power of this autonomous realm of
its basis only a key portion of social life, namely the economy, where this class was already in power). It is thus the very evolution of class society into the spectacular organization of non-life that obliges the revolutionary project to become visibly what it always was in essence.

REVOLUTIONARY THEORY is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology — and it knows it.

artifice necessarily everywhere entails a falsification of life.

THE IMAGE OF the blissful unification of society through consumption suspends disbelief with regard to the reality of division only until the next disillusionment occurs in the sphere of actual consumption. Each and every new product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. As such it is ceremoniously presented as the unique and ultimate product. But, as with the fashionable adoption of seemingly rare aristocratic first names which turn out in the end to be borne by a whole generation, so the would-be singularity of an object can be offered to the eager hordes only if it has been mass-produced. The sole real status attaching to a mediocre object of this kind is to have been placed, however briefly, at the very center of social life and hailed as the revelation of the goal of the production process. But even this spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer — and hence by all other consumers too. At this point its essential poverty, the natural outcome of the poverty of its production, stands revealed — too late. For by this time another product will have been assigned to supply the system with its justification, and will in turn be demanding its moment of acclaim.

THIS CONTINUOUS PROCESS of replacement means that fake gratification cannot but be exposed as products change, and as changes occur in the general conditions of production. Something that can assert its own unchanging excellence with uncontested arrogance changes nonetheless. This is as true of the concentrated as of the diffuse version of the spectacle, and only the system endures: Stalin, just like any obsolete product, can be cast aside by the very forces that promoted his rise. Each new lie of the advertising industry implicitly acknowledges the one before. Likewise every time a personification of totalitarian power is eclipsed, the illusion of community that has guaranteed that figure unanimous support is exposed as a mere sum of solitudes without illusions.

WHATEVER LAYS CLAIM to permanence in the spectacle is founded on change, and must change as that foundation changes. The spectacle,
though quintessentially dogmatic, can yet produce no solid dogma. Nothing is stable for it; this is its natural state, albeit the state most at odds with its natural inclination.

72

THE UNREAL UNITY the spectacle proclaims masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production is based. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what separates them from it. What brings together men liberated from local and national limitations is also what keeps them apart. What pushes for greater rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What creates society’s abstract power also creates its concrete unfreedom.

120

THE REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into two-way communication with practical struggles; it is thus part of the process of the coming into being of practical theory.

121

THE REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION must necessarily constitute an integral critique of society — a critique, that is to say, which refuses to compromise with any form of separated power and which is directed globally against every aspect of alienated social life. In the revolutionary organization’s struggle with class society, the weapons are nothing less than the essence of the antagonists themselves; the revolutionary organization cannot allow the conditions of division and hierarchy that obtain in the dominant society to be reproduced within itself. It must also fight constantly against its own distortion by and within the reigning spectacle. The only restriction on individual participation in the revolutionary organization’s total democracy is that imposed by the effective recognition and appropriation by each member of the coherence of the organization’s critique, a coherence that must be borne out both in critical theory proper and in the relationship between that theory and practical activity.

122

AS CAPITALISM’S ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, and eventually puts them in the position of having either to reject it in its totality or do nothing at all, the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.

123

THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION is predicated entirely on the requirement that, for the first time, theory as the understanding of human practice be recognized and directly lived by the masses. This revolution demands that workers become dialecticians, and inscribe their thought upon practice; it thus asks much more of its men without qualities than the bourgeois revolution asked of those men with qualifications that it enlisted to run things (the partial ideological consciousness constructed by a segment of the bourgeois class had as
opening the door to the realization of that active direct communication which marks the end of all specialization, all hierarchy, and all separation, and thanks to which existing conditions are transformed “into the conditions of unity.” And it is here too that the proletarian subject can emerge from the struggle against a purely contemplative role, for consciousness is now equal to the practical organization that it has chosen for itself, and it has become inseparable from a coherent intervention in history.

117

Once embodied in the power of workers councils—a power destined to supplant all other powers worldwide—the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself, and in his own eyes the producer has himself as his goal. Only in this context can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in its turn.

118

The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century was the high point of the proletarian movement, but this reality has gone unnoticed, or else been presented in travestied form, because it inevitably vanished along with the remainder of a movement that the whole historical experience of the time tended to deny and destroy. From the standpoint of the renewal of the proletariat’s critical enterprise, however, the councils may be seen in their true light as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement: historical consciousness, aware that this is the only environment in which it can thrive, now perceives the councils as situated historically not at the periphery of an ebbing tide but rather at the center of a rising one.

119

A revolutionary organization that exists before the establishment of the power of workers’ councils—which must discover its own appropriate form through struggle—will know that, for all these historical reasons, it cannot represent the revolutionary class. It must simply recognize itself as radically separated from the world of separation.
The equal right of all to the goods and enjoyment of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints — these, at bottom, are the raison d'être of the March 18th insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army.

— Enquête parlementaire sur l'insurrection du 18 mars

IV. The Proletariat as Subject and Representation

The equal right of all to the goods and enjoyment of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints — these, at bottom, are the raison d'être of the March 18th insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army.

— Enquête parlementaire sur l'insurrection du 18 mars

itself in any particular wrong it has suffered; nor, therefore, in the righting of any particular wrong — nor even in the righting of many such wrongs; but only in the righting of the unqualified wrong that has been perpetrated upon it — the universal wrong of its exclusion from life.

115

SIGNS OF THE NEW and growing tendency toward negation proliferate in the more economically advanced countries. The spectacular system reacts to these signs with incomprehension or attempts to misrepresent them, but they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. After the failure of the working class’s first subversive assault on capitalism, we are now witness to the failure of capitalist abundance. On the one hand, we see anti-union struggles of Western workers that have to be repressed (and repressed primarily by the unions themselves), at the same time rebellious tendencies among the young generate a protest that is still tentative and amorphous, yet already clearly embodies a rejection of the specialized sphere of the old politics, as well as of art and everyday life. These are two sides of the same coin, both signaling a new spontaneous struggle emerging under the sign of criminality, both portents of a second proletarian onslaught on class society. When the enfants perdus of this as-yet immobile horde enter once again upon the battlefield, which has changed yet stayed the same, a new General Ludd will be at their head — leading them this time in an onslaught on the machinery of permitted consumption.

116

“That long-slought” political form whereby the economic emancipation of labor might finally be achieved” has taken on a clear outline in this century, in the shape of revolutionary workers’ councils vesting all decision-making and executive powers in themselves and federating with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time. As yet such councils have enjoyed only a brief and experimental existence; their appearance has invariably occasioned attack and defeat by one or another of class society’s means of defence — often including, it must be said, the presence of false consciousness within the councils themselves. As Pannekoek rightly stressed, the decision to set up workers’ councils does not in itself provide solutions so much as it “proposes problems.” Yet the power of workers’ councils is the one context in which the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can be truly solved. It is here that the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are assembled,
a bourgeoisie to fulfill normal bourgeois economic functions leads to its soon being confronted by a subversive opposition, structured on the bureaucratic model and more or less well adapted to local conditions, that is eager to usurp what the bourgeoisie has inherited. But the successful realization by any bureaucracy of its fundamental project of industrialization itself necessarily embodies the prospect of its historical failure, for as it accumulates capital it also accumulates the proletariat, so creating its own negation in countries where that negation did not yet exist.

114

IN THE COURSE OF the complex and terrible evolution that has brought the era of class struggle under a new set of conditions, the proletariat of the industrialized countries has lost the ability to assert its own independence. It has also, in the last reckoning, lost its illusions. But it has not lost its being. The proletariat has not been eliminated, and indeed it remains irreducibly present, under the intensified alienation of modern capitalism, in the shape of the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives and who, once they realize this, must necessarily redefine themselves as the proletariat — as negation at work in the bosom of today’s society. This class is objectively reinforced by the peasantry’s gradual disappearance, as also by the extension of the logic of the factory system to a broad sector of labor in the “services” and the intellectual professions. Subjectively, though, this is a proletariat still very far removed from any practical class consciousness, and this goes not only for white-collar workers but also for wage workers who as yet know nothing but the impotence and mystifications of the old politics. But when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power conspires in the continual reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer merely thanks to the alienation of its labor, but also thanks to the form taken on by unions, parties and institutions of State power that it had established in pursuit of its own self-emancipation, then it must also discover through concrete historical experience that it is indeed that class which is totally opposed to all reified externalizations and all specializations of power. The proletariat is the bearer of a revolution that can leave no other sphere of society untransformed, that enforces the permanent domination of the past by the present and demands a universal critique of separation; the action of the proletariat must assume a form adequate to these tasks. No quantitative relief of its poverty, no illusory hierarchical incorporation, can supply a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognize

73

THE REAL MOVEMENT that abolishes reigning conditions governed society from the moment the bourgeoisie triumphed in the economic sphere, and it did so visibly once that victory was translated onto the political plane. The development of the forces of production had shattered the old relations of production; every static order had crumbled to nothing. And everything that had formerly been absolute became historical.

74

IT IS BECAUSE human beings have thus been thrust into history, and into participation in the labor and the struggles which constitute history, that they find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear-eyed manner. The history in question has no goal aside from whatever effects it works upon itself, even though the last unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era may view the productive progression through which history has unfolded as itself the object of that history. As for the subject of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world — that is, of history — and coming to exist as consciousness of its own activity.

75

THE CLASS STRUGGLES of the long revolutionary period ushered in by the rise of the bourgeoisie have evolved in tandem with the “thought of history,” with the dialectic — with a truly historical thinking that is not content simply to seek the meaning of what is but aspires to understand the dissolution of everything that is — and in the process to dissolve all separation.

76

FOR HEGEL it was no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but rather of interpreting the world’s transformation. Inasmuch as he did no more than interpret that transformation, however, Hegel was merely the philosophical culmination of philosophy. He sought to understand a world that made itself. Such historical thought was still part of that consciousness which comes on the scene too late and supplies a justification after the fact. It thus transcended separation — but it did so in thought only. Hegel’s paradoxical posture, which subordinates the meaning of all reality to its historical culmination, while at the same time revealing this meaning by
proclaiming itself to be that culmination, arises from the simple fact that the great thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries strove in his philosophy merely for reconciliation with the results of those revolutions. "Even as a philosophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not reflect the entire process of that revolution, but only its concluding phase. It is thus a philosophy, not of the revolution, but of the restoration" (Karl Korsch, "Theses on Hegel and Revolution"). Hegel performed the task of the philosopher — "the glorification of what exists" — for the last time, but, even for him, what existed could only be the totality of the movement of history. Since the external position of thought was nevertheless maintained, this could be masked only by identifying that thought with a preexisting project of the Spirit — of that absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done, that force whose achievement is the present. So philosophy, as it expires in the arms of truly historical thinking, can no longer glorify its world without denying it, for even in order to express itself it must assume that the total history in which it has vested everything has come to an end, and that the only court capable of ruling on truth or falsehood has been adjourned.

77

WHEN THE PROLETARIAT demonstrates through its own actions that historical thought has not after all forgotten and lost itself, that thought's conclusions are negated, but at the same time the validity of its method is confirmed.

78

HISTORICAL THOUGHT CAN be saved only if it becomes practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class cannot be less than historical consciousness applied to the totality of its world. All the theoretical strands of the revolutionary workers' movement stem from critical confrontation with Hegelian thought, and this goes for Marx as for Stirner and Bakunin.

79

THE INSEPARABILITY of Marx's theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from that theory's revolutionary character, that is to say, from its truth. It is under this aspect that the relationship between Marx and Hegel has generally been ignored, ill understood or even denounced as the weak point of what has been fallaciously transformed between their philosophy and the party program." The real subject of Lukacs's purely imaginary — and inopportune — portrait was a party that was indeed coherent with respect to one precise and partial task only — to wit, the seizure of State power.

113

THE NEO-LENINIST mirage entertained by present-day Trotskyism is contradicted at every moment by the reality of modern capitalist society, whether of the bourgeois or the bureaucratic type. It is therefore not surprising that it gets its best reception in the formally independent "underdeveloped" countries, where a variety of fraudulent versions of state and bureaucratic socialism are consciously passed off by local ruling classes as, quite simply, the ideology of economic development. The hybrid nature of such classes is more or less directly associated with their position on the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between these two poles of existing capitalist power, along with ideological compromises (notably with Islam) corresponding to their heterogeneous social bases, together serve to strip these last retreads of ideological socialism of all credibility except for that of their police. One type of bureaucracy has established itself by providing a common framework for nationalist struggle and peasant agrarian revolt; in such cases, as in China, the Stalinist model of industrialization tends to be applied in societies even less advanced than the Russia of 1917. A bureaucracy capable of industrializing a nation may also arise out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened for instance in Egypt. In other places, among them Algeria following its war of independence, a bureaucracy that has established itself as a para-State authority in the course of a struggle seeks stability through compromise, and fuses with a weak national bourgeoisie. Lastly, in those former colonies of black Africa that have maintained overt ties to Western bourgeoisies, whether European or American, a local bourgeoisie is constituted — generally reposing on the power of traditional tribal chiefs — through possession of the State: in such countries, where foreign imperialism is still the true master of the economy, a stage is reached at which the compradors' compensation for the sale of local products is ownership of a local State that is independent of the masses though not of the imperialist power. The result is an artificial bourgeoisie that is incapable of accumulating capital and merely squanders its revenue — as much the portion of surplus value it extracts from local labor as the foreign subsidies it receives from protector States or monopolies. The manifest incapacity of such
survived all the evidence of that conflation’s real consequences. The gap between Trotskyism and a revolutionary critique of present-day society is in effect coextensive with the respectful distance that the Trotskyists maintain toward positions that were already mistaken when they played themselves out in a real struggle. Until 1927 Trotsky remained fundamentally loyal to the high bureaucracy, though he sought to gain control of this bureaucracy and cause it to resume a properly Bolshevik foreign policy. (It is well known that at this time he went so far, in order to help conceal Lenin’s famous “Testament,” as to disavow slanderously his supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public.) Trotsky was doomed by his basic perspective; the fact was that as soon as the bureaucratic class knew itself, on the basis of the results of its action, to be a counterrevolutionary class on the domestic front, it was bound to opt for a counterrevolutionary role on the world stage, albeit one assumed in the name of revolution — in short, to act abroad just as it did at home. Trotsky’s subsequent struggle to set up a Fourth International enshrined the same inconsistency. Having once, during the second Russian revolution, become an unconditional partisan of the Bolshevik form of organization, Trotsky simply refused, for the rest of his life, to see that the bureaucracy’s power was the power of a separate class. When Lukacs, in 1923, pointed to this same organizational form as the long-sought mediation between theory and practice thanks to which proletarians, instead of being mere “spectators” of events that occur in their own organization, consciously choose and experience those events, what he was describing as actual virtues of the Bolshevik party were in fact everything that the Party was not. The depth of his theoretical work notwithstanding, Lukacs was an ideologist speaking for a power that was in the crudest way external to the proletarian movement, believing and giving his audience to believe that he himself, his entire personal being, partook of this power as though it were truly his own. While subsequent events were to demonstrate exactly how the power in question repudiated and eliminated its servants, Lukacs, with his endless self-repudiations, revealed with caricatural clarity precisely what he had identified with, namely, the opposite of himself, and the opposite of everything for which he had argued in *History and Class Consciousness*. No one better than Lukacs illustrates the validity of a fundamental rule for assessing all the intellectuals of this century: what they respect is a precise gauge of their own contemptible reality. It certainly cannot be said that Lenin encouraged illusions of this kind concerning his activities, for it was Lenin who acknowledged that “a political party cannot examine its members to see whether contradictions exist into a Marxist *dogma*. Deploiring the less-than-scientific predictions of the *Manifesto* of 1848 concerning the imminence of proletarian revolution in Germany, Bernstein perfectly described this connection between the dialectical method and a historical *taking of sides*: “Such historical autosuggestion, so grievously mistaken that the commonest of political visionaries would be hard pressed to top it, would be incomprehensible in a Marx — who by that period had already become a serious student of the economy — were it not possible to recognize here the traces of a lingering loyalty to Hegel’s antithetical dialectics, from which Marx, no more than Engels, had never completely emancipated himself. In view of the general turbulence of the times, this was all the more fatal to him.”

### The Inversion That Marx Effected

The inversion that Marx effected in order to salvage the thought of the bourgeois revolutions by “transplanting” it was no trivial substitution of the material development of the forces of production for the unfolding of the Hegelian Spirit on its way to its rendezvous with itself in time, its objectification being indistinguishable from its alienation, and its historical wounds leaving no scars. For history, once it becomes real, no longer has an end. What Marx did was to demolish Hegel’s *detached* stance with respect to what occurs, along with the *contemplation* of a supreme external agent of whatever kind. Theory thence-forward had nothing to know beyond what it itself did. By contrast, the contemplation of the movement of the economy in the dominant thought of present-day society is indeed a *non-inverted* legacy of the undialectical aspect of the Hegelian attempt to create a circular system; this thought is an approbatory one which no longer has the dimension of the concept, which no longer has any need of Hegelianism to justify it, because the movement that it is designed to laud is a sector of the world where thought no longer has any place — a sector whose mechanical development in effect dominates the world’s development overall. Marx’s project is the project of a conscious history whereby the quantitative realm that arises from the blind development of purely economic productive forces would be transformed into a qualitative appropriation of history. The *critique of political economy* is the first act of this *end of prehistory*: “Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.”

### The Close Affinity of Marx’s Thinking with Scientific Thinking

81
its rational grasp of the forces actually at work in society. Fundamentally, though, Marx’s theory lies beyond science, which is only preserved within it inasmuch as it is transcended by it. For Marx it is the struggle — and by no means the law — that has to be understood. “We know only a single science,” says The German Ideology, “the science of history.”

The bourgeois era though eager to give history a scientific foundation, neglects the fact that the science available to it must certainly have been itself founded — along with the economy — on history. On the other hand, history is fundamentally dependent on economic knowledge only so long as it remains merely economic history. History’s intervention in the economy (a global process that is after all capable of changing its own basic scientific preconditions) has in fact been overlooked by scientific observers to a degree well illustrated by the vain calculations of those socialists who believed that they could ascertain the exact periodicity of crises. Now that continual tinkering by the State has succeeded in compensating for the tendency for crises to occur, the same type of reasoning takes this delicate balance for a permanent economic harmony. If it is to master the science of society and bring it under its governance, the project of transcending the economy and taking possession of history cannot itself be scientific in character. The revolutionary point of view, so long as it persists in espousing the notion that history in the present period can be mastered by means of scientific knowledge, has failed to rid itself of all its bourgeois traits.

The utopia strands in socialism, though they do have their historical roots in the critique of the existing social organization, are properly so called inasmuch as they deny history — inasmuch, that is, as they deny the struggle that exists, along with any movement of the times beyond the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society. Not, however, because they deny science. On the contrary, the utopians were completely in thrall to scientific thinking, in the form in which this had imposed itself in the preceding centuries. Their goal was the perfection of this rational system. They certainly did not look upon themselves as prophets disarmed, for they believed firmly in the social power of scientific proof — and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. “However did they imagine,” Sombart wonders, “that what needed to be proved might be won by fighting?” All the same, the utopians’ scientific orientation did not superiority on capitalism’s own ground, it is exposed as capitalism’s poor cousin. Just as its actual history is at odds with its judicial status, and its crudely maintained ignorance in contradiction with its scientific pretensions, so its wish to vie with the bourgeoisie in the production of an abundance of commodities is stymied by the fact that an abundance of this kind contains its own implicit ideology, and is generally accompanied by the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular false alternatives — a pseudo-freedom, yes, but one which, for all that, is incompatible with the bureaucracy’s ideology.

At the present stage in the bureaucracy’s development, its ideological title to ownership is already collapsing internationally: a power set up on the national level as a basically internationalist model must now renounce any claim to maintaining its false cohesion irrespective of national frontiers. The unequal economic development experienced by those competing bureaucracies that have succeeded in owning “socialism” in more than one country has led only to a public and all-out confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie. Henceforward each bureaucracy in power, and likewise each of those totalitarian parties aspiring to a power that has outlived the Stalinist period within one national working class or another, will have to find its own way. Considered in conjunction with the expressions of internal negation which first became visible to the outside world when the workers of East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats and demanded a “government of metalworkers,” and which have since even extended to the setting up of workers’ councils in Hungary, this crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavorable portent for the future development of capitalist society. For the bourgeoisie is now in danger of losing an adversary that has objectively supported it by investing all opposition to its order with a purely illusory unity. A rift in the pseudo-revolutionary component of the established division of spectacular labor can only herald the end of that system itself. This spectacular aspect of the dissolution of the workers’ movement is thus itself headed for dissolution.

The mirage of Leninism today has no basis today outside the various Trotskyist tendencies, where the conflation of the proletarian project with a hierarchical organization grounded in ideology has stolidly
order that was by now conservative, and effectively mobilized both the petty bourgeoisie and unemployed workers panic-stricken because of the crisis or disillusioned by the impotence of revolutionary socialism, it was not itself fundamentally ideological in character. Fascism presented itself for what it was — a violent resurrection of myth calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudo-values: race, blood, leader. Fascism is a cult of the archaic completely fitted out by modern technology. Its degenerate ersatz of myth has been revived in the spectacular context of the most modern means of conditioning and illusion. It is thus one factor in the formation of the modern spectacle, as well as being, thanks to its part in the destruction of the old workers’ movement, one of the founding forces of present-day society. But inasmuch as fascism happens also to be the costliest method of maintaining the capitalist order, it was normal enough that it should be dislodged by more rational and stronger forms of this order — that it should leave the front of the stage to the lead players, namely the capitalist States.

WHEN THE RUSSIAN BUREAUCRACY at last successfully disencumbered itself of relics of bourgeois property standing in the way of its hegemony over the economy, once it had developed this economy in accordance with its own purposes, and once it had achieved recognition from without as a great power among others, it sought to enjoy its own world in tranquility, and to remove the arbitrariness to which it was still itself subjected; it therefore proceeded to denounce the Stalinism of its beginnings. Such a denunciation was bound, however, to remain Stalinist, arbitrary, unexplained and subject to continual adjustment, for the simple reason that the ideological falsehood that had attended the bureaucracy’s birth could never be exposed. The bureaucracy cannot liberalize itself either culturally or politically because its existence as a class depends on its monopoly of an ideology — which, for all its cumbersomeness, is its sole title to ownership. Admittedly this ideology has lost the passion that informed its original self-affirmation, yet even the pitiless triviality which is all that is left retains the oppressive role of prohibiting the least suggestion of competition and holding the entirety of thought captive. The bureaucracy is thus helplessly tied to an ideology no longer believed by anyone. What inspired terror now inspires derision, but even this derision would disappear were it not for the fact that the terror it mocks still lurks in the wings. So it is that at the very moment when the bureaucracy attempts to demonstrate its extend to knowledge of the fact that social groups are liable to have vested interests in a status quo, forces at their disposal equipped to maintain it and indeed forms of false consciousness designed to buttress their positions. Their idea of things thus lagged far behind the historical reality of the development of science itself, which was by this time largely governed by the social demand arising from factors, such as those mentioned above, which determined not only what was considered scientifically acceptable but also just what might become an object of scientific research. The utopian socialists remained prisoners to the scientific manner of expounding the truth, and they viewed this truth in accordance with its pure abstract image — the form in which it had established itself at a much earlier moment in social development. As Sorel noted, the utopians took astronomy as their model for the discovery and demonstration of the laws of society: their conception of harmony, so hostile to history, was the product, logically enough, of an attempted application to society of the science least dependent on history. This conception was introduced and promoted with an experimental ingenuity worthy of Newtonism, and the smiling future continually evoked by the utopians played “a role in their social science analogous to that played by inertia in rational mechanics” (Matériaux pour une théorie du prolétariat).

THE SCIENTIFIC-DETERMINIST side of Marx’s thought was indeed what made it vulnerable to “ideologization”; the breach was opened in Marx’s own lifetime, and greatly widened in his theoretical legacy to the workers’ movement. The advent of the subject of history was consequently set back even further, as economics, the historical science par excellence, was depended on more and more as guarantor of the necessity of its own future negation. In this way revolutionary practice — the only true agent of this negation — tended to be thrust out of theory’s field of vision altogether. It became important patiently to study economic development, and once more to accept, with Hegelian tranquility, the suffering it imposed — that suffering whose outcome was still a “graveyard of good intentions.” All of a sudden it was discovered that, according to the “science of revolutions,” consciousness now always came on the scene too soon, and needed to be taught. “History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong,” Engels would write in 1895. “It has made it clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was not, by a long way, ripe....” Throughout his life Marx upheld his theory’s unitary standpoint, yet in the exposition of that theory he
was drawn onto the ground of the dominant forms of thought, in that he undertook critiques of particular disciplines, and notably of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It was in this mutilated form, later taken as definitive, that Marx’s theory became “Marxism.”

**85**

The weakness of Marx’s theory is naturally part and parcel of the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The working class failed to inaugurate permanent revolution in 1848, and the Commune went down in isolation. Revolutionary theory was thus still unable to come into full possession of its own existence. That Marx should have been reduced to defending and honing that theory in the detachment of scholarly work in the British Museum can only have had a debilitating effect on the theory itself. What is certain is that the scientific conclusions that Marx drew about the future development of the working class — along with the organizational practice founded on them — would later become obstacles to proletarian consciousness.

**86**

All the theoretical shortcomings of a scientific defense of proletarian revolution, be they in the content or in the form of the exposition, come down in the end to the identification of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.

**87**

As early as the *Manifesto*, the urge to demonstrate the scientific legitimacy of proletarian power by citing a sequence of precedents only served to muddy Marx’s historical thinking. This approach led him to defend a linear model of the development of modes of production according to which, at each stage, class struggles would end “either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” The plain facts of history, however, are that, just as the “ Asiatic mode of production” (as Marx himself observed in another connection) preserved its stasis in spite of class conflict, so too no jacquerie of serfs ever overthrew the barons and no slave revolt in the ancient world ever ended the rule of freemen. The first thing the linear model loses sight of is the fact that the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever been victorious; the only class, also, for which the development of the economy was the cause and consequence of domination and the power that devastates that field.

**108**

By the time ideology, become absolute because it possesses absolute power, has been transformed from a fragmentary knowledge into a totalitarian lie, truly historical thinking has for its part been so utterly annihilated that history itself, even at the level of the most empirical knowledge, can no longer exist. Totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which everything that has happened earlier exists for it solely as a space accessible to its police. A project already formulated by Napoleon, that of “monarchically directing the energy of memories,” has thus been made concrete in a permanent manipulation of the past, and this not just in respect of the past’s meaning, but even in respect of the facts themselves. The price paid for this emancipation from all historical reality, though, is the loss of the rational orientation indispensable to capitalism as a historical social system. We know how much the scientific application of an ideology gone mad has cost Russia — one need only think of the Lysenko fiasco. The internal contradictions besetting totalitarian bureaucracy in its administration of an industrialized society — its simultaneous need for rationality and refusal of it — also constitutes one of its chief shortcomings as compared with normal capitalist development. Just as the bureaucracy cannot resolve the question of agriculture as capitalism does, so too it turns out eventually to be inferior to capitalism in industrial production, which it seeks to plan in an authoritarian manner on the twin bases of a complete lack of realism and an adherence to an all-embracing lie.

**109**

Between the two world wars the revolutionary workers movement was destroyed by the action, on the one hand, of the Stalinist bureaucracy and, on the other, of fascist totalitarianism, the latter having borrowed its organizational form from the totalitarian party as first tried out in Russia. Fascism was an attempt of the bourgeois economy to defend itself, in extremis, from the dual threat of crisis and proletarian subversion; it was a state of siege in capitalist society, a way for that society to survive through the administration of an emergency dose of rationalization in the form of massive State intervention in its management. Such rationalization, however, inevitably bore the stamp of the immensely irrational nature of the means whereby it was imposed. Even though fascism came to the aid of the chief icons (the family, private property, the moral order, the nation) of a bourgeois
leadership. Though everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy is obliged to be a class imperceptible to consciousness, thus making the whole of social life unfathomable and insane. The social organization of the absolute lie reposes on this fundamental contradiction.

STALINISM was a reign of terror within the bureaucratic class. The terror on which the bureaucracy’s power was founded was bound to strike the class itself, because this class had no legal basis, no juridical status as a property-owning class that could be extended to each of its members individually. Its real proprietorship was masked, because it had become an owner only by means of false consciousness. False consciousness can maintain absolute power only through absolute terror, where all real motives soon vanish. Members of the ruling bureaucratic class have the right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a basic lie: they have to play the part of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they are actors faithful to the text of ideological betrayal. Yet their effective participation in this counterfeit being has to be perceived as real. No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to present himself as the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the official truth of the bureaucracy is that the bureaucracy does not exist. Thus each bureaucrat is completely dependent on a central guarantee from ideology, which acknowledges the collective participation in “socialist power” of all such bureaucrats as it does not liquidate. As a group the bureaucrats may be said to make all the decisions, but the cohesiveness of their class can only be ensured by the concentration of their terroristic power in one person. In this person reposes the only practical truth of the lie in power: the power to lay down an unchallengeable boundary that is ever subject to revision. Stalin thus had the power to decide without appeal exactly who was a bureaucrat, and hence an owner; his word alone distinguished “proletarians” in power from “traitors in the pay of the Mikado and Wall Street.” The atomized bureaucrat could find the shared essence of his juridical status only in the person of Stalin — that lord and master of the world who takes himself in this way to be the absolute person and for whom there exists no higher type of spirit: “The lord of the world becomes really conscious of what he is — viz., the universal might of actuality — by that power of destruction which he exercises against the contrasted selfhood of his subjects.” He is at once the power that defines the field of its capture of society. The same simplified view led Marx to neglect the economic role of the State in the management of a class society. If the rising bourgeoisie appears to have liberated the economy from the State, this is true only to the extent that the State was formerly the instrument of class oppression in a static economy. The bourgeoisie developed its autonomous economic power during the medieval period when the State had been weakened, when feudalism was breaking up a stable equilibrium between powers. The modern State, on the other hand, which first supported the developing bourgeoisie thanks to the mercantile system, and then went on, in the time of “laisser faire, laisser passer,” to become the bourgeoisie’s own State, was eventually to emerge as wielder of a power central to the planned management of the economic process. Marx was already able, under the rubric of Bonapartism, accurately to depict a foreshadowing of modern State bureaucracy in that fusion of capital and State which established “capital’s national power over labor and a public authority designed to maintain social servitude”; the bourgeoisie thus renounced any historical existence beyond its own reduction to the economic history of things, and permitted itself to be “condemned along with the other classes to a like political nullity.” Already discernible in outline here are the sociopolitical bases of the modern spectacle, which in a negative way defines the proletariat as the only pretender to historical existence.

THE ONLY TWO classes that really correspond to Marx’s theory, the two pure classes that the whole thrust of Capital’s analysis tends to bring to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history — but they are revolutionary under different conditions. The bourgeois revolution is a fait accompli. The proletarian revolution is a project, formulated on the basis of the earlier revolution but differing qualitatively from it. To neglect the originality of the bourgeoisie’s historical role serves only to conceal the concrete originality of the proletarian project, which can get nowhere unless it advances under its own banner and comes to grips with the “prodigiousness of its own aims.” The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the class of consciousness. The growth of the forces of production cannot in itself guarantee this accession to power — not even indirectly, via the increase in dispossession that this growth entails. Nor can any Jacobin-style seizure of the State be a means to that end. The proletariat cannot make
use of any ideology designed to pass partial goals off as general ones, because it cannot maintain any partial reality that is truly its own.

IT IS TRUE that during a certain period of his participation in the struggle of the proletariat Marx overrated the value of scientific prediction — indeed he went so far in this direction that he provided the illusions of economism with an intellectual justification; however, he clearly never fell prey himself to such illusions. In a well-known letter of 7 December 1867, accompanying an article criticizing Capital which he himself had written, and which Engels was supposed to publish as if it were that of an opponent, Marx clearly indicated the limits of his scientific stance: “The author’s subjective tendency (imposed on him, perhaps, by his political position and his past) — that is to say, the way in which he himself pictures, and portrays for others, the ultimate outcome of the present movement, the present social process — has nothing whatsoever to do with his real analysis.” By thus censuring the “tendentious conclusions” of his own objective analysis, and by interpolating an ironic “perhaps” apropos of the unscientific choices supposedly “imposed” on him, Marx in effect reveals the methodological key to tackling the two aspects of the matter.

THE FUSION of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each of these poles depends for its validation on the other. What constitutes the proletarian class as a subject is its organizing of revolutionary struggles and its organizing of society at the moment of revolution: this is the point at which the practical conditions of consciousness must be assembled and the theory of praxis verified by virtue of its transformation into theory-in-practice. This pivotal issue of organization, however, received but the scantest attention from revolutionary theory during the founding period of the workers’ movement — the very period when that theory still possessed the unitary character which it had inherited from historical thought (and which it had rightly vowed to develop into a unitary historical practice). As it turned out, organization became the locus of revolutionary theory’s inconsistency, allowing the tenets of that theory to be imposed by statist and hierarchical methods borrowed from the bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization developed subsequently by the workers’ movement on the basis of this dereliction of theory have tended in turn to bar the construction of a unitary theory, to break theory up instead

regn of the economy and the salvaging of all essential aspects of market society, not least the institution of labor-as-commodity. The economy in its independence thus showed itself so thoroughly able to dominate society as to recreate for its own purposes that class domination which is essential to its operation. It proved, in other words, that the bourgeoisie had created a power so autonomous that, so long as it endured, it could even do without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy was not, in Bruno Rizzi’s sense, “the last property-owning class in history,” for it was merely a substitute ruling class for the market economy. A tottering capitalist property system was replaced by an inferior version of itself — simplified, less diversified and concentrated as the collective property of the bureaucratic class. This underdeveloped type of ruling class was likewise a reflection of economic underdevelopment, and it had no agenda beyond correcting this backwardness in particular parts of the world. The hierarchical, statist framework for this cheap remake of the capitalist ruling class was supplied by the party of the workers, organized on the bourgeois model of separation. As Anton Ciliga noted from the depths of one of Stalin’s prisons, “Technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions” (Lenin and Revolution).

AS THE coherence of the separate, the revolutionary ideology of which Leninism was the highest voluntaristic expression governed the management of a reality that was resistant to it; with Stalinism, this ideology rediscovered its own incoherent essence. Ideology was no longer a weapon, but an end in itself. But a lie that can no longer be challenged becomes a form of madness. Eventually both reality and the goal sought dissolved in a totalitarian ideology proclaiming that whatever it said was all there was. This was a local primitivism of the spectacle that has nonetheless played an essential part in the spectacle’s worldwide development. The ideology that took on material form in this context—did not transform the world economically, as capitalism in its affluent stage has done; it succeeded only in using police methods to transform perception.

THE IDEOLOGICAL—TOTALITARIAN class in power is the power of a world turned on its head: the stronger the class, the more forcefully it proclaims that it does not exist, and its strength serves first and foremost to assert its nonexistence. This is as far as its modesty goes, however, for its official nonexistence is supposed to coincide with the ne plus ultra of historical development, which is indeed owed to its infallible
meaning; and, as for the proletarian power of the soviets, it could not be maintained at once against the class of small landholding peasants, against a national and international White reaction, and against its own externalized and alienated representation in the shape of a workers’ party of absolute masters of the State, of the economy, of the means of expression and (before long) of thought. Trotsky and Parvus’s theory of permanent revolution—which Lenin in effect espoused in April 1917—was the only theory that held true for countries that were backward from the point of view of the social development of the bourgeoisie, but even here it only applied once the unknown quantity of the bureaucracy’s class power had come into play. In the many clashes within the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was the most consistent defender of the concentration of dictatorial powers in the hands of this supreme ideological representation. He invariably had the advantage over his opponents because he championed solutions that flowed logically from the earlier choices made by the minority that now exercised absolute power: a democracy refused to peasants on the State level should be by the same token refused to workers, and hence also to Communist union leaders, to party members in general, and even, in the end, to the highest ranks of the party’s hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being put down by force of arms and deluged in slander, Lenin passed a judgment on the leftist bureaucrats of the “Workers’ Opposition,” the logic of which Stalin would later extend into a perfect division of the world: “Here with us—or out there with a gun in your hand—but not as an opposition. We have had enough of opposition.”

Finding itself the sole owner of a state capitalism, the bureaucracy at first secured its power internally by entering, after Kronstadt, and under the “New Economic Policy,” into a temporary alliance with the peasantry; externally, in parallel fashion, it defended its power by using the regimented workers of the bureaucratic parties of the Third International to back up Russian diplomacy, to sabotage revolutionary movements and to support bourgeois governments on whose support in the international sphere it was counting (the Kuomintang in the China of 1925–1927, Popular Fronts in Spain and France, etc.). In pursuit of its self-realization, however, bureaucratic society then proceeded, by means of terror exercised against the peasantry, to effect history’s most brutal primitive accumulation of capital ever. The industrialization of the Stalin era reveals the bureaucracy’s true nature: the prolonging of the

into a variety of specialized and fragmentary types of knowledge. Thus ideologically alienated, theory cannot even recognize the practical verification of the unitary historical thought that it has betrayed whenever that verification emerges in spontaneous workers’ struggles; on the contrary, all it can do is help to repress it and destroy all memory of it. Yet such historical forms, thrown up by the struggle, are the very practical medium that theory needs in order to be true. They are in fact a requirement of theory, but one that has not been given theoretical expression. The soviets, for example, were not a theoretical discovery; and, to go back even farther, the highest theoretical truth attained by the International Workingmen’s Association was its own existence in practice.

Early successes in the First International’s struggle enabled it to free itself from the confused influences that the dominant ideology continued for a time to exercise upon it from within. But the defeat and repression that it soon confronted brought to the surface a conflict between two conceptions of the proletarian revolution, each of which had an authoritarian dimension spelling the abandonment of the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. The rift between Marxists and Bakuninists, which eventually became an irreconcilable one, had a dual aspect in that it bore both upon the question of power in a future revolutionary society and upon the current organization of the movement; and both the opposing factions reversed their own position in moving from one of these issues to the other. Bakunin denounced as an illusion the idea that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian use of State power, warning that this course would lead to the reconstruction of a bureaucratic ruling class and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (or of those reputed to be the most knowledgeable). Marx, who held that the combined maturation, of economic contradictions on the one hand, and of the democratic education of the workers on the other hand, would reduce the proletarian State’s role to the short phase needed to give the stamp of legality to new social relations brought into being by objective factors, charged Bakunin and his supporters with the authoritarianism of a conspiratorial elite that had deliberately placed itself above the International with the hare-brained intention of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those self-designated as such). Bakunin unquestionably recruited followers on just such a basis: “in the midst of the popular tempest, we must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution, not by any kind of overt power.
but by the collective dictatorship of all our allies, a dictatorship without badges, without official titles, without any official status, and therefore all the more powerful, as it does not carry the trappings of power.” This was clearly a clash between two ideologies of workers’ revolution: each embodied a partially correct critique, but each, having lost the unity of historical thought, aspired to set itself up as an ideological authority. Powerful organizations, among them the German Social Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation, would subsequently faithfully serve one or the other of these ideologies; in every case the result produced was greatly different from the one sought.

92

THE FACT THAT the anarchists regard the goal of the proletarian revolution as immediately present is at once the great strength and the great weakness of the real anarchist struggle (I refer to the struggle of collectivist anarchism; the claims of anarchism in its individualist variants are laughable). Collectivist anarchism retains only the terminal point of the historical thought of modern class struggles, and its unconditional demand that this point be attained instantly is echoed in its systematic contempt for method. Its critique of the political struggle consequently remains an abstract one, while its commitment to the economic struggle is framed only in terms of the mirage of a definitive solution to be achieved at one stroke, on the economic battleground itself, on the day of the general strike or insurrection. The anarchist agenda is the fulfillment of an ideal. Anarchism is the still ideological negation of the State and of classes, that is to say, of the very social preconditions of any separated ideology. It is an ideology of pure freedom which makes everything equal and eschews any suggestion of historical evil. This position, which fuses all partial demands into a single demand, has given anarchism the great merit of representing the refusal of existing conditions from the standpoint of the whole of life, not merely from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization. On the other hand, the fact that this fusion of demands is envisaged in the absolute, at the whim of the individual, and in advance of any actualization, has doomed anarchism to an incoherence that is only too easy to discern: the doctrine requires no more than the reiteration, and the reintroduction into each particular struggle, of the same simple and all-encompassing idea — the same end—point that anarchism has identified from the first as the movement’s sole and entire goal. Thus Bakunin, on quitting the Jura Federation in 1873, found it easy to write that “During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have the radical current within the German proletariat uncovered the secret of the new conditions brought into being by the whole process which had gone before (and to which the image of the working class had largely contributed): the spectacular organization of the ruling order’s defense, and a social reign of appearances under which no “central question” could any longer be “openly and honestly” posed. By this time the revolutionary image of the proletariat had become both the main element in, and the chief result of, a general falsification of society.

102

THE ORGANIZATION of the proletariat according to the Bolshevik model stemmed from the backwardness of Russia and from the abdication from the revolutionary struggle of the workers’ movement in the advanced countries. Russian backwardness also embodied all the conditions needed to carry this form of organization in the direction of the counterrevolutionary reversal that it had unconsciously contained from its beginnings; and the repeated balking of the mass of the European workers’ movement at the Hic Rhodus, hic salta of the 1918-1920 period — a balking that included the violent annihilation of its own radical minority — further facilitated the complete unfolding of a process whose end result could fraudulently present itself to the world as the only possible proletarian solution. The Bolshevik party justified itself in terms of the necessity of a State monopoly over the representation and defense of the power of the workers, and its success in this quest turned the party into what it truly was, namely the party of the owners of the proletariat, which essentially dislodged all earlier forms of ownership.

103

FOR TWENTY YEARS the various tendencies of Russian social democracy had engaged in an unresolved debate over which conditions were most propitious for the overthrow of czarism: the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the weight in the balance of the peasant majority, the decisive role to be played by a centralized and militant proletariat and so on. When practice finally provided the solution, however, it did so thanks to a factor that had figured in none of these hypotheses, namely the revolutionary bureaucracy which placed itself at the head of the proletariat, seized the State and proceeded to impose a new form of class rule on society. A strictly bourgeois revolution was impossible; talk of a “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants” had no real
of the sort of reformist practice pursued in parallel fashion by the Second International. The task of directing the proletariat from without, by means of a disciplined clandestine party under the control of intellectuals who had become “professional revolutionaries,” gave rise to a genuine profession — and one disinclined to make compacts with any professional strata of capitalist society (even had such an overture — presupposing the attainment of an advanced stage of bourgeois development — been within the power of the czarist political regime to make). In consequence the specialty of the profession in question became that of total social management.

99

WITH THE ADVENT OF the war, and the collapse of international social democracy in face of it, the authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks was able to cast its net across the globe. The bloody end of the workers’ movement’s democratic illusions made a Russia of the whole world, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary rift opened up by this period of crisis, proposed its hierarchical and ideological model to the proletariat of all countries as the way to “talk Russian” to the ruling class. Lenin never reproached the Second International’s Marxism for being a revolutionary ideology — but only for having ceased to be such an ideology.

100

THIS SAME HISTORICAL MOMENT, when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world, also marks the definitive inauguration of an order of things that lies at the core of the modern spectacle’s rule: this was the moment when an image of the working class arose in radical opposition to the working class itself.

101

"IN ALL EARLIER REVOLUTIONS," wrote Rosa Luxemburg in Die Rote Fahne for 21 December 1918, “the opponents confronted one another face to face: class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops that protect the old order, instead of intervening in the name of the ruling classes, intervene under the banner of a ‘social-democratic party.’ If the central question of the revolution were posed openly and honestly — in the form ‘Capitalism or socialism?’ — then no doubt or hesitation would be possible today among the broad proletarian masses.” Thus, a few days before its destruction, been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds.” No doubt this attitude preserves the commitment of the truly historical thought of the proletariat to the notion that ideas must become practical, but it leaves the ground of history by assuming that the adequate forms of this transition to practice have already been discovered and are no longer subject to variation.

93

THE ANARCHIST, whose ideological fervor clearly distinguished them from the rest of the workers’ movement, extended this specialization of tasks into their own ranks, so offering a hospitable field of action, within any anarchist organization, to the propagandists and defenders of anarchist ideology; and the mediocrity of these specialists was only reinforced by the fact that their intellectual activity was generally confined to the repetition of a clutch of unchanging truths. An ideological respect for unanimity in the taking of decisions tended to favor the uncontrolled exercise of power, within the organization itself, by “specialists of freedom”; and revolutionary anarchism expects a comparable unanimity, obtained by comparable means, from the people once they are liberated. Furthermore, the refusal to distinguish between the opposed situations of a minority grouped in the ongoing struggle and a new society of free individuals has led time and again to the permanent isolation of anarchists when the time for common decisions arrives — one need only think of the countless anarchist insurrections in Spain that have been contained and crushed at a local level.

94

THE ILLUSION MORE OR LESS explicitly upheld in all genuine anarchism is that of the permanent imminence of a revolution which, because it will be made instantaneously, is bound to validate both anarchist ideology and the form of practical organization that flows from it. In 1936 anarchism really did lead a social revolution, setting up the most advanced model of proletarian power ever realized. Even here, though, it is pertinent to recall, for one thing, that the general insurrection was dictated by an army pronunciamento. Furthermore, inasmuch as the revolution was not completed in its earliest days — Franco, enjoying strong foreign backing at a time when the rest of the international proletarian movement had already been defeated, held power in half
the country, while bourgeois forces and other workers’ parties of statist bent still existed in the Republican camp — the organized anarchist movement proved incapable of broadening the revolution’s semi-victories, or even of safeguarding them. The movement’s leaders became government ministers — hostages to a bourgeois state that was dismantling the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

95

THE “ORTHODOX MARXISM” of the Second International was the scientific ideology of the socialist revolution, an ideology which asserted that its whole truth resided in objective economic processes, and in the gradual recognition of their necessity by a working class educated by the organization. This ideology exhumed utopian socialism’s faith in pedagogics, eking this out with a contemplative evocation of the course of history. So out of touch was this attitude with the Hegelian dimension of a total history, however, that it lost even the static image of the totality present in the utopians’ (and signally in Fourier’s) critique. A scientific orientation of this variety, hardly capable of doing anything more than rehash symmetrical ethical alternatives, informed Hilferding’s insipid observation in *Das Finanzkapital* that recognizing the necessity of socialism “gives no clue as to what practical attitude should be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize a necessity, and quite another to place oneself in the service of that necessity.” Those who chose not to understand that for Marx, and for the revolutionary proletariat, a unitary historical thought was itself nothing more and nothing less than the practical attitude to be adopted could only fall victim to the practice which that choice immediately entailed.

96

THE IDEOLOGY of the social-democratic organization placed that organization in the hands of teachers who were supposed to educate the working class, and the organizational form adopted corresponded perfectly to the sort of passive learning that this implied. The participation of the socialists of the Second International in the political and economic struggles was concrete enough, but it was profoundly uncritical. Theirs was a manifestly reformist practice carried on in the name of an illusory revolution. It was inevitable that this ideology of revolution should founder on the very success of those who proclaimed it. The setting apart of parliamentary representatives and journalists within the movement encouraged people who had in any case been recruited from the bourgeois intelligentsia to pursue a bourgeois style of life, while the trade-union bureaucracy turned even those drawn in through industrial struggle, and of working-class background, into mere brokers of labor — traders in labor-power as a commodity to be bought and sold like any other. For the activity of all these people to have retained any revolutionary aspect whatsoever, capitalism would have had to find itself conveniently unable to put up with a reformism on the economic plane that it was perfectly able to tolerate on the political, in the shape of the social democrats’ legalistic agitation. The “science” of the social democrats vouched for the inevitability of such a paradoxical occurrence; history, however, gave the lie to it at every turn.

97

THIS WAS THE CONTRADICTION that Bernstein, being the social democrat farthest removed from political ideology, and the one who most unabashedly embraced the methodology of bourgeois science, was honest enough to draw attention to; the reformism of the English workers’ movement, which did without revolutionary ideology altogether, also attested to it; but only historical development itself could demonstrate it beyond all possibility of doubt. Though prey to all kinds of illusions in other areas, Bernstein had rejected the notion that a crisis of capitalism must miraculously occur, thus forcing the hand of the socialists, who declined to assume any revolutionary mantle in the absence of such a legitimating event. The profound social upheaval set in train by the First World War, though it raised consciousness on a wide scale, proved twice over that the social-democratic hierarchy had failed to educate the German workers in a revolutionary way, that it had failed, in short, to turn them into theoreticians: the first time was when the overwhelming majority of the party lent its support to the imperialist war; the second time was when, in defeat, the party crushed the Spartacist revolutionaries. The sometime worker Ebert still believed in sin — declaring that he hated revolution “like sin.” He also proved himself to be a fine herald of that image of socialism which was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat of Russia and elsewhere, by precisely articulating the agenda of this new form of alienation: “Socialism,” said Ebert, “means working hard.”

98

AS A MARXIST THINKER, Lenin was simply a faithful and consistent Kautskyist who applied the revolutionary ideology of “orthodox Marxism” to the conditions existing in Russia, conditions that did not permit
Guy Debord

The Society of the Spectacle

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Separation Perfected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Commodity As Spectacle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Unity And Division Within Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>The Proletariat As Subject And As Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Time And History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Spectacular Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>The Organization Of Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Negation And Consumption Within Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Ideology Materialized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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And without doubt our epoch...prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being... What is sacred for it is only illusion, but what is profane—is truth. More than that, the sacred grows in its eyes to the extent that truth diminishes and illusion increases, to such an extent that the peak of illusion is for it the peak of the sacred.

FEUERBACH
Preface to the second edition of
The Essence of Christianity

I. SEPARATION PERFECTED
1

The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

2

The images which detached themselves from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream where the unity of life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially deploys itself in its own general unity as a pseudo-world apart, an object of contemplation only. The specialization of images of the world is rediscovered, perfected, in the world of the autonomized image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living.

3

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all looking and all consciousness. Because of the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the location of the abused look and of false consciousness; and the unification which it accomplishes is nothing other than an official language of generalized separation.
The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images.

The spectacle cannot be understood as the abuse of a world of vision, as the product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a Weltanschauung which has become actual, materially translated. It is a vision of the world which has become objectified.

The spectacle, understood in its totality, is simultaneously the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, its added decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, advertisement or direct consumption of entertainments, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. The form and the content of the spectacle are identically the total justification of the conditions and the ends of the existing system. The spectacle is also the permanent presence of this justification, to the extent that it occupies the principal part of the time lived outside of modern production.
Separation is itself part of the unity of the world, of the global social praxis which is split into reality and image. The social practice in front of which the autonomous spectacle parades is also the real totality which contains the spectacle. But the gash within this totality mutilates it to the point of making the spectacle appear to be its goal. The language of the spectacle consists of signs of the ruling production, which at the same time are the ultimate goal of this production.

One cannot abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided. The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. At the same time lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and it takes up the spectacular order within itself, giving it a positive adhesion. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society.

Within a world really on its head, the true is a moment of the false.

The concept of the spectacle unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena. The diversity and the contrasts are the appearances of this socially organized appearance which must itself be recognized in its general truth. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is the affirmation of appearance and the affirmation of all human, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle uncovers it as the visible negation of life; as a negation of life which has become visible.
To describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces which tend to dissolve it, one must artificially distinguish some inseparable elements. When analyzing the spectacle one speaks, to some extent, the language of the spectacular itself in the sense that one moves across the methodological terrain of the society which expresses itself in the spectacle. But the spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, its use of time. It is the historical moment which contains us.

The spectacle presents itself as an enormous unutterable and inaccessible actuality. It says nothing more than “that which appears is good, that which is good appears.” The attitude which it demands in principle is this passive acceptance, which in fact it has already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.

The basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are at the same time its goal. It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory.

The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectacleist. In the spectacle, image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development is all. The spectacle wants to get to nothing other than itself.
As the indispensable decoration of the objects produced today, as the general expose of the rationality of the system, as the advanced economic sector which directly shapes a growing multitude of image-objects, the spectacle is the main production of present-day society.

The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers.

The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life had brought into the definition of all human realization an obvious degradation of being into having. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of having into appearing, from which all actual “having” must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function. At the same time all individual reality has become social, directly dependent on social force, shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only because it is not.
When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is no longer identifiable with the mere look, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation the spectacle reconstitutes itself.

The spectacle is the heir of all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which was to understand activity, dominated by the categories of seeing; indeed, it is based on the incessant deployment of the precise technical rationality which grew out of this thought. It does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. It is the concrete life of all which is degraded into a speculative universe.

Philosophy, the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power, could never by itself overcome theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dissipated the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base. Thus it is the most earthly life which becomes opaque and unbreatheable. It no longer throws into the sky but houses within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; separation perfected within the interior of man.
To the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.

The fact that the practical power of modern society detached itself and built itself an independent empire in the spectacle can only be explained by another fact, the fact that this practical power continued to lack cohesion and remained in contradiction with itself.

The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks for the ensemble of the others. It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society in front of itself, where all other expression is banned. Here the most modern is also the most archaic.

The spectacle is the uninterrupted conversation which the present order maintains about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the
conditions of existence. The fetishist appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations hides their character of relations among men and among classes: a second nature seems to dominate our environment with its fatal laws. But the spectacle is not the necessary product of technical development seen as a natural development. The society of the spectacle is on the contrary the form which chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle, taken in the limited sense of "means of mass communication," which are its most glaring superficial manifestation, may seem to invade society as a simple instrumentation, this instrumentation is in fact nothing neutral but is the very instrumentation which is suited to the total self-movement of the spectacle. If the social needs of the epoch in which such techniques are developed can only be satisfied through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially unilateral. As a result the concentration of "communication" accumulates within the hands of the administration of the existing system the means which allow it to carry on this particular administration. The generalized cleavage of the spectacle is inseparable from the modern State, namely from the general form of cleavage within society, the product of the division of social labor and the organ of class domination.

Separation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor, the formation of classes, had
constructed a first sacred contemplation, the mythical order with which every power covers itself from the beginning. The sacred has justified the cosmic and ontological order which corresponded to the interests of the masters, it has explained and embellished that which society could not do. Thus all separate power has been spectacular, but the adherence of all to an immobile image only signified the common acceptance of an imaginary prolongation for the poverty of real social activity, still largely felt as a unitary condition. The modern spectacle, on the contrary, expresses what society can do, but in this expression the permitted is absolutely opposed to the possible. The spectacle is the preservation of unconsciousness within the practical change of the conditions of existence. It is its own product, and it has made its own rules: it is a pseudo-sacred. It shows what it is: separate power developing within itself, in the growth of productivity by means of the incessant refinement of the division of labor into a parcellization of gestures which are then dominated by the independent movement of machines; and working for an ever more expanded market. All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces which could have grown have separated and have not yet been rediscovered.

With the generalized separation of the worker from his product every unitary viewpoint of accomplished activity and all direct personal communication among producers, are lost. Accompanying the progress of the accumulation of separate products and the concentration of the productive process, unity and communication become exclusively the attribute of the directorate of the system. The success of the economic system of separation is the proletarianization of the world.
Through the very success of separate production in the sense of production of the separate, the basic experience related in primitive societies to a principal work is in the process of being displaced by non-work, by inactivity, at the pole of the system's development. But this inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity: it depends on productive activity, it is an uneasy and admiring submission to the necessities and the results of production; it is itself a product of its rationality. There can be no liberty outside of activity, and in the context of the spectacle all activity is negated, just as real activity has been captured in its entirety for the global erection of this result. Thus the present "liberation from labor," the augmentation of leisure, is in no way a liberation within labor, nor a liberation of the world shaped by this labor. None of the activity stolen within labor can be rediscovered in the submission to its result.

The economic system founded on isolation is a circular production of isolation. The technology is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to television, all the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of "lonely crowds." The spectacle constantly rediscovers its own assumptions more concretely.
The origin of the spectacle is the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss: the abstraction of all specific labor and the general abstraction of the entirety of production are perfectly translated in the spectacle, whose *mode of being concrete* is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, one part of the world *represents itself* before the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation. What ties the spectators together is no more than an irreversible relation at the very center which maintains their isolation. The spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it *as separate*.

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

The worker does not produce himself; he produces an independent power. The *success* of this production, its abundance, returns over the
producer as an abundance of dispossession. All the time and space of his world become strange to him with the accumulation of his alienated products. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory. The very powers which escaped us show themselves to us in all their force.

The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion is mainly the expansion of precisely this industrial production. That which grows with the economy moving for itself can only be the alienation which was precisely at its origin.

The man separated from his product himself produces all the details of his world with ever increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his world. The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life.

The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.
II. THE COMMODITY AS A SPECTACLE

For it is only as the universal category of total social being that the commodity can be understood in its authentic essence. It is only in this context that reification which arises from the commodity relation acquires a decisive meaning, as much for the objective evolution of society as for the attitude of men towards it, for the submission of their consciousness to the forms in which this reification is expressed.

... This submission also grows because of the fact that the more the rationalization and mechanization of the work process increases, the more the activity of the worker loses its character as activity and becomes a contemplative attitude.

Lukacs
History and Class Consciousness.
In the essential movement of the spectacle, which consists of taking up within itself all that existed in human activity in a fluid state, in order to possess it in a coagulated state, as things which have become the exclusive value by their formulation in negative of lived value, we recognize our old enemy, the commodity, who knows so well how to seem at first glance something trivial and obvious, while on the contrary it is so complex and so full of metaphysical subtleties.

This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things," which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible par excellence.

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. And the world of the commodity is thus shown as it is, because its movement is identical to the estrangement of men among themselves and vis-à-vis their global product.

The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language,
of the objects it praises and the behavior it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative. It is the quantitative which the commodity-form develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative.

39

This development which excludes the qualitative is, as development, itself subject to a passage into the qualitative: the spectacle signifies that it has crossed the threshold of its own abundance; this is as yet true only locally at some points, but is already true on the universal scale which is the original context of the commodity, a context which its practical movement, encompassing the Earth as a world market, has verified.

40

The development of productive forces has been the real unconscious history which built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups as conditions of survival, and extended these conditions: the economic basis of all their enterprises. Within a natural economy, the commodity sector represented a surplus of survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of varied products among independent producers, could for a long time remain craft production contained within a marginal economic function where its quantitative truth was still masked. However, when commodity production met the social conditions of large scale commerce and of the accumulation of capitals, it seized the total domination of the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had shown itself to be during the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This incessant deployment of economic power in the form of the commodity, which transformed human labor into commodity-labor, into wage-labor, cummulatively led to an abundance in which the primary question of survival is undoubtedly resolved, but in such a way that it is constantly rediscovered; it is posed over again each time at a higher level. Economic growth frees societies from the natural pressure which demanded their direct struggle for survival, but at that point it is from their liberator that they are not liberated. The independence of the commodity was extended to the entire economy over which it rules. The economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy. The pseudo-nature within which human labor is alienated demands that it be served ad infinitum, and this service, being judged and absolved only by itself, in fact acquires the totality of socially permissible efforts and projects as its servants. The abundance of com-
modities, that is, the commodity relation, can be no more than augmented survival.

The domination of the commodity was at first exerted over the economy in an obscure manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar which remains unknown. In a society where the concrete commodity is rare or unusual, it is the apparent domination of money which presents itself as an emissary armed with full powers which speaks in the name of an unknown force. With the industrial revolution, the division of labor in manufactures, and mass production for the world market, the commodity appears in fact as a power which comes really to occupy social life. It is then that political economy takes shape, as the dominant science and as the science of domination.

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. The relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its domina-
tion is already present with a few star commodities and as imperialist domination by zones which are ahead in the development of productivity. In these advanced zones, social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption becomes for the masses a supplementary duty to alienated production. It is all the sold labor of a society which globally becomes the total commodity for which the cycle must be continued. For this to be done, it is necessary for this total commodity to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as an ensemble. Thus it is here that the specialized science of domination must in turn specialize: it fragments itself into sociology, psychotechnics, cybernetics, semiology, etc., watching over the self-regulation of all the levels of the process.

43

Whereas in the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, "political economy sees in the proletarian only the worker," who must receive the minimum indispensable for the conservation of his labor power without ever considering him "in his leisure, in his humanity," this position of the ideas of the dominant class is reversed as soon as the degree of abundance attained in the production of commodities demands a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker suddenly washed of the total scorn which is clearly shown to him by all the modalities of organization and surveillance of production, finds himself each day, outside of production, seemingly treated as a grown up, with a zealous politeness under the mask of a consumer. Then the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the "leisure and humanity" of the worker, simply because political economy can and must now dominate these spheres as political economy. Thus the "perfected denial of man" has taken charge of the totality of human existence.
The spectacle is a permanent opium war whose aim is to make acceptable the identification of goods with commodities, and of satisfaction with survival augmenting according to its own laws. But if consumable survival is something which must always increase, this is because it never ceases to contain privation. If there is nothing beyond augmented survival, no point where it might stop its growth, this is because it is not beyond privation, but is privation become enriched.

With automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the model where its practice is perfectly summed up, the world of the commodity must surmount the following contradiction: the technical instrumentation which objectively eliminates labor must at the same time conserve labor as a commodity and as the only source of the commodity. In order for automation (or any other less extreme form of increasing the productivity of labor) not to diminish the actual social labor necessary for the entire society, new jobs must be created. The tertiary sector, services, represents an immense extension of continuous rows of the army of distribution, and a eulogy of present-day commodities: the tertiary sector is thus a mobilization of supplementary forces which opportunistically encounters the necessity for such an organization of rear-guard labor in the very artificiality of the needs for such commodities.
Exchange value could originate only as an agent of use value, but its victory by means of its own weapons created the conditions for its autonomous domination. Mobilizing all human use and seizing the monopoly of its satisfaction, exchange value has ended up by directing use. The process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange. Exchange value is the condottiere of use value, which ends up carrying on the war for itself.

The tendency of use value to fall, this constant of capitalist economy, develops a new form of privation within augmented survival. The new privation is not liberated to any extent from the old penury since it requires the participation of most men as wage workers in the endless pursuit of its attainment, and since everyone knows he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail lies in the fact that use in its most impoverished form (eating, inhabiting) exists only to the extent that it is imprisoned within the illusory wealth of augmented survival, the real basis for the acceptance of illusion in general in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.

Use value, which was implicitly contained in exchange value, must now be explicitly proclaimed, in the inverted reality of the spectacle, precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy; and because a pseudo-justification becomes necessary for counterfeit life.

The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalent of all commodities. But if money has dominated society as the representation of the central equivalence, namely as the exchangeable property of the various goods whose uses remained incomparable,
the spectacle is its developed modern complement, in which the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the totality of the society can be and do. The spectacle is the money which one only looks at, because in the spectacle the totality of use is already exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not only the servant of pseudo-use, it is already in itself the pseudo-use of life.

50

At the moment of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product. Capital is no longer the invisible center which directs the mode of production: accumulation spreads it to the periphery in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

51

The victory of the autonomous economy must at the same time be its defeat. The forces which it has unleashed eliminate the economic necessity which was the immutable basis of earlier societies. When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But the autonomous economy separates itself forever from basic need to the extent that it emerges from the social unconscious which depended on it without knowing it. “All that is conscious is used up. That which is unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in its turn?” (Freud)

52

When society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy, in effect, depends on it. This subterranean power, which has grown to the point of seeming to be sovereign, has lost its power. That which was the economic it must become the I. The subject can only emerge from society, namely from the struggle within it. The subject’s possible existence hangs on the outcome of the class struggle which shows itself to be the product and the producer of the economic foundation of history.
The consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness are identically the project which, in its negative form, seeks the abolition of classes, that is, the direct possession by the workers over all the moments of their activity. Its opposite is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world which it has created.
A new, animated polemic is unfolding in the country, on the philosophical front, with respect to the concepts "one divides into two" and "two fuse into one." This debate is a struggle between those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that "one divides into two" is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that "two fuse into one" are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic reflects, on the ideological level, the acute and complex class struggle which is unfolding in China and in the world.

The Red Flag of Peking
September 21, 1964.

III.
UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCE
The spectacle, like modern society, is at once unified and divided. Like society, it builds its unity on tearing apart. But the contradiction, when it emerges in the spectacle, is in turn contradicted by a reversal of its meaning, so that the demonstrated division is unitary, while the demonstrated unity is divided.

The struggle of powers constituted for the management of the same socio-economic system spreads as an official contradiction but is in fact a real unity—on a world scale as well as within every nation.

The spectacular sham struggles of rival forms of separate power are at the same time real in that they translate the unequal and conflictual development of the system, the relatively contradictory interests of classes or subdivisions of classes which acknowledge the system and define themselves as participants within its power. Just as the development of the most advanced economy is a confrontation between priorities, the totalitarian management of the economy by a State bureaucracy, and the condition of the countries within the sphere of colonization or semi-colonization, are defined by considerable specificities in the modalities of production and power. These different oppositions can be presented, in the spectacle, by completely different criteria, as absolutely distinct forms of society. But in terms of the factual reality of their specific sectors, the truth of their specificity resides in the universal system which encompasses them, the unique movement which has made the planet its field: capitalism.

The society which carries the spectacle does not dominate the underdeveloped regions only by its economic hegemony. It dominates them as the society of the spectacle. Where the material base is as yet absent, modern society has already invaded the social surface of each continent by means of the spectacle. It defines the program of a ruling class and presides over its formation. Just as it presents pseudo-goods to be coveted, so it offers to local revolutionaries false models of revolution. The spectacle of bureaucratic power, which holds sway over some in-
dustrial countries, is precisely a part of the total spectacle, its general pseudo-negation and its support. The spectacle in its varied localizations brings to view the totalitarian specializations of social communication and administration; these being to dissolve at the level of the functioning of the entire system into a world division of spectacular tasks.

58

The division of spectacular tasks which preserves the entirety of the existing order, preserves in particular the dominant pole of its development. The root of the spectacle is within the terrain of the abundant economy, which is the source of the fruits which dominate the spectacular market, in spite of the ideologico-police protectionist barriers of local spectacles with autarkic pretensions.

59

The movement of banalization, under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, dominates modern society the world over and at every point where the developed consumption of commodities has multiplied the roles and the objects to choose from in appearance. The relics of religion and of the family (which remain the principal form of the heritage of class power) and the moral repression which they assure, can be combined into one with the repeated affirmation of the joy of this world—this world only being produced precisely as a pseudo-joy which contains repression within it. The smug acceptance of that which exists can also be combined into one, with purely spectacular rebellion: this translates the simple fact that dissatisfaction itself became a commodity as soon as economic abundance was able to extend its production to the treatment of such a raw material.

60

By concentrating in himself or herself the image of a possible role, the celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, concentrates this banality. The condition of the star is the specialization of the seemingly lived, the object of identification with apparent life without depth, which must compensate for the fragments of productive specializations which are really lived. Celebrities exist in order to represent varied types of life styles and styles of comprehending society, free to express themselves globally. They incarnate the inaccessible result of social labor by miming the sub-products of this labor which are magically transferred above it as its goal: power and vacations, decision and consumption, which are at the beginning and at the
end of an undiscussed process. There, it's the governmental power which personalizes itself in a pseudo-celebrity; here it's the star of consumption which popularizes itself as a pseudo-power over the experienced. But just as the activities of the star are not really global, they are not really varied.

The agent of the spectacle, put on stage as a star, is the opposite of the individual; he is the enemy of the individual in himself as obviously as in others. Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent has renounced all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things. The star of consumption, while being externally the representation of different types of personality, shows each of these types having equal access to the totality of consumption and finding similar happiness there. The celebrity of decision must possess a complete stock of recognized human qualities. Thus between stars official differences are wiped out by official similarity, the presupposition of their excellence in everything. Khrushchev became a general so as to decide on the battle of Kursk, not on the spot, but at the twentieth anniversary, when he was master of the State. Kennedy remained an orator even to the point of proclaiming the eulogy over his own tomb, since Theodore Sorensen continued to edit speeches for the successor in the style which had characterized the personality of the deceased. The admirable people in which the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are; they became great men by descending beneath the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it.
False choice within spectacular abundance, a choice which consists of the juxtaposition of competing and united spectacles and in the juxtaposition of roles (signified and carried mainly by things) which are at once exclusive and overlapping, develops into a struggle of fantastic qualities destined to give passion to adhesion to quantitative triviality. In this manner, false archaic oppositions are reborn; regionalisms or racisms are charged with transforming the vulgarity of hierarchic places into a fantastic ontological superiority. In this manner, the interminable series of laughable confrontations is recomposed, mobilizing a sub-ludic interest, from the sport of competition to that of elections. Wherever abundant consumption is installed, the spectacular opposition between youth and adults gains importance among the fallacious roles. There are no adults, masters of their lives. Youth, the transformation of what exists, is in no way the characteristic of those who are now young; it is a property of the economic system, the dynamism of capitalism. It is things which rule and are young; which confront and replace each other.

It is the unity of misery which hides under the spectacular oppositions. If varied forms of the same alienation struggle under masks of total choice, it is because they are all built on real contradictions which are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it dinies and supports. In both cases, it is the same image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and horror, in the tranquil center of unhappiness.

The concentrated spectacle essentially belongs to bureaucratic capitalism, even though it may be imported as a technique of state power in mixed backward economies, or at certain moments of crisis in advanced capitalism. In fact, bureaucratic property itself is concentrated in the sense that the individual bureaucrat relates to the ownership of the global economy only through an intermediary, the bureaucratic community, and only as a member of this community. Furthermore, less developed commodity production also takes on a concentrated form: the commodity which the bureaucracy possesses is the total social labor, and that which it sells to society is survival as a whole. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the ex-
exploited masses any significant margin of choice, since the bureaucracy itself must choose everything; external choices, whether they concern food or music, already represent the choice of the total destruction of the bureaucracy. This must be accompanied by permanent violence. The image of the good which is imposed within this spectacle gathers up the totality of what officially exists, and is usually concentrated in one man, who is the guarantee of totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute celebrity, or disappear. Master of non-consumption, he is the heroic image of an acceptable direction for absolute exploitation which is in fact primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If every Chinese must learn Mao, and thus be Mao, it is because he can be nothing else. Wherever the concentrated spectacle rules, the police also rules.

The diffuse spectacle accompanies the abundance of commodities, the unperturbed development of modern capitalism. Here every commodity taken alone is justified in the name of the grandeur of producing the totality of objects of which the spectacle is an apologetic catalogue. Irreconcilable claims seize the stage of the affluent economy’s unified spectacle; different star-commodities simultaneously support contradictory projects for the management of society: the spectacle of automobiles demands a perfect transport network which destroys old cities, while the spectacle of the city itself requires museum-cities. Therefore the already problematic satisfaction which is supposed to come from the consumption of the ensemble, is immediately falsified since the real consumer can directly touch only a succession of fragments of this commodity happiness, fragments in which the quality attributed to the ensemble is obviously missing every time.

Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one. The spectacle, then, is the epic poem of this struggle, an epic which cannot be concluded by the fall of any Troy. The spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle every commodity, pursuing its passion, unconssciously realizes something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world. Thus, by means of a ruse of commodity reason, the specific of the commodity-form moves on towards its absolute realization.
The satisfaction no longer given by the use of the abundant commodity is now sought in its value as a commodity: it is the use of the commodity being sufficient to itself; for the consumer there is religious fervor for the sovereign liberty of the commodity. Waves of enthusiasm for a given product, supported and spread by all the means of information, are thus propagated with lightning speed. A clothing style emerges from a film; a magazine promotes night spots which launch varied fads. The gadget expresses the fact that, at the moment when the mass of commodities slides toward aberration, the aberrant itself becomes a special commodity. Supplementary gifts accompanying prestigious objects which are sold or which flow from exchange in their own sphere, represent a manifestation of a mystical abandon to the transcendence of the commodity. One who collects the gifts which have just been manufactured for collection, accumulates the indulgences of the commodity, a glorious sign of his real presence among the faithful. Reified man advertises the proof of his intimacy with the commodity. As in the convulsions or miracles of the old religious fetishism, the fetishism of the commodity sometimes reaches moments of fervent exaltation. The only use which is still expressed here is the fundamental use of submission.
Without doubt, the pseudo-need imposed by modern consumption cannot be opposed by any genuine need or desire which is not itself shaped by society and its history. But the abundant commodity is an absolute rupture of an organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation liberates unlimited artificiality, in the face of which living desire is disarmed. The cumulative power of independent artificiality is followed everywhere by the falsification of social life.

In the image of the society happily unified by consumption, real division is only suspended until the next non-accomplishment in the consumable. Every specific product which must represent the hope for a dazzling shortcut to the promised land of total consumption, is ceremoniously presented as the decisive unit. But as in the case of the instantaneous diffusion of fads of apparently aristocratic first names which are carried by nearly all individuals of the same age, the object from which one expects a singular power could not have been suggested for the devotion of masses unless it had been produced in numbers large enough to be consumed massively. The prestigious character of a product comes to it only from its having been placed for a moment at the center of social life, as the revealed mystery of the final goal of production. The object which was prestigious in the spectacle
becomes vulgar the moment it enters the house of the consumer, at the same time that it enters the house of all the others. Too late it reveals its essential poverty, which naturally comes to it from the misery of its production. But it is already another object which carries the justification of the system and the demand to be acknowledged.

70

The imposture of satisfaction denounces itself by replacing itself, by following the change of products and the change of the general conditions of production. That which affirmed its own definitive excellence with the most perfect impudence nevertheless changes, both in the diffuse spectacle and in the concentrated spectacle, and it is the system alone which must continue: Stalin as well as the outmoded commodity are denounced precisely by those who imposed them. Every new lie of advertising is also an avowal of the previous lie. Every fall of a figure of totalitarian power reveals the illusory community which approved him unanimously, and which was nothing more than an agglomeration of solitudes without illusions.

71

What the spectacle gives as eternal is founded on change, and must change with its base. The spectacle is absolutely dogmatic and at the same time cannot really achieve any solid dogma. Nothing stops for it: this is the state which is natural to it and nevertheless the most contrary to its inclination.

72

The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle is the mask of the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production rests. That which obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also that which separates them from it. That which creates relations among men liberated from their local and national limits is also that which pulls them apart. That which requires a more profound rationality is also that which nourishes the irrationality of hierarchic exploitation and repression. That which creates the abstract power of society creates its concrete non-liberty.
IV.
THE PROLETARIAT AS SUBJECT AND AS REPRESENTATION
The equal right of all to the goods and joys of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral obstacles—there, if one goes to the bottom of things, is the reason for the insurrection of March 18th and the charter of the suspicious association which furnished it with an army.

Parliamentary inquest on the insurrection of March 18th.
The real movement which suppresses existing conditions rules over society from the moment of the victory of the bourgeoisie within the economy, and visibly after the political translation of this victory. The development of productive forces made the old relations of production explode, and all static order falls to dust. Whatever was absolute becomes historical.

It is by being thrown into history, by having to participate in the work and the struggles which make up history, that men find themselves obliged to see their relations in a clear manner. This history has no object which is distinct from that which takes place within it, even though the last unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical epoch could look at the productive progression through which history is deployed as history's goal. The subject of history can be none other than the living producing itself, becoming master and possessor of its world which is history, and existing as consciousness of its game.

The class struggles of the long revolutionary epoch inaugurated by the rise of the bourgeoisie, develop together with the thought of history, the dialectic, the thought which no longer stops to look for the meaning of what is, but rises to a knowledge of the dissolution of all that is, and in its movement dissolves all separation.

Hegel no longer had to interpret the world, but the transformation of the world. By interpreting only the transformation, Hegel is only the philosophical completion of philosophy. He wants to understand a world which makes itself. This historical thought is as yet only the consciousness which always arrives too late, and which pronounces the justification after the fact. Thus it has gone beyond separation only in thought. The paradox which consists of making the meaning of all reality depend on its historical completion, and at the same time of revealing this meaning as it constitutes itself into the completion of history, flows from the simple fact that the thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries sought in his philosophy only a reconciliation with the results of these revolutions. "Even as a phil-
osophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not express the entire process of this revolution, but only its final conclusion. In this sense, it is not a philosophy of the revolution, but of the restoration.” (Karl Korsch, Theses on Hegel and Revolution). Hegel did, for the last time, the work of the philosopher, “the glorification of what exists;” but what existed for him could already be nothing less than the totality of historical movement. The external position of thought having in fact been preserved, it could only be masked by the identification of thought with an earlier project of Spirit, absolute hero who did what he wanted and wanted what he did, and whose accomplishment coincides with the present. Thus philosophy, which dies in the thought of history, can now glorify its world only by renouncing it, since in order to speak, it must presuppose that this total history to which it has reduced everything is already complete, and that the only tribunal where the judgment of truth could be given is closed.

77

When the proletariat manifests by its own existence through acts that this thought of history is not forgotten, the exposure of the conclusion is at the same time the confirmation of the method.
The thought of history can only be saved by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class cannot be less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of its world. All the theoretical currents of the revolutionary workers' movement grew out of a critical confrontation with Hegelian thought—Marx as well as Stirner and Bakunin.

The inseparable character of Marx's theory and the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from the revolutionary character of this theory, namely from its truth. This relationship has been misunderstood and even denounced as the weakness of what fallaciously became a marxist doctrine. Bernstein, in his *Theoretical Socialism and Social-Democratic Practice*, perfectly reveals the connection between the dialectical method and historical partisanship, by deploring the unscientific forecasts of the 1847 *Manifesto* on the imminence of proletarian revolution in Germany: "This historical auto-suggestion, so erroneous that the first political visionary who arrived could hardly have found better, would be incomprehensible in a Marx, who at that time had already seriously studied economics, if one could not see in this the product of a relic of the antithetical Hegelian dialectic from which Marx, no less than Engels, could never completely free himself. In those times of general effervescence, this was all the more fatal to him."

The overturning which Marx brings about for a "recovery through transfer" of the thought of bourgeois revolutions does not trivially consist of putting the materialist development of productive forces in the place of the journey of the Hegelian Spirit moving towards its encounter with itself in time, its objectification being identical to its alienation, and its historical wounds leaving no scars. History become real no longer has an end. Marx has ruined the separate position of Hegel in the face of what happens, and the contemplation of any supreme external agent. Theory must now know only what it does. However, the contemplation of the movement of the economy in the dominant thought of the present society is the untranscended heritage of the undialectical part of Hegel's search for a closed system: it is an approbation which has lost the dimension of the concept and which no longer needs a Hegelianism to justify itself, because the movement which it seeks to praise is no more than a sector without a worldly thought, a sector
whose mechanical development effectively dominates everything, Marx’s project is the project of a conscious history. The quantitative which arises in the blind development of merely economic productive forces must be transformed into a qualitative historical appropriation. The critique of political economy is the first act of this end of prehistory: “Of all the instruments of production the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.”

That which closely links Marx’s theory with scientific thought is the rational understanding of the forces which in fact exert themselves in society. But Marx’s theory is fundamentally outside of scientific thought, and it preserves scientific thought only by transcending it: what is in question is an understanding of struggle, and not of law. “We recognize only one science: the science of history,” says The German Ideology.

The bourgeois epoch, which wants to give a scientific foundation to history, overlooks the fact that the economy first had to give a historical foundation to this science. Inversely, history radically depends on economic knowledge only to the extent that it remains economic history. The degree to which the role of history in the economy (the global process which modifies its own basic scientific premises) could be overlooked by the viewpoint of scientific observation is shown by the vanity of those socialist calculations which thought they had established the exact periodicity of crises. When the constant intervention of the State succeeded in compensating for the effect of tendencies toward crisis, the same type of reasoning sees in this equilibrium a definitive economic harmony. The project of surmounting the economy, the project of taking possession of history, if it must know—and take into itself—the science of society, cannot itself be scientific. In the movement which thinks it can dominate present history by means of scientific knowledge, the revolutionary point of view remains bourgeois.

The utopian currents of socialism, although themselves historically grounded in the critique of the existing social organization, can rightly be called utopian to the extent that they reject history—namely the real struggle taking place—as well as the movement of time beyond the immutable perfection of their picture of a happy society—but not because
they rejected science. On the contrary, the utopian thinkers are completely dominated by the scientific thought of earlier centuries. They sought the completion of this general rational system: they did not in any way consider themselves disarmed prophets, since they believed in the social power of scientific proof and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. How, asked Sombart, “did they want to seize through struggle what must be proved?” Nevertheless, the scientific conception of the utopians did not extend to the knowledge that some social groups have interests in the existing situation, the forces to maintain it, and also the forms of false consciousness corresponding to such positions. This conception remained outside of the historical reality of the development of science itself, which was largely oriented by the social demand which came from such groups who selected not only what could be admitted, but also what could be studied. The utopian socialists, remaining prisoners of the mode of exposition of scientific truth, conceived this truth in terms of its pure abstract image—an image which had been imposed at a much earlier stage of society. As Sorel observed, it is on the model of astronomy that the utopians thought they would discover and demonstrate the laws of society. The harmony envisaged by them, hostile to history, flows from an attempt to apply to society the science least dependent on history. This harmony tries to make itself visible with the experimental innocence of Newtonianism, and the happy destiny constantly postulated “plays in their social science a role analogous to that which falls to inertia in rational mechanics.” (Matériaux pour une théorie du prolétariat).

The deterministic-scientific side in the thought of Marx was precisely the gap through which the process of “ideologization” penetrated into the theoretical heritage left to the workers’ movement when he was still alive. The coming of the historical subject is still pushed off until later, and it is economics, the historical science par excellence, which tends increasingly to guarantee the necessity of its own future negation. But what is pushed out of the field of theoretical vision in this manner is the revolutionary practice which is the only truth of this negation. What becomes important is to patiently study economic development, and to continue to accept suffering with a Hegelian tranquility, so that the result remains a “cemetery of good intentions.” One discovers that now, according to the science of revolutions, consciousness always comes too soon, and has to be taught. “History has shown that we, and all who thought as we did, were wrong. History has clearly shown that the state of economic development on the continent at that time was far from being ripe. . .”; Engels was to say in 1895. Throughout his life, Marx had maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the exposition of the theory was carried out over the terrain of the dominant
thought by becoming precise in the form of critiques of particular disciplines, principally the critique of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It is this mutilation, later accepted as definitive, which has constituted "marxism."

85

The shortcoming of Marx's theory is naturally the shortcoming of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The working class did not set off the permanent revolution in the Germany of 1848; the Commune was defeated in isolation. Revolutionary theory thus cannot yet achieve its own total existence. Marx's being reduced to defending and clarifying it within the separation of scholarly work, in the British Museum, implied a loss in the theory itself. It is precisely the scientific justifications drawn about the future of the development of the working class, and the organizational practice combined with these justifications, which were to become the obstacles to proletarian consciousness at a more advanced stage.

86

All the theoretical insufficiency of the scientific defense of proletarian revolution can be traced, in terms of content as well as form of exposition, to an identification of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie from the standpoint of the revolutionary seizure of power.
The tendency to base a proof of the scientific validity of proletarian power on repeated experiments in the past obscures Marx’s historical thought, from the Manifesto on, forcing Marx to support a linear image of the development of modes of production brought on by class struggles which end, each time, “with a revolutionary transformation of the entire society or with a mutual destruction of the classes in struggle.” But in the observable reality of history, as Marx observed elsewhere, the “Asiatic mode of production” preserved its immobility in spite of all the confrontations among classes, just as the serf uprisings never defeated the landlords, nor the slave revolts of Antiquity the free men. The linear schema loses sight of the fact that the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that ever won; at the same time it is the only class for which the development of the economy was the cause and the consequence of its taking hold of society. The same simplification led Marx to neglect the economic role of the State in the management of a class society. If the rising bourgeoisie seemed to liberate the economy from the State, this only took place to the extent that the former State was the instrument of class oppression in a static economy. The bourgeoisie developed its autonomous economic power in the medieval period of the weakening of the State, at the moment of feudal fragmentation of balanced powers. But the modern State which, through Mercantilism, began to support the development of the bourgeoisie, and which finally became its State at the time of “laisser faire, laisser passer,” was to reveal later that it was endowed with a central power in the calculated management of the economic process. Marx was nevertheless able to describe, in Bonapartism, the outline of the modern statist bureaucracy, the fusion of capital and the State, the formation of a “national power of capital over labor, a public force organized for social enslavement,” in which the bourgeoisie renounces all historical life which is not its reduction to the economic history of things, and would like to “be condemned to the same political nothingness as other classes.” Here the socio-political foundations of the modern spectacle are already established, negatively defining the proletariat as the only pretender to historical life.

The only two classes which effectively correspond to Marx’s theory, the two pure classes towards which the entire analysis of Capital leads, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, are also the only two revolutionary classes in history, but in very different conditions: the bourgeois revolution is over; the proletarian revolution is a project born on the foundation of the preceding revolution but differing from it qualitatively. By neglecting the originality of the historical role of the bourgeoisie,
one masks the concrete originality of the proletarian project, which can attain nothing if not by carrying its own flags and by knowing the "immensity of its tasks." The bourgeoisie came to power because it is the class of the developing economy. The proletariat cannot itself be the power except by becoming the class of consciousness. The growth of productive forces cannot guarantee such a power, even by the detour of the increasing depossession which it creates. A Jacobin seizure of power cannot be its instrument. No ideology can serve the proletariat to disguise its partial goals into general goals, because it cannot preserve any partial reality which is really its own.

89

If Marx, in a given period of his participation in the struggle of the proletariat, expected too much from scientific forecasting, to the point of creating the intellectual foundation for the illusions of economism, it is known that he did not personally succumb to them. In a well known letter of December 7, 1867, accompanying an article where he himself criticized Capital, an article which Engels would later present to the press as the work of an adversary, Marx clearly exposed the limits of his own science: "...The subjective tendency of the author (which was perhaps imposed on him by his political position and his past), namely the manner in which he sees and presents to others the ultimate results of the real movement, the real social process, has no relation to his own actual analysis." Thus Marx, by denouncing the "tendentious conclusions" of his own objective analysis, and by the irony of the "perhaps" with reference to the extra-scientific choices imposed on him, at the same time shows the methodological key of the fusion of the two aspects.

90

The fusion of knowledge and action must be realized in the historical struggle itself, so that each of these terms places the guarantee of its truth in the other. The formation of the proletarian class into a subject means the organization of revolutionary struggles and the organization of society at the revolutionary moment: it is then that the practical conditions of consciousness must exist, conditions in which the theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory. However, this central question of organization was the question least developed by revolutionary theory at the time when the workers' movement was founded, namely when this theory still had the unitary character which came from the thought of history. (Theory had undertaken precisely this task in order to develop a unitary historical practice.) This question is in fact the locus of inconsistency of this theory, allowing the return of statist and hierarchic methods of application borrowed from the
bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization of the workers' movement developed on the basis of this renunciation of theory have in turn prevented the maintenance of a unitary theory, separating it into varied specialized and partial disciplines. This ideological estrangement from theory can then no longer admit the practical verification of the unitary historical thought which it had betrayed when this verification arises out of the spontaneous struggle of the workers; it can only compete in repressing the manifestation and the memory of it. Yet these historical forms which appeared in struggle are precisely the practical milieu which the theory needed in order to be true. They are requirements of the theory which have not been formulated theoretically. The soviet was not a theoretical discovery. Yet its existence in practice was already the highest theoretical truth of the International Working-men's Association.

The first successes of the struggle of the International led it to free itself from the confused influences of the dominant ideology which survived in it. But the defeat and repression which it soon encountered brought to the forefront a conflict between two conceptions of the proletarian revolution. Both of these conceptions contained an authoritarian dimension through which the conscious self-emancipation of the working class is abandoned. In effect, the quarrel which became irreconcilable between Marxists and Bakuninists was two-edged, referring at once to power in the revolutionary society and to the organization of the present movement, and when the positions of the adversaries passed from one aspect to the other, they reversed themselves. Bakunin fought the illusion of abolishing classes by the authoritarian use of state power, foreseeing the reconstitution of a dominant bureaucratic class and the
dictatorship of the most knowledgeable, or those who would be reputed to be such. Marx, who thought that a maturing process inseparable from economic contradictions, and democratic education of the workers, would reduce the role of the proletarian State to a simple phase of legitimating the new social relations imposing themselves objectively, denounced Bakunin and his followers for the authoritarianism of a conspiratorial elite which deliberately placed itself above the International and formulated the extravagant design of imposing on society the irresponsible dictatorship of those who are most revolutionary, or those who would designate themselves to be such. Bakunin, in fact, recruited followers on the basis of such a perspective: “Invisible pilots in the center of the popular storm, we must direct it, not with a visible power, but with the collective dictatorship of all the allies. A dictatorship without badge, without title, without official right, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power.” Thus two ideologies of the workers’ revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique, but losing the unity of the thought of history, and instituting themselves into ideological authorities. Powerful organizations, like German Social-Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation faithfully served one or the other of these ideologies; and everywhere the result was greatly different from what had been desired.

The fact of looking at the goal of proletarian revolution as immediately present marks at once the greatness and the weakness of the real anarchist struggle (in its individualist variants, the pretensions of anarchists are laughable). Collectivist anarchism retains only the conclusion of the historical thought of modern class struggles, and its absolute demand for this conclusion is also translated into a deliberate contempt for method. Thus its critique of the political struggle has remained abstract, while its choice of economic struggle is affirmed only as a function of the illusion of a definitive solution brought about by one single blow on this terrain, on the day of the general strike or the insurrection. The anarchists have an ideal to realize. Anarchism is still an ideological negation of the State and of classes, namely of the social conditions of separate ideology. It is the ideology of pure liberty which equates everything and which does away with all idea of historical evil. This viewpoint which fuses all partial desires has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in favor of the whole of life, and not around a privileged critical specialization; but this fusion being considered in the absolute, according to individual caprice, before its actual realization, has also condemned anarchism to an incoherence too easily seen through. Anarchism has merely to say over again and to
put into play the same simple, total conclusion in every single struggle, because this first conclusion was from the beginning identical to the entire goal of the movement. Thus Bakunin could write in 1873, when he left the Fédération Jurassienne: "During the past nine years, more ideas have been developed within the International than would be needed to save the world, if ideas alone could save it, and I challenge anyone to invent a new one. It is no longer the time for ideas, but for facts and acts." There is no doubt that this conception preserves, from the historical thought of the proletariat, the certainty that ideas must become practice, but it leaves the historical terrain by assuming that the adequate forms for this passage to practice have already been found and will never change.

93

The anarchists, who distinguish themselves explicitly from the ensemble of the workers' movement by their ideological conviction, reproduce this separation of competences among themselves; they provide a terrain favorable to informal domination over all anarchist organizations by propagandists and defenders of their ideology, specialists who are generally more mediocre the more their intellectual activity strives to rehearse certain definitive truths. Ideological respect for unanimity of decision has on the whole been favorable to the uncontrolled authority, within the organization itself, of specialists in liberty; and revolutionary anarchism expects, from the liberated population, the same type of unanimity, obtained by the same means. Furthermore, the refusal to take into account the opposition between the conditions of a minority grouped in the present struggle and the society of free individuals, has nourished a permanent separation among anarchists at the moment of common decision, as is shown by an infinity of anarchist insurrections in Spain, limited and destroyed on a local level.

94

The illusion entertained more or less explicitly by genuine anarchism is the permanent imminence of an instantaneously accomplished revolution which will prove the truth of the ideology and of the mode of practical organization derived from the ideology. Anarchism in fact led, in 1936, to a social revolution and the most advanced foreshadowing in all time of a proletarian power. In this context it must be noted that the signal for a general insurrection had been imposed by a proclamation of the army. Furthermore, to the extent that this revolution was not
completed during the first days (because of the existence of Franco’s power in half the country, strongly supported from abroad while the rest of the international proletarian movement was already defeated, and because of survivals of bourgeois forces or other statist workers’ parties within the camp of the Republic) the organized anarchist movement showed itself unable to extend the semi-victories of the revolution, or even to defend them. Its known chiefs became ministers and hostages of the bourgeois State which destroyed the revolution only to lose the civil war.

95

The “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International is the scientific ideology of the socialist revolution: it identifies its whole truth with objective processes in the economy and with the progress of a recognition of this necessity by the working class educated by the organization. This ideology rediscovers the confidence in pedagogical demonstration which had characterized utopian socialism, but mixes it with a contemplative reference to the course of history: this attitude has lost as much of the Hegelian dimension of a total history as it has lost the immobile image of totality in the utopian critique (most highly developed by Fourier). This scientific attitude can do no more than revive a symmetry of ethical choices; it is from this attitude that the nonsense of Hilferding springs when he states that recognizing the necessity of socialism gives “no indication of the practical attitude to be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize a necessity, and it is quite another thing to put oneself at the service of this necessity.” (Finanzkapital). Those who failed to recognize that, for Marx and for the revolutionary proletariat, the unitary thought of history was in no way distinct from the practical attitude to be adopted, regularly became victims of the practice they simultaneously adopted.

96

The ideology of the social-democratic organization gave power to professors who educated the working class, and the form of organization which was adopted was the form most suitable for this passive apprenticeship. The participation of socialists of the Second International in political and economic struggles was admittedly concrete but profoundly uncritical. It was conducted in the name of revolutionary illusion by means of an obviously reformist practice. Thus the revolutionary ideology was to be shattered by the very success of those who held it. The separation of deputies and journalists in the movement drew toward a bourgeois mode of life those bourgeois intellectuals who had already
been recruited to the movement. The union bureaucracy shaped even those who had been recruited from the struggles of industrial workers, and who were themselves workers, into brokers of labor power who sold labor as a commodity, for a just price. If their activity was to retain some appearance of being revolutionary, it would have been necessary for capitalism to find itself conveniently unable to support economically this reformism which it tolerated politically in the legalistic agitation of the social-democrats. This type of incompatibility was guaranteed by their science; but history constantly gave the lie to it.

Bernstein, the social-democrat furthest from political ideology and most openly attached to the methodology of bourgeois science, had the honesty to want to demonstrate the reality of this contradiction. The English workers' reformist movement had also demonstrated it, by depriving itself of revolutionary ideology. However, the contradiction was definitively demonstrated only by historical development itself. Though full of illusions in other respects, Bernstein had denied that a crisis of capitalist production would miraculously force the hand of socialists who wanted to inherit the revolution only by this legitimate rite. The moment of profound social upheaval which arose with the first world war, though fertile with the awakening of consciousness, twice demonstrated that the social-democratic hierarchy had not educated revolutionarily, and had in no way rendered the German workers theorists: the first time when the vast majority of the party rallied to the imperialist war, and then, in defeat, when it squashed the Spartakist revolutionaries. The ex-worker Ebert still believed in sin, since he admitted that he hated revolution "like sin." And the same leader showed himself a good precursor of the socialist representation which shortly after opposed itself to the Russian proletariat as its absolute enemy, moreover formulating exactly the same program of this new alienation: "Socialism means working a lot."

As a Marxist thinker Lenin was no more than a faithful and consistent Kautskyist who applied the revolutionary ideology of this "orthodox Marxism" to Russian conditions, conditions which did not allow the reformist practice carried on by the Second International. In the Russian context, the external direction of the proletariat, acting by means of a disciplined clandestine party subordinated to intellectuals who had become "professional revolutionaries," becomes a profession which will not negotiate with any leading profession of capitalist society (the Czarist political regime being in any case unable to offer such an opening, which is based on an advanced stage of capitalist power). It therefore became the profession of the absolute direction of society.
The authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks deployed itself all over the world with the war and the collapse of the social-democratic international in the face of the war. The bloody end of the democratic illusions of the workers' movement transformed the entire world into a Russia, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary breach brought on by this epoch of crisis, offered to proletarians of all lands its hierarchic and ideological model, so that they could "speak Russian" to the ruling class. Lenin did not reproach the Marxism of the Second International for being a revolutionary ideology, but for ceasing to be one.

The same historical moment when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and when social-democracy fought victoriously for the old world marks the complete birth of the state of affairs which is at the heart of the domination of the modern spectacle: the representation of the working class has opposed itself radically to the working class.

"In all previous revolutions," wrote Rosa Luxemburg in Rote Fahne of December 21, 1918, "the combatants faced each other directly: class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops protecting the old order did not intervene under the insignia of the ruling class, but under the flag of a 'social-democratic party.' If the central question of revolution had been posed openly and honestly: capitalism or socialism?—the great mass of the proletariat would today have no doubts and no hesitations." Thus, a few days before its destruction the radical current of the German proletariat discovered the secret
of the new conditions which had been created by the preceding process (toward which the representation of the working class had greatly contributed): the spectacular organization of defense of the existing order, the social reign of appearances where no "central question" can any longer be posed "openly and honestly." The revolutionary representation of the proletariat had at this stage become both the main factor and the central result of the general falsification of society.

102

The organization of the proletariat on the Bolshevik model, born out of Russian backwardness and out of the resignation from revolutionary struggle of the workers' movement of advanced countries, found in the backwardness of Russia all the conditions which carried this form of organization toward the counter-revolutionary reversal which it unconsciously contained at its source. The repeated retreat of the mass of the European workers' movement in the face of the *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* of the 1918-1920 period, a retreat which included the violent destruction of its radical minority, favored the completion of the Bolshevik development and let this false result present itself to the world as the only proletarian solution. The seizure of a state monopoly of representation and of the defense of the workers' power, which justified the Bolshevik party, made the party become what it was, the party of the proprietors of the proletariat, essentially eliminating the earlier forms of property.

103

For twenty years the varied tendencies of Russian social-democracy had examined all the conditions for the liquidation of Czarism in a theoretical debate that was never satisfactory. They had pointed to the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the weight of the peasant majority, the decisive role of a concentrated and combative but hardly numerous proletariat. These conditions finally found their solution in practice, but because of a given which had not been present in the hypotheses of the theoreticians: the revolutionary bureaucracy which directed the proletariat seized State power and gave society a new class domination. Strictly bourgeois revolution had been impossible; the "democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants" had no meaning. The proletarian power of the Soviets could not maintain itself simultaneously against the class of small landowners, against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation externalized and alienated in the form of a workers' party of absolute masters of the State, of the economy, of expression, and soon of thought. The theory of permanent revolution of Trotsky and Parvus, which Lenin
adopted in April 1917, was the only theory which became true for countries where the social development of the bourgeoisie was retarded, but this theory became true only after the introduction of the unknown factor: the class power of the bureaucracy. The concentration of dictatorship in the hands of the supreme representation of ideology was defended most consistently by Lenin in the numerous confrontations of the Bolshevik directorate. Lenin was right every time against his adversaries in that he supported the solution implied by earlier choices of absolute minority power. The democracy which was kept from peasants by means of the state would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to keeping it from communist leaders of unions, and in the entire party, and finally up to the top of the party hierarchy. At the 10th Congress, when the Kronstadt Soviet had been defeated by arms and buried under calumny, Lenin pronounced the following conclusion against the leftist bureaucrats organized in a “Workers’ Opposition,” the logic of which Stalin would later extend to a perfect division of the world: “Here or down there with a rifle, but not with the opposition. . . We’ve had enough opposition.”

After Kronstadt, at the time of the “new economic policy,” the bureaucracy, remaining sole proprietor of a State Capitalism, assured its power internally by means of a temporary alliance with the peasantry. Externally it defended its power by using workers regimented into the bureaucratic parties of the 3rd International as supports for Russian diplomacy, thus sabotaging the entire revolutionary movement and supporting bourgeois governments whose aid it needed in international politics (the power of the Kuomintang in China in 1925-27, the Popular Front in Spain and in France, etc.). But the bureaucratic society was to continue its completion by exerting terror on the peasantry in order to realize the most brutal primitive capitalist accumulation in history. The industrialization of the Stalin epoch reveals the reality behind the bureaucracy: it is the continuation of the power of the economy, the
salvaging of the essentials of commodity society preserving commodity labor. It is the proof of the independent economy, which dominates society to the point of recreating for its own ends the class domination it requires. In other words the bourgeoisie has created an autonomous power which, so long as its autonomy lasts, can even do without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy is not "the last owning class in history" in the sense of Bruno Rizzi; it is only a substitute ruling class for the commodity economy. Declining capitalist private property is replaced by a simplified subproduct, one which is less diversified, which is concentrated into the collective property of the bureaucratic class. This under-developed form of ruling class is also the expression of economic under-development, and it has no other perspective than to overcome the retardation of this development in certain regions of the world. It was the workers' party organized according to the bourgeois model of separation which furnished the hierarchical-statist cadre for this supplementary edition of a ruling class. Anton Ciliga observed in one of Stalin's prisons that "technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions." (Lenin and the Revolution).

Revolutionary ideology, the coherence of the separate, of which Leninism represents the greatest voluntaristic attempt, maintaining control over a reality which rejects it, returns to its truth in incoherence with Stalinism. At that point ideology is no longer a weapon, but a goal. The lie which is no longer challenged becomes lunacy. Reality as well as the goal dissolve in the totalitarian ideological proclamation: all it says is all there is. It is a local primitivism of the spectacle, whose role is nevertheless essential in the development of the world spectacle. The ideology which is materialized in this context has not economically transformed the world, as has capitalism which has arrived at the stage of abundance; it has merely transformed perception by means of the police.

The totalitarian-ideological class in power is the power of an overturned world: the stronger it is, the more it claims not to exist, and its force serves above all to affirm its inexistence. It is modest only on this point, because its official inexistence must also coincide with the nec plus ultra of historical development which one simultaneously owes to its infallible command. Extended everywhere, the bureaucracy must be the class invisible to consciousness; as a result all social life becomes false. The social organization of absolute falsehood flows from this fundamental contradiction.
Stalinism was the reign of terror within the bureaucratic class itself. The terrorism at the base of the power of this class must also strike this class because it possesses no juridical guarantee, no recognized existence as owning class, which it could extend to every one of its members. Its real property is dissimulated; the bureaucracy became proprietor through the path of false consciousness. False consciousness preserves its absolute power only by means of absolute terror, where all real motives are finally lost. The members of the bureaucratic class in power have a right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a fundamental lie: they have to play the role of a leading proletariat in a socialist society; they have to be actors loyal to a script of ideological disloyalty. But effective participation in this lying being must see itself recognized as a real participation. No bureaucrat can support his right to power individually, since proving that he's a socialist proletarian would mean presenting himself as the opposite of a bureaucrat, and proving that he's a bureaucrat is impossible since the official truth of the bureaucracy is that it does not exist. Thus every bureaucrat depends absolutely on the central guarantee of the ideology which recognizes the collective participation in its "socialist power" of all the bureaucrats it does not annihilate. If all the bureaucrats taken together decide everything, the cohesion of their own class can only be assured by the concentration of their terrorist power in a single person. In this person resides the only practical truth of falsehood in power: the indisputable permanence of its constantly adjusted frontier. Stalin decides without appeal who is finally to be a possessing bureaucrat; in other words who should be named "proletarian in power" or "traitor in the pay of the Mikado or of Wall Street." The bureaucratic atoms find the common essence of their right only in the person of Stalin. Stalin is the world sovereign who in this manner knows himself as the absolute person for the consciousness of which there is no higher spirit. "The sovereign of the world has effective consciousness of what he is—the universal power of efficacy—in the destructive violence which he exerts against the Self of his subjects, the contrasting others." Just as he is the power that defines the terrain of domination, he is "the power which ravages this terrain."

When ideology, having become absolute through the possession of absolute power, changes from partial knowledge into totalitarian falsehood, the thought of history is so perfectly annihilated that history itself can no longer exist at the level of the most empirical knowledge. The totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present where everything that happened exists for it only as a place accessible to its
police. The project already formulated by Napoleon of "directing the energy of memory from the throne" has found its total concretization in a permanent manipulation of the past, not only of meanings but of facts as well. But the price paid for this emancipation from all historical reality is the loss of all rational reference which is indispensible to the historical society, capitalism. It is known how much the scientific application of insane ideology has cost the Russian economy, if only through the imposture of Lysenko. The contradiction of the totalitarian bureaucracy administering an industrialized society, caught between its need for rationality and its rejection of the rational, is one of its main deficiencies with regard to normal capitalist development. The bureaucracy cannot resolve the question of agriculture the way capitalism had done, and ultimately it is inferior to capitalism in industrial production, planned from the top and based on generalized unreality and falsehood.
Between the two world wars, the revolutionary workers' movement was annihilated by the joint action of the Stalinist bureaucracy and of fascist totalitarianism which had borrowed its form of organization from the totalitarian party tried out in Russia. Fascism was an extremist defense of the bourgeois economy threatened by crisis and by proletarian subversion. Fascism is a *state of siege* in capitalist society, by means of which this society saves itself and gives itself stop-gap rationalization by making the State intervene massively in its management. But this rationalization is itself marked by the immense irrationality of its means. Fascism rallies to the defense of the main points of a bourgeois ideology which has become conservative (the family, property, the moral order, the nation), reuniting the petite-bourgeoisie and the unemployed routed by crisis or deceived by the impotence of socialist revolution. However, fascism is not itself fundamentally ideological. It presents itself as it is: a violent resurrection of *myth* which demands participation in a community defined by archaic pseudo-values: race, blood, the leader. Fascism is *technically-equipped archaism*. Its decomposed *ersatz* of myth is revived in the spectacular context of the most modern means of conditioning and illusion. Thus it is one of the factors in the formation of the modern spectacle, and its role in the destruction of the old workers' movement makes it one of the fundamental forces of present-day society. However, since fascism is also the most costly form of preserving the capitalist order, it must naturally leave the front of the stage to the great roles played by capitalist States; it is eliminated by stronger and more rational forms of the same order.

When the Russian bureaucracy finally does away with the remains of bourgeois property which hampered its rule over the economy, when it develops this property for its own use, and when it is recognized externally among the great powers, it wants to enjoy its world calmly and to suppress the arbitrary element which had been exerted over it. It denounces the Stalinism of its origin. But the denunciation remains Stalinist, arbitrary, unexplained and continually corrected, because the *ideological lie at its origin can never be revealed*. Thus the bureaucracy can liberalize neither culturally nor politically because its existence as a class depends on its ideological monopoly which, whatever its weight, is its only title to property. The ideology has no doubt lost the passion of its positive affirmation, but what still survives of indifferent triviality still has the repressive function of prohibiting the slightest competition, of holding the totality of thought captive. Thus the bureaucracy is bound to an ideology which is no longer believed by anyone. What used to be terrorist has become a laughing matter, but this laughter itself can
preserve itself as a last resort, only by holding on to the terrorism it would like to be rid of. Thus precisely at the moment when the bureaucracy wants to demonstrate its superiority on the terrain of capitalism it reveals itself a poor relative of capitalism. Just as its actual history contradicts its right and its vulgarly entertained ignorance contradicts its scientific pretensions, so its project of becoming a rival to the bourgeoisie in the production of a commodity abundance is blocked. This project is blocked by the fact that this abundance carries its implicit ideology within itself, and is usually accompanied by an indefinitely extended freedom in spectacular false choices, a pseudo-freedom which remains irreconcilable with the bureaucratic ideology.

At the present moment of its development, the bureaucracy's title of ideological property is already collapsing internationally. The power which established itself nationally as a fundamentally internationalist model must admit that it can no longer pretend to uphold its false cohesion beyond every national frontier. The unequal economic development of some bureaucracies with competing interests who succeeded in possessing their "socialism" outside of a single country has led to the public and total confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie. From this point on, every bureaucracy in power, or every totalitarian party which is a candidate to the power left behind by the Stalinist period in some national working classes, must follow its own path. The global decomposition of the alliance of bureaucratic mystification is further aggravated by manifestations of internal negation which began to be visible to the world with the East Berlin workers' revolt, opposing the bureaucrats with the demand for "a government of steel workers," manifestations which already once led all the way to the power of workers' councils in Hungary. However, the global decomposition of the bureaucratic alliance is in the last analysis the least favorable factor for the present development of capitalist society. The bourgeoisie is in the
process of losing the adversary which objectively supported it by providing an illusory unification of all negation of the existing order. This division of spectacular labor comes to an end when the pseudo-revolutionary role in turn divides. The spectacular element of the collapse of the workers’ movement will itself collapse.

The Leninist illusion has no contemporary base outside of the various Trotskyist tendencies. Here the identification of the proletarian project with a hierarchic organization of ideology unwaveringly survives the experience of all its results. The distance which separates Trotskyism from revolutionary critique of the present society also permits the respectable distance which it keeps with regard to positions which were already false when they were used in a real combat. Trotsky remained basically in solidarity with the high bureaucracy until 1927, seeking to capture it so as to make it undertake a genuinely Bolshevik action externally (it is known that in order to dissimulate Lenin’s famous “testament” he went so far as to slanderously disavow his supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public). Trotsky was condemned by his basic perspective, because at the moment when the bureaucracy recognizes itself in its result as a counter-revolutionary class internally, it must also choose to be effectively counter-revolutionary externally in the name of revolution, just as it is at home. Trotsky’s subsequent struggle for a Fourth International contains the same inconsistency. All his life he refused to recognize the power of a separate class in the bureaucracy, because during the second Russian revolution he became an unconditional supporter of the Bolshevik form of organization. When Lukacs, in 1923, showed that this form was the long-sought mediation between theory and practice, in which the proletarians are no longer “spectators” of the events which happen in their organization, but consciously choose and live these events, he described as actual merits of
the Bolshevik party everything that the Bolshevik party was not. Except for his profound theoretical work, Lukacs was still an ideologue speaking in the name of the power most grossly external to the proletarian movement, believing and making believe that he found himself, with his entire personality within this power as if it were his own. The rest of the story made it obvious just how this power disowns and suppresses its lackeys. Lukacs, repudiating himself without end, made visible with the clarity of a caricature exactly what he had identified with: with the opposite of himself and of what he had supported in History and Class Consciousness. Lukacs is the best proof of the fundamental rule which judges all the intellectuals of this century: what they respect exactly measures their own despicable reality. However, Lenin had hardly called for this type of illusion about his activity; in his view “a political party cannot examine its members to see if there are contradictions between their philosophy and the party program.” The real party whose imaginary portrait Lukacs had presented was coherent only for one precise and partial task: to seize State power.

113

The neo-Leninist illusion of present-day Trotskyism, constantly exposed by the reality of modern bourgeois as well as bureaucratic capitalist societies, naturally finds a favored field of application in “underdeveloped” countries which are formally independent. Here the illusion of some sort of state and bureaucratic socialism is consciously dished out by local ruling classes as simply the ideology of economic development. The hybrid composition of these classes is more or less clearly related to a level on the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their games with the two poles of existing capitalist power in the international arena, and their ideological compromises (notably with Islam), which express the hybrid reality of their social base, remove from this final sub-product of ideological socialism everything serious except the police. A bureaucracy is able to form by uniting a national struggle with an agrarian peasant revolt; from that point on, as in China, it tends to apply the Stalinist model of industrialization in societies less developed than Russia was in 1917. A bureaucracy able to industrialize the nation is able to constitute itself out of the petite-bourgeoisie, or out of army cadres who seize power, as in Egypt. On certain points, as in Algeria at the beginning of its war of independence, the bureaucracy which constitutes itself as a para-statist leadership during the struggle seeks the equilibrium point of a compromise in order to fuse with a weak national bourgeoisie. Finally in the former colonies of black Africa which remain openly tied to the American and European bourgeoisie, a bourgeoisie constitutes itself (usually on the basis of the power of traditional tribal chiefs), by seizing the State. These countries, where foreign imperialism remains the real master of the economy, enter a stage where the compradorés have gotten an indigenous State as compensation for
their sale of indigenous products, a State which is independent in the face of the local masses but not in the face of imperialism. This is an artificial bourgeoisie which is not able to accumulate, but which simply dilapidates the share of surplus value from local labor which reaches it as well as the foreign subsidies from the States or corporations which protect it. Because of the obvious incapacity of these bourgeois classes to fulfill the normal economic function of a bourgeoisie, each of them faces a subversion based on the bureaucratic model, more or less adapted to local peculiarities, and eager to seize the heritage of this bourgeoisie. But the very success of a bureaucracy in its fundamental project of industrialization necessarily contains the perspective of its historical defeat: by accumulating capital it accumulates a proletariat and thus creates its own negation in a country where it did not yet exist.

In this complex and terrible development which has carried the epoch of class struggles toward new conditions, the proletariat of the industrial countries has completely lost the affirmation of its positive perspective and also, in the last analysis, its illusions, but not its being. It has not been suppressed. It remains irreducibly in existence within the intensified alienation of modern capitalism: it is the immense majority of workers who have lost all power over the use of their lives and who, once they know this, redefine themselves as the proletariat, the negation to the core within this society. The proletariat is objectively enlarged by the movement of disappearance of the peasantry and by the extension of the logic of factory labor to a large sector of "services" and intellectual professions. It is subjectively that the proletariat is still far removed from its practical class consciousness, not only among white collar workers but also among wage workers who have as yet discovered only the impotence and mystification of the old politics. Nevertheless, when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power competes constantly to reinforce capitalist society, not only in the form of its labor but also in the form of unions, of parties, or of the state power it had built to emancipate itself, it also discovers from concrete historical experience that it is the class totally opposed to all congregated externalization and all specialization of power. It carries the revolution which can leave nothing external to it, the demand for the permanent domination of the present over the past, and the total critique of separation. It is this that must find its suitable form in action. No quantitative amelioration of its misery, no illusion of hierarchic integration is a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, because the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in a particular wrong it received nor in the reparation of a particular wrong. It cannot recognize itself in the reparation of a large number of wrongs either, but only in the absolute wrong of being relegated to the margin of life.
From the new signs of negation which multiply in the economically most advanced countries, signs which are misunderstood and falsified by spectacular arrangement, one can already draw the conclusion that a new epoch has begun. After the first attempt at workers' subversion, it is now capitalist abundance which has failed. When anti-union struggles of Western workers are repressed first of all by unions, and when rebellious currents of youth launch their first informed protest which directly implies a rejection of the old specialized politics, of art and of daily life, we see two sides of a new spontaneous struggle which begins under a criminal guise. These are the signs of forerunners of a second proletarian assault against the class society. When the lost children of this still immobile army reappear on this terrain, become other and yet remain the same, they follow a new "General Ludd" who, this time, throws them into the destruction of the machines of permitted consumption.

"The political form at last discovered in which the economic liberation of labor could be realized" has in this century acquired a clear outline in the revolutionary workers' Councils which concentrate in themselves all the functions of decision and execution, and federate with each other by means of delegates responsible to the base and revocable at any moment. Their actual existence has as yet only been a brief sketch, immediately fought and defeated by different forces of defense of the class society, among which one must often count their own false consciousness. Pannekoek rightly insisted on the fact that the choice of a power of workers' Councils "poses problems" rather than bringing a solution. But this power is precisely where the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can find their real solution. This is where the objective conditions of historical consciousness are reunited. This is where direct active communication is realized, where specialization, hierarchy and separation end, where the existing conditions are transformed "into conditions of unity." Here the proletarian subject can emerge from his struggle against contemplation: his consciousness is equal to the practical organization which it undertakes because this consciousness is itself inseparable from coherent intervention in history.

In the power of the Councils, which must internationally supplant all other power, the proletarian movement is its own product and this product is itself the producer. It is to itself its own goal. Only there is the spectacular negation of life negated in its turn.
The appearance of the Councils was the highest reality of the proletarian movement in the first quarter of this century, a reality which was not seen or was travestied because it disappeared with the rest of the movement which was denied and eliminated by the entire historical experience of the time. In this new moment of proletarian critique, this result returns as the only undefeated point of the defeated movement. The historical consciousness which knows that this is the only milieu where it can exist can now recognize it, no longer at the periphery of what is ebbing, but at the center of what is rising.

A revolutionary organization existing before the power of the Councils (it will find its own form through struggle), for all these historical reasons, already knows that it does not represent the working class. It must only recognize itself as a radical separation with the world of separation.

The revolutionary organization is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into non-unilateral communication with practical struggles, in the process of becoming practical theory. Its own practice is the generalization of communication and of coherence in these struggles. At the revolutionary moment of dissolution of social separation, this organization must recognize its own dissolution as a separate organization.
The revolutionary organization can be nothing less than a unitary critique of society, namely a critique which does not compromise with any form of separate power anywhere in the world, and a critique proclaimed globally against all the aspects of alienated social life. In the struggle of the revolutionary organization against the class society, weapons are nothing other than the essence of the combatants themselves: the revolutionary organization cannot reproduce within itself the conditions of separation and hierarchy of the dominant society. It must struggle constantly against its deformation in the ruling spectacle. The only limit to participation in the total democracy of the revolutionary organization is the recognition and self-appropriation of the coherence of its critique by all its members, a coherence which must be proved in the critical theory as such and in the relation between the theory and practical activity.

Ever-increasing capitalist alienation at all levels makes it increasingly difficult for workers to recognize and name their own misery, thus placing them in front of the alternative of rejecting the totality of their misery or nothing. From this the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation with alienated forms.

Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as intelligence of human practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires workers to become dialecticians and to inscribe their thought into practice. Thus it demands more of men without quality than the bourgeois revolution demanded of the qualified men which it delegated to its task (the partial ideological consciousness built by a part of the bourgeois class had the economy at its basis, this central part of social life in which this class was already in power). The very development of class society to the point of the spectacular organization of non-life thus leads the revolutionary project to become visibly what it already was essentially.

Revolutionary theory is now the enemy of all revolutionary ideology and knows it.
"O, gentlemen, the time of life is short!... And if we live, we live to tread on kings...."

Shakespeare
Henry IV.
Man, "the negative being who is uniquely to the extent that he suppresses Being," is identical to time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his seizure of the deployment of the universe. "History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man." (Marx). Inversely this "natural history" has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which captures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, in time, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in a historical form. The temporalization of man as effected through the mediation of a society is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and becomes true within historical consciousness.

Historical movement as such, though still hidden, begins in the slow and intangible formation of the "real nature of man," this "nature born within human history—within the generating action of human society—", yet the society, which has developed a technology and a language, is conscious only of a perpetual present, though it is itself already the product of its own history. All knowledge limited to the memory of the oldest is always carried by the living. Neither death nor procreation are
grasped as a law of time. Time remains immobile, like a closed space. When a more complex society becomes conscious of time, its task is rather to negate it because it does not see in time that which happens, but that which is repeated. A static society organizes time in terms of its immediate experience of nature, on the model of cyclical time.

Cyclical time already dominates the experience of nomadic populations because the same conditions repeat themselves before the nomads at every moment of their journey: Hegel notes that “the wandering of nomads is only formal because it is limited to uniform spaces.” The society which, by fixing itself in place locally, gives space a content by arranging individualized places, thus finds itself enclosed within the interior of this localization. The temporal return to similar places now becomes the pure return of time in the same place, the repetition of a series of gestures. The transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture is the end of the lazy liberty without content, the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production in general, dominated by the rhythm of the seasons, is the basis for fully constituted cyclical time. Eternity is internal to it; it is the return of the same here on earth. Myth is the unitary construction of the thought which guarantees the entire cosmic order surrounding the order which this society has in fact already realized within its frontiers.
The social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, develop within a society divided into classes. The power which constituted itself above the penury of the society of cyclical time, the class which organizes this social labor and appropriates the limited surplus value, at the same time appropriates the temporal surplus value of its organization of social time: it possesses for itself alone the irreversible time of the living. The only wealth which can exist in concentrated form within the realm of power is materially spent in sumptuous feasts and also in the form of a squandering of the historical time at the surface of society. The owners of historical surplus value possess the knowledge and the enjoyment of lived events. This time, separated from the collective organization of time which predominates with the repetitive production at the basis of social life, flows above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war in which the masters of the cyclical society traverse their personal history, and it is also the time which appears in confrontations with foreign communities, in the derangement of the unchangeable order of the society. History then passes before men as an alien factor, as that which they never wanted and against which they thought themselves protected. But through this detour also returns the negative anxiety of the human, which had been at the very origin of the entire development which had fallen asleep.
Cyclical time in itself is time without conflict. But conflict is installed within this infancy of time: history first of all struggles to be history within the practical activity of the masters. This history superficially creates the irreversible; its movement constitutes precisely the time it uses up within the interior of the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

"Frozen societies" are those which slowed down their historical activity to the limit, those which kept their opposition to the natural and human environment, and their internal oppositions, in a constant equilibrium. If the extreme diversity of institutions established for this purpose demonstrates the flexibility of the self-creation of human nature, this demonstration becomes obvious only for the external observer, for the ethnologist who returns from historical time. In each of these societies a definitive structuring excluded change. Absolute conformism in existing social practices, with which all human possibilities are identified for all time, has no external limit other than the fear of falling back into formless animality. Here, in order to remain human, men must remain the same.

The birth of political power, which seems to be related to the last great technological revolutions (cast iron), at the threshold of a period which would not experience profound shocks until the appearance of industry, also marks the moment when blood ties begin to dissolve. From then on, the succession of generations leaves the sphere of pure cyclical nature and becomes oriented to events, to the succession of powers. Irreversible time is now the time of those who rule, and dynasties are its first measure. Writing is its weapon. In writing, language attains its full independent reality of mediating between consciousnesses. But this independence is identical to the general independence of separate power as the mediation which forms society. With writing there appears a consciousness which is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living: an impersonal memory, the memory of the administration of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the State; archives are its memory." (Novalis).

The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power. It is also the instrument which preserves the voluntaristic progression of this time. Time begins with the end of the predecessor, since this orien-
tation of time collapses with the force of every particular power, falling back to the indifferent oblivion of the only cyclical time known to the peasant masses who, during the collapse of empires and their chronologies, never change. The owners of history have given time a meaning: a direction which is also a signification. But this history deploys itself and succumbs separately; it leaves the underlying society unchanged because it is precisely that which remains separated from common reality. This is why we reduce the history of Oriental empires to the history of religions: the chronologies which have fallen to ruins left no more than the apparently autonomous history of the illusions which enveloped them. The masters who make history their private property, under the protection of myth, possess first of all a private ownership of the mode of illusion: in China and Egypt they long held a monopoly over the immortality of the soul; their first known dynasties are an imaginary arrangement of the past. But this illusory possession of the masters is also the entire possible possession, at that moment, of a common history and of their own history. The growth of their real historical power goes together with a popularization of mythical and illusory possession. All this flows from the simple fact that, to the extent that the masters took it upon themselves to guarantee the permanence of cyclical time mythically, as in the rites of the seasons of Chinese emperors, they themselves achieved a relative liberation from cyclical time.

133

The dry unexplained chronology of divine power speaking to its servants, which wants to be understood only as the earthly execution of the commandments of myth, can be surmounted and become conscious history; this requires that real participation in history be lived by extended groups. Out of this practical communication among those who recognized each other as possessors of a singular present, who experienced the qualitative richness of events as their activity and as the place where they lived—their epoch—arises the general language of historical communication. Those for whom irreversible time has existed discover within it the memorable as well as the menace of forgetting: "Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents the results of his study, so that time may not abolish the works of men. . . ."

134

Reasoning about history is inseparably reasoning about power. Greece was the moment when power and its change were discussed and understood: the democracy of the masters of society. Greek conditions were the inverse of the conditions known to the despotic State, where power settles its accounts only with itself within the inaccessible ob-
scurity of its densest point: through *palace revolution*, which is placed beyond the pale of discussion by success or failure alike. However, the power shared among the Greek communities existed only with the expenditure of a social life whose production remained separate and static within the servile class. Only those who do not work live. In the division among the Greek communities, and in the struggle to exploit foreign cities, the principle of separation which internally grounded each of them was externalized. Greece, which had dreamed of universal history, did not succeed in unifying itself in the face of invasion; or even in unifying the calendars of its independent cities. In Greece historical time became conscious, but not yet conscious of itself.

135

After the disappearance of the locally favorable conditions known to the Greek communities, the regression of western historical thought was not accompanied by a rehabilitation of ancient mythic organizations. Out of the confrontations of the Mediterranean populations, out of the formation and collapse of the Roman State, appeared *semi-historical religions* which became fundamental factors in the new consciousness of time, and in the new armor of separate power.

136

The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between cyclical time which still dominated production and irreversible time where populations confront each other and regroup. The religions which grew out of Judaism are a universal abstract recognition of irreversible time which is democratized, opened to all, but in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: "The Kingdom of God is near." These religions were born on the threshold of history, and established themselves there. But there they still preserve themselves in radical opposition to history. Semi-historical religion establishes a qualitative point of departure in time: the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed, but its irreversible time—introducing an actual accumulation which in Islam can take the shape of a conquest, or in Christianity of the Reformation the shape of an increase of capital—is in fact inverted in religious thought: the expectation, in the time which diminishes, of entrance to the genuine other world; the expectation of the last Judgment. Eternity came out of cyclical time. It is outside. It is the element which holds back the irreversibility of time, which suppresses history within history itself by placing itself on the other side of irreversible time as a pure punctual element in which cyclical time entered and abolished itself. Bossuet will still say: "And by means of the time that passes we enter into the eternity which does not pass."
The middle ages, this incomplete mythical world whose perfection lay outside it, is the moment when cyclical time, which still reigns over the greater part of production, is really chewed away by history. A certain irreversible temporality is recognized individually in everyone, in the succession of stages of life, in the consideration of life as a journey, a passage with no return through a world whose meaning lies elsewhere: the pilgrim is the man who leaves cyclical time to be actually this traveller that everyone is symbolically. Personal historical life still finds its fulfillment in the sphere of power, within participation in the struggles led by power and in the struggles of dispute over power; but the irreversible time of power is shared to infinity under the general unification of the oriented time of the Christian era, in a world of armed faith, where the game of the masters revolves around fidelity and the challenge of owed fidelity. This feudal society, born out of the encounter of “the organizational structure of the conquering army as it developed during the conquest” and of “the productive forces found in the conquered country” (German Ideology)—and in the organization of these productive forces one must count their religious language—divided the domination of society between the Church and the state power which was in turn subdivided in the complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage of territorial tenures and urban communes. Within this diversity of possible historical life, the irreversible time which unconsciously carried the underlying society, the time lived by the bourgeoisie in the production of commodities, the foundation and expansion of cities, the commercial discovery of the Earth—practical experimentation which forever destroyed all mythical organization of the cosmos—slowly revealed itself as the unknown work of this epoch, when the great official historical undertaking of this world collapsed with the Crusades.

At the decline of the middle ages, the irreversible time which invades society is felt, by the consciousness attached to the ancient order, in the form of an obsession with death. It is the melancholy of the dissolution of a world, the last in which the security of myth still gave balance to history; and for this melancholy everything earthly ends up merely by being corrupted. The great revolts of the European peasants are also their attempt to answer history, which violently pulled them out of the patriarchal sleep which had guaranteed the feudal tutelage. This is the millenarian utopia of terrestrial realization of paradise, which revives
what was at the origin of semi-historical religion, when Christian communities, like the Judaic messianism from which they arose (as answers to the troubles and unhappiness of the epoch) expected the imminent realization of the realm of God and added a disquieting and subversive factor to ancient society. When Christianity reached the point of sharing power within the empire, it exposed as a simple superstition what still survived of this hope: that is the meaning of the Augustinian affirmation, archetype of all the satispecit of modern ideology, according to which the established Church has already for a long time been this kingdom one spoke of. The social revolt of the millenarian peasantry is naturally defined first of all as a will to destroy the Church. But millenarianism plays itself out in the historical world, and not on the terrain of myth. Modern revolutionary expectations are not irrational continuations of the religious passion of millenarianism, as Norman Cohn thought he had demonstrated in The Pursuit of the Millenium. On the contrary, millenarianism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, is already a modern revolutionary tendency which as yet lacks the consciousness that it is historical. The millenarians had to lose because they could not recognize the revolution as their own operation. The fact that they waited to act on the basis of an external sign of God's decision is the translation into thought of a practice in which the insurgent peasants followed chiefs taken from outside their ranks. The peasant class could not attain an adequate consciousness of the functioning of society and of the manner to lead its own struggle; it is because it lacked these conditions of unity in its action and in its consciousness that it expressed its project and led its wars with the imagery of a terrestrial paradise.

The new possession of historical life, the Renaissance which finds its past and its legitimacy in Antiquity, carries with it a joyous rupture with eternity. Its irreversible time is that of the infinite accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness which grows out of the experience of democratic communities and of the forces which ruin them will take up, with Machiavelli, the analysis of desanctified power, saying the unspeakable about the State. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the art of the festival, life is experienced as enjoying the passage of time. But this enjoyment of passage is itself a passing enjoyment. The song of Lorenzo di Medici considered by Burckhardt to be the expression of the "very spirit of the Renaissance" is the eulogy which this fragile feast of history pronounces on itself: "How beautiful the spring of life—which vanishes so quickly."
The constant movement of monopolization of historical life by the State of the absolute monarchy, transitional form toward complete domination by the bourgeois class, brings into clear view the new irreversible time of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is tied to labor time, which is only now liberated from the cyclical. With the bourgeoisie, work becomes labor which transforms historical conditions. The bourgeoisie is the first dominant class for which labor is a value. And the bourgeoisie which suppresses all privilege, which recognizes no value which does not flow from the exploitation of labor, has justly identified with labor its own value as a dominant class, and has made the progress of labor its own progress. The class which accumulates commodities and capital continually modifies nature by modifying labor itself, by unleashing its productivity. All social life has already been concentrated within the ornamental poverty of the Court, trimmings of the cold state administration which culminates in "the vocation of king;" and all particular historical liberty has had to consent to be lost. The liberty of the irreversible temporal game of the nobles is consumed in their last lost battles with the wars of the Fronde or the insurrection of the Scotch for Charles-Edward. The world has changed at its roots.
The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of profoundly historical time, because it is the time of economic production which transforms society, continuously and from the bottom up. So long as agrarian production remains the principal labor, the cyclical time which remains present at the root of society nourishes the coagulated forces of tradition which stop movement. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economy extirpates these vestiges on every corner of the globe. History, which until then had seemed to be only the movement of individuals of the dominant class, and thus was written as the history of events, is now understood as the general movement, and in this severe movement individuals are sacrificed. The history which discovers its foundation in political economy now knows of the existence of that which had been its unconscious, but it nevertheless remains the unconscious which it cannot bring to the light of day. It is only this blind prehistory, a new fatality dominated by no one, that the commodity economy has democratized.

The history which is present in all the depths of society tends to be lost at the surface. The triumph of irreversible time is also its metamorphosis into the time of things, because the weapon of its victory was precisely the mass production of objects according to the laws of the commodity. The main product which economic development has transferred from luxurious scarcity to daily consumption is therefore history, but only in the form of the history of the abstract movement of things which dominates all qualitative use of life. While the earlier cyclical time had supported a growing part of historical time lived by individuals and groups, the domination of the irreversible time of production tends to socially eliminate this lived time.
Thus the bourgeoisie made known to society and imposed on it an irreversible historical time, but refuses society its use. "There was history, but there is no more," because the class of owners of the economy, which cannot break with economic history, must also push back as a direct menace all other irreversible use of time. The dominant class, made up of *specialists in the possession of things* who are themselves therefore a possession of things, must link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, with the permanence of a new immobility within history. For the first time the worker, at the base of society, is not materially a *stranger to history*, because it is now the base that irreversibly moves society. In the demand to *live* the historical time which it makes, the proletariat finds the simple unforgettable center of its revolutionary project; and every one of the attempts until now broken to realize this project marks a point of possible departure for new historical life.

The irreversible time of the bourgeoisie, master of power, at first presented itself under its proper name, as an absolute origin, Year 1 of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of general liberty which had destroyed the last remainders of the mythical organization of values and the entire traditional regulation of society, already made visible the real will which it had clothed in Roman dress: *the liberty of generalized commerce*. The commodity society, now discovering that it had to reconstruct the passivity which it had shaken fundamentally to establish its own pure reign, finds that "Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man. . . is the most fitting form of religion." (*Capital*). Thus the bourgeoisie establishes a compromise with this religion, a compromise which also expresses itself in the presentation of time: its own calendar abandoned, its irreversible time returns to unwind within the Christian era whose succession it continues.

With the development of capitalism, irreversible time is *unified on a world scale*. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is gathered under the development of this time. But this history which is everywhere at one time the same, is still only the inter-historical refusal of history. It is the time of economic production cut up into equal abstract fragments which is manifested over the entire planet as *the same day*. Unified irreversible time is the time of the *world market* and, as a corollary, of the world spectacle.
The irreversible time of production is first of all the measure of commodities. Therefore the time officially affirmed over the entire expanse of the globe as the general time of society, signifying only the specialized interests which constitute it, is only a particular time.
We have nothing of our own but time, which is even enjoyed by those who have no rest.

Balthasar GRACIAN
L'Homme de cour.
VI. SPECTACULAR TIME
147

The time of production, commodity-time, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is the abstraction of irreversible time where all the segments of the chronometer must only prove their quantitative equality. This time is in reality exactly what it is in its exchangeable character. It is in this social domination by commodity-time that "time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the carcass of time." (Poverty of Philosophy). It is devalued time, the complete inversion of time as "the field of human development."

148

The general time of human non-development also exists in the complementary form of a consumable time which returns to the daily life of the society with this determined production as a pseudo-cyclical time.

149

Pseudo-cyclical time is in fact no more than the consumable disguise of the commodity-time of production. It contains the essential properties of commodity-time, namely homogeneous exchangeable units and the suppression of the qualitative dimension. But being the sub-product of commodity time, destined to retarding concrete daily life—and to maintaining this retardation—it must be charged with pseudo-valuations and must seem to be a sequence of falsely individualized moments.

150

The pseudo-cyclical time of modern economic survival is the time of consumption, of augmented survival, where what is lived daily is deprived of decision and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudo-nature developed in alienated labor; and thus this time naturally rediscovers the ancient cyclical rhythm which regulated the survival of pre-industrial societies. Pseudo-cyclical time leans on the natural remains of cyclical time and at the same time composes new homologous combinations: day and night, work and weekly rest, the recurrence of vacations.
Pseudo-cyclical time is a time transformed by industry. The time which has its basis in the production of commodities is itself a consumable commodity which includes everything previously (during the phase of dissolution of the old unitary society) distinguished into private life, economic life, political life. All the consumable time of modern society comes to be treated as a raw material for varied new products which impose themselves on the market as uses of socially organized time. “A product which already exists in a form which makes it suitable for consumption can nevertheless in its turn become a raw material for another product.” (Capital).

In its most advanced sector, concentrated capitalism orients itself towards the sale of blocks of “completely equipped” time, each of which constitutes a single unified commodity which has integrated a certain number of varied commodities. In the expanding economy of “services” and leisure, this gives rise to the formula of calculated payment in which “everything’s included” for a spectacular environment, the collective pseudo-displacement of vacations, subscriptions to cultural consumption, and the sale of sociability itself in the form of “passionate conversations” and “encounters with personalities.” This sort of spectacular commodity, which can obviously pass only as a function of the acute poverty of corresponding realities, just as obviously fits among the pilot-articles of the modernization of sales by being payable on credit.

Consumable pseudo-cyclical time is spectacular time, at once as the time for the consumption of images in the limited sense, and as the image of the consumption of time in the broad sense. Time for the consumption of images, the medium of all commodities, is inseparably the field where the instruments of the spectacle fully take over, as well as the goal which these instruments present globally as the place and the central aspect of all particular consumptions: it is known that the saving of time constantly sought by modern society—whether in the form of the speed of transport vehicles or in the use of dried soups—is positively translated for the population of the United States by the fact that
merely the contemplation of television occupies an average of three to six hours a day. The social image of the consumption of time, in turn, is exclusively dominated by moments of leisure and vacation, moments represented at a distance and desirable by postulate, as are all spectacular commodities. This commodity is here explicitly given as the moment of real life whose cyclical return is awaited. But even in these assigned moments of life, it is again the spectacle which is to be seen and reproduced, attaining a more intense degree. That which was represented as genuine life is exposed as simply more genuinely spectacular life.

154

This epoch which shows itself its time as being essentially the sudden return of multiple festivities is at the same time an epoch without festivals. What had been the moment of participation of a community in the luxurious expenditure of life within cyclical time is impossible for the society without community and without luxury. When its vulgarized pseudo-festivals, parodies of the dialogue and the gift, incite a surplus of economic expenditure, they only lead to deception always compensated by the promise of a new deception. The more its use value is reduced, the higher the claims of modern survival time are in the spectacle. The reality of time has been replaced by the advertisement of time.

155

While the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real labor of these societies, the pseudo-cyclical consumption of the developed economy is in contradiction with the abstract irreversible time of its production. While cyclical time was the time of immobile illusion, really lived, spectacular time is the time of changing reality, lived in illusion.

156

That which is constantly new in the process of production of things is not found in consumption, which remains the expanded repetition of the same. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in spectacular time the past dominates the present.
Another side of the deficiency of general historical life is that individual life as yet has no history. The pseudo-events which take place in the spectacular dramatization have not been lived by those informed of them; furthermore they are lost in the inflation of their sudden replacement at every pulse of the spectacular machinery. Furthermore, that which is really lived has no relation to the official irreversible time of society and is in direct opposition to the pseudo-cyclical rhythm of the consumable subproduct of this time. This individual experience of separate daily life remains without language, without concept, without critical access to its own past which has been left nowhere. It is not communicated. It is not understood and is forgotten to the profit of false spectacular memory of the unmemorable.

The spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the false consciousness of time.
The condition required for reducing workers to the status of "free" producers and consumers of commodity time was the violent expropriation of their time. The return of time as spectacular time did not become possible until after this first depossessment of the producer.

The irreducible biological part which remains within labor, as much in the dependence on the natural cycle of waking and sleep as in the fact of individually irreversible time in the expenditure of a life, become no more than incidental from the viewpoint of modern production. As such, these elements are neglected in the official proclamations of the movement of production and in the consumable trophies which are the available translation of this incessant victory. Immobilized in the falsified center of the movement of its world, the consciousness of the spectator no longer knows in its life a passage towards its realization and towards its death. Whoever has renounced the expenditure of his life can no longer admit his death. Life-insurance advertisements merely suggest that he is guilty of dying without having insured the regulation of the system after this economic loss; and the advertisement of the American way of death insists on his capacity to maintain in this encounter the greatest possible number of appearances of life. On all other fronts of advertising bombardment, it is strictly forbidden to grow old. One would have to arrange, for each and for all, a "youth-capital" which, for having been used in a mediocre way, cannot pretend to acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital. This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life.

Time is the necessary alienation, as Hegel showed; it is the environment where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, where he becomes other in order to become truly himself. But its opposite is precisely the dominant alienation which is undergone by the producer of an alien present. In this spatial alienation, the society that at the root separates the subject from the activity it takes from him, separates him first of all from his own time. Surmountable social alienation is precisely that which prohibits and petrifies the possibilities and risks of living alienation in time.
Under the apparent *modes* which annul and recompose themselves at the futile surface of contemplated pseudo-cyclical time, the *grand style* of the epoch is always within that which is oriented by the obvious and secret necessity of the revolution.

The natural basis of time, the experienced given of the flow of time, becomes human and social by existing *for man*. It is the limited state of human practice, labor at different stages, that has until now humanized and also dehumanized time as cyclical time and separate irreversible time of economic production. The revolutionary project of a classless society, of a generalized historical life, is the project of a withering away of the social measure of time, to the benefit of a playful model of irreversible time of individuals and groups, a model in which *independent federated times* are simultaneously present. It is the program of a total realization, within the context of time, of communism which suppresses "all that exists independently of individuals."

The world already possesses the dream of a time whose consciousness it must now possess in order to actually live it.
And whoever becomes ruler of a city accustomed to living freely and does not destroy it, let him expect to be destroyed by her, because as refuge for her rebellions she always has the name of liberty and her old customs, which neither through the length of time nor for any good deed will ever be forgotten. And whatever one does there and whatever one provides, if it is not to persecute or disperse the inhabitants, this name and these customs will never be forgotten.

Machiavelli
The Prince.
Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. The accumulation of commodities produced on the assembly line for the abstract space of the market, which broke through all regional and legal barriers and all the corporate restrictions of the middle ages that preserved the quality of craft production, also destroyed the autonomy and quality of places. This power of homogenization is the heavy artillery which brought about the fall of all the walls of China.

It is in order to become ever more identical to itself, in order to continue moving toward immobile monotony, that the free space of the commodity is nevertheless constantly modified and reconstructed.

This society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular seperation.
A by-product of the circulation of commodities, tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, is basically reduced to the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The economic organization of the frequention of different places is already in itself the guarantee of their equivalence. The same modernization which has removed time from travel has also removed from it the reality of space.

The society which shapes its entire environment has constructed its special technique for working the concrete base of this collection of tasks—its own territory. Urbanism is this taking hold of the natural and human environment by capitalism; developing logically into absolute domination, it can and must now remake the totality of space as its own stage-setting.

The capitalist necessity satisfied by urbanism as a visible freezing of life can be expressed—by the use of Hegelian terms—as the absolute predominance of "the peaceful coexistence of space" over the "restless becoming in the passage of time."

If all the technical forces of capitalism can be understood as tools for the making of separations, in the case of urbanism we confront the basis of these technical forces, the treatment of the earth which is suitable for their deployment, the very technique of separation.

Urbanism is the modern accomplishment of the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power: the preservation of the atomization of workers whom urban conditions of production had dangerously brought together. The constant struggle which had to be fought against all aspects of the possibility of encounter finds its privileged field in urbanism. The exertion of all established powers, after the experiences of the French Revolution, to enlarge the means of maintaining order in the
streets, finally culminates in the suppression of the street. "With the mass media of communication over great distances, the isolation of the population showed itself a much more efficient means of control," says Lewis Mumford in *The City in History*, describing "henceforth a one-way world." But the general movement of isolation, which is the reality of urbanism, must also contain a controlled reintegration of workers in terms of the necessities of production and consumption subject to planning. Integration into the system must recapture isolated individuals as individuals *isolated together*: factories as well as culture houses, resort towns as well as grand ensembles are especially organized for the ends of this pseudo-collectivity which also accompanies the isolated individual within the *family cell*. The generalized use of receivers of the spectacular message makes it possible for the individual to repopulate his isolation with dominant images, images which acquire their full power only because of this isolation.

For the first time a new architecture, which in all previous epochs had been reserved for the satisfaction of the dominant classes, is directly aimed at the poor. The formal poverty and the gigantic spread of this new experience of habitat both come from its *mass* character, which is conditioned both by its destination and by modern condi-
tions of construction. Authoritarian decision, which abstractly organizes territory into territory of abstraction, is obviously at the heart of these modern conditions of construction. The same architecture appears wherever the industrialization of countries backward in this respect begins; they are a suitable terrain for the new type of social existence which is to be implanted there. Just as clearly as in questions of thermonuclear armament or of birth—which already approaches the possibility of a manipulation of heredity—the threshold crossed by the growth of society’s material power, and the retardation of conscious domination of this power, are displayed in urbanism.

The present moment is already the moment of the self-destruction of the urban milieu. The expansion of cities over countrysides covered with “unformed masses of urban residues” (Lewis Mumford) is directly officiated by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile, pilot-product of the first phase of commodity abundance, inscribed itself on the earth with the domination of the highway, which dislocates ancient centers and requires an ever-larger dispersion. At the same time, the moments of incompletely reorganization of the urban tissue polarize temporarily around “distribution factories,” enormous supermarkets constructed on bare ground, on a parking lot; and these temples of hurried consumption themselves flee within the centrifugal movement which rejects them when they in turn become overburdened secondary centers, because they brought about a partial recomposition of agglomeration. But the technical organization of consumption is only the first element of the general dissolution which has led the city to the point of consuming itself.

Economic history, which developed entirely around the opposition between town and country, has arrived at a level of success which simultaneously annihilates both terms. The current paralysis of total historical movement, to the profit of the sole pursuit of the independent movement of the economy, makes the moment when town and country begin to disappear, not the transcendence of their cleavage, but their simultaneous collapse. The reciprocal erosion of town and country, product of the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality should have been surmounted, appears in the eclectic melange of their decomposed elements, which covers the zones most advanced in industrialization.
Universal history is born in the cities and comes of age at the moment of the decisive victory of city over country. Marx considers it one of the greatest revolutionary merits of the bourgeoisie that "it subjected the village to the city" whose air emancipates. But if the history of the city is the history of liberty, it is also the history of tyranny, of state administration which controls the country and the city itself. As yet the city was only able to be the terrain of the struggle for historical liberty, and not its possession. The city is the milieu of history because it is at once concentration of social power which makes the historical undertaking possible, and consciousness of the past. The present tendency toward the liquidation of the city thus expresses in a different way the retardation of the subordination of the economy to historical consciousness, the unification of society taking back the powers which became detached from it.

"The countryside shows precisely the opposite: isolation and separation" (German Ideology). The urbanism which destroys cities re-composes a pseudo-countryside which loses the natural relations of the ancient countryside as well as the direct social relations directly put into question by the historical city. It is a new artificial peasantry which is re-created by the conditions of dwelling and of spectacular control within the present "organized territory"; the scattering in space and the limited mentality which had always prevented the peasantry from undertaking an independent action and from affirming itself as a creative historical force, become characteristics of the producers—the movement of a world which they themselves fabricate remaining as completely out of their reach as the natural rhythm of tasks was for the agrarian society. But when this peasantry, which was the unmovable base of "Oriental despotism" and whose very fragmentation called for bureaucratic centralization, reappears as the product of conditions of growth of the modern state bureaucracy, its apathy must now be historically fabricated and maintained; natural ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of error. The "new cities" of the technological pseudo-peasantry clearly inscribe into the ground their rupture with the historical time on which they were constructed; their motto could be: "On this spot nothing will ever happen, and nothing has ever happened." It is obviously because the history which must be liberated in the cities has not yet been liberated that the forces of historical absence begin to compose their own exclusive landscape.
The history which threatens this twilight world is also the force which could subject space to lived time. Proletarian revolution is the critique of human geography through which individuals and communities must construct the places and the events corresponding to the appropriation, no longer only of their labor, but of their total history. Within this moving space of the game and of freely chosen variations of rules of the game, the autonomy of place can be regained without re-introducing an exclusive attachment to the land, thus bringing back the reality of the journey and of life understood as a journey containing within itself all of its sense.

The greatest revolutionary idea with reference to urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or esthetic. It is the decision to reconstruct the environment completely in accordance with the needs of the power of the Workers’ Councils, of the anti-statist dictatorship of the proletariat, of enforceable dialogue. And the power of the Councils, which can only be effective by transforming the totality of existing conditions, cannot assign itself a smaller task if it wants to be recognized and to recognize itself in its world.
VIII.
NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION WITHIN CULTURE
We’re going to live long enough to see a political revolution? we, the contemporaries of those Germans? My friend, you believe what you desire . . . Since I judge Germany in terms of its present history, you cannot object that its whole history is falsified and all its present public life does not represent the real condition of the people. Read any newspaper you want, convince yourself that one does not cease—and you will concede that censorship stops no one from ceasing—to celebrate the liberty and national happiness we possess . . .

Ruge,
Letter to Marx
March 1844.
Culture is the general sphere of the knowledge and the representations of the lived, in the historical society divided into classes; which is to say that culture is the power of generalization existing apart, as a division of intellectual labor and as the intellectual labor of division. Culture detaches itself from the unity of the society of myth "when the power of unification disappears from the life of man and when opposites lose their relation and their living interaction and acquire autonomy..." (Difference des systems de Fichte et de Schelling). By gaining its independence, culture begins an imperialist movement of enrichment which is at the same time the decline of its independence. The history which creates the relative autonomy of culture and the ideological illusions about this autonomy also expresses itself as history of culture. And all the conquering history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of its inadequacy, as a march towards its self-suppression. Culture is the location of the search for lost unity. In this search for unity, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

The struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the principle of internal development of culture in historical societies, can only be carried on through the permanent victory of innovation. Yet innovation in culture is carried by nothing other than the total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends to go beyond its own cultural presuppositions and moves toward the suppression of all separation.

The rise of studies of society which contain the understanding of history as the heart of culture, takes from itself a knowledge without return, which is expressed by the destruction of God. But this "first condition of all critique" is also the first obligation of a critique without end. When it is no longer possible to maintain a single rule of conduct, every result of culture forces culture to advance towards its dissolution. Like philosophy at the moment when it gained its full autonomy, every discipline which becomes autonomous has to fall apart, first of all as a pretention to explain social totality coherently, and finally even as a fragmented instrumentation which can be used in its own boundaries. The lack of rationality of separate culture is the element which condemns it to disappear, because within it the victory of the rational is already present as a requirement.
Culture grew out of the history which abolished the type of life of the old world, but as a separate sphere it is still no more than sensible intelligence and communication, which remain partial in a *partially historical* society. It is the sense of a world which has too little sense.

The end of the history of culture manifests itself on two opposite sides: the project of its transcendence in total history, and the organization of its preservation as a dead object in spectacular contemplation. One of these movements has tied its fate to social critique, the other to the defense of class power.
Each of the two sides of the end of culture—all the aspects of the sciences as well as all the aspects of tangible representations—exist in a unitary manner in what used to be art in the most general sense. In the case of the sciences, the accumulation of fragmentary learnings, which become unusable because the approval of existing conditions must finally renounce knowledge of itself, confronts the theory of praxis which alone holds the truth of them all by being the only one that holds the secret of their use. In the case of representations, the critical self-destruction of society's ancient common language and its artificial recomposition in the commodity spectacle confronts the illusory representation of the not-lived.

By losing the community of the society of myth, society must lose all the references of a really common language, up to the moment when the separation of the inactive community can be surmounted by accession to the real historical community. Art was the common language of social inaction; from the moment when it constitutes itself into independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it knows, as a special case, the movement which dominates the history of the ensemble of separate culture. Its independent affirmation is the beginning of its destruction.

The fact that the language of communication is lost—this is what is positively expressed by the modern movement of decomposition of all art, its formal annihilation. What this movement expresses negatively is the fact that a common language must be rediscovered—no longer in the unilateral conclusion which always arrived too late in the art of the historical society, speaking to others about what was lived without real dialogue, and admitting this deficiency of life—but it must be rediscovered in praxis, which gathers within it all direct activity and its language. The problem is to effectively possess the community of dialogue and the game with time which have been represented by poetico-artistic works.
When art which has become independent represents its world with dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old and it cannot be rejuvenated with dazzling colors. It can only be evoked in memory. The greatness of art only begins to appear at the fall of life.

The historical time which invades art expressed itself first of all in the sphere of art itself, starting with the baroque. Baroque is the art of a world which has lost its center: the last mythical order in the cosmos and in the terrestrial government accepted by the Middle Ages—the unity of Christianity and the phantom of an Empire—has fallen. The art of change must carry within it the ephemeral principle which it discovers in the world. It has chosen, says Eugenio d'Ors, "life against eternity." Theater and the feast, the theatrical feast, are the dominant moments of baroque realization within which all particular artistic expression becomes meaningful only through its reference to the setting of a constructed place, to a construction which must be its own center of unification; and this center is the passage, which is inscribed as a threatened equilibrium within the dynamic disorder of the whole. The somewhat excessive importance given to the concept of the baroque in the contemporary discussion of esthetics translates the growing awareness of the impossibility of artistic classicism: for three centuries the attempts to realize a normative classicism or neo-classicism were no more than brief artificial constructions speaking the external language of the State, of the absolute monarchy, or of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in Roman clothes. From romanticism to cubism, it is in the last analysis an ever more individualized art of negation, perpetually renovating itself up to the point of the crumbling and complete negation of the artistic sphere which followed the general course of the baroque. The disappearance of historical art, which was tied to the internal communication of an elite, which had its semi-independent social basis in the partly playful conditions still lived by the last aristocracies, also translates the fact that capitalism experiences the first class power which confesses itself bare of any ontological quality, and whose root of power in the simple management of the economy is equally the loss of all human mastery. The baroque ensemble, which is itself a long-lost unity for artistic creation, is rediscovered in some manner in the present consumption of the totality of the artistic past. Historical knowledge and recognition of all the art of the past, retrospectively constituted into a world art, relativizes it into a global disorder which in its turn constitutes a
baroque edifice on a higher level, an edifice within which the production of baroque art itself, and all its revivals, dissolve. The arts of all civilizations and all epochs can for the first time be known and admitted together. It is a "recollection of souvenirs" of the history of art, which by becoming possible, is also the end of the world of art. It is in this epoch of museums, when artistic communication can no longer exist, that all the ancient moments of art can be equally admitted, because none of them suffer more from the loss of their particular conditions of communication than from the present loss of conditions of communication in general.

Art in the epoch of its dissolution, a negative movement which seeks the transcendence of art in a historical society where history is not yet lived, is simultaneously an art of change and the pure expression of impossible change. The more grandiose its reach, the more its true realization is beyond it. This art is forcibly in the vanguard, and it is not. Its vanguard is its disappearance.
Dadaism and surrealism are the two currents which could mark the end of modern art. Though only in a relatively conscious manner, they are contemporaries of the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of this movement, which left them imprisoned in the same artistic field whose decay they had announced, is the basic reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism are at once historically related and opposed. This opposition, which constitutes the most important and radical part of the contribution of each, reveals the internal inadequacy of their critique, developed one-sidedly by each. Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realizing it; surrealism wanted to realize art without suppressing it. The critical position later elaborated by the situationists has shown that the suppression and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of the same overcoming of art.

Spectacular consumption which preserves congealed ancient culture, including the recuperated repetition of its negative manifestations, openly becomes in the cultural sector what it is implicitly in its totality; the communication of the incommunicable. The extreme destruction of language can here be found acknowledged flatly as an official positive value, since the task is to advertise a reconciliation with the dominant state of things, where all communication is joyously proclaimed absent. The critical truth of this destruction with reference to the real life of poetry and modern art is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture, applies in the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means the very strategy which constitutes it in depth. Thus a school of neo-literature, which simply admits that it contemplates what is written for its own sake, can present itself as something new. Furthermore, alongside the simple proclamation of the sufficient beauty of the dissolution of the communicable, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture—and the one most closely tied to the repressive practice of the general organization of society—seeks to recompose, by means of “integral works,” a complex neo-artistic environment made up of decomposed elements; notably in the researches of integration of artistic garbage or of esthetico-technical hybrids in urbanism. This is a translation on the level of spectacular pseudo-culture of the general project of developed capitalism, which aims to re-
capture the fragmented worker as a "personality well integrated in the group," a tendency recently described by American sociologists (Riesman, Whyte, etc.). It is everywhere the same project of a restructuring without community.

193

Culture turned completely into commodity must also turn into the star commodity of the spectacular society. Colin Kerr, one of the most advanced ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge already gets 29% of the yearly national product in the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will hold the key role in the development of the economy, a role played by the automobile in the first half, and by railroads in the second half of the previous century.

194

The ensemble of learnings which continue to develop today as the thought of the spectacle must justify a society without justifications, and must constitute themselves into a general science of false consciousness. This thought is completely conditioned by the fact that it cannot and does not want to think of its own material basis in the spectacular system.

195

The thought of the social organization of appearance is itself obscured by the generalized sub-communication which it defends. It does not know that conflict is at the origin of all things in its world. The specialists of the power of the spectacle, an absolute power within the context of its system of language without answer, are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and the success of contempt; they find their contempt confirmed by the knowledge of the contemptible man who the spectator really is.
Within the specialized thought of the spectacular system a new division of tasks takes place to the extent that the improvement of this system itself poses new problems: on one hand the spectacular critique of the spectacle is undertaken by modern sociology which studies separation by the sole means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation; on the other hand the apology for the spectacle constitutes itself into the thought of non-thought, into the official forgetting of historical practice, within all the various disciplines where structuralism takes root. Nevertheless, the false despair of non-dialectical critique and the false optimism of pure advertising of the system are identical as submissive thought.

The sociology which began, first of all in the United States, to focus discussion on the conditions of existence brought about by present development, was able to bring to view much empirical data, but could
in no way know the truth of its own object because it does not find within it the critique immanent to it. The result is that the sincerely reformist tendency of this sociology leans on morality, on common sense, on completely senseless appeals with regard to measure, etc. Because this type of critique is not familiar with the negative which is at the heart of its world, it only insists on the description of a type of negative surplus which seems deplorably to hinder it on the surface, like an irrational parasitic proliferation. This indignant good will, which even as such arrives at blaming only the external consequences of the system, thinks itself critical, forgetting the essentially apologetic character of its assumptions and its method.

198

Those who denounce the absurdity or the perils of incitement to waste in the society of economic abundance do not know the purpose of waste. They condemn with ingratitude, in the name of economic rationality, the good irrational guardians without whom the power of this economic rationality would collapse. And Boorstin, for example, who in The Image describes the commodity consumption of the American spectacle, never reaches the concept of spectacle because he thinks he can leave private life, or the notion of “the honest commodity,” outside of this disastrous exaggeration. He does not understand that the commodity itself made the laws whose “honest” application leads to the distinct reality of private life and to its ulterior reconquest by the social consumption of images.

199

Boorstin describes the excesses of a world which has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world. But the “normal” basis of social life, to which he implicitly refers when he qualifies the superficial reign of images in terms of psychological and moral judgments as the product of “our extravagant pretentions,” has no reality either in his book or in his epoch. It is because the real human life Boorstin speaks of is for him in the past, which includes the past of religious resignation, that he cannot understand all the profundity of a society of images. The truth of this society is nothing other than the negation of this society.
The sociology which thinks it can isolate from the whole of social life an industrial rationality functioning apart can go so far as to isolate from the general industrial movement the techniques of reproduction and transmission. It is thus that Boorstin finds that the results he depicts are caused by the unhappy, almost fortuitous encounter of an oversized technical apparatus for the diffusion of images with an excessive attraction to the pseudo-sensational on the part of the people of our epoch. Thus the spectacle would be caused by the fact that modern man is too much of a spectator. Boorstin does not understand that the proliferation of the pre-fabricated "pseudo-events" which he denounces flows from the simple fact that, in the massive reality of present social life, men do not themselves live events. It is because history itself haunts modern society like a spectre that one finds the pseudo-history constructed at every level of consumption of life, to preserve the threatened equilibrium of the present frozen time.

The affirmation of the definitive stability of a short period of frozen historical time is the undeniable basis, unconsciously and consciously proclaimed, of the present tendency toward a structuralist systematization. The vantage point from which anti-historical structuralist thought views the world is that of the eternal presence of a system which was never created and which will never end. The dream of the dictatorship
of a pre-existing unconscious structure over all social praxis was abusive-
ly drawn from models of structures elaborated by linguistics and eth-
nology (see the analysis of the functioning of capitalism), models al-
ready abusively understood in these circumstances, simply because the
academic imagination of average functionaries, quickly filled, an ima-
gination completely entrenched in the celebration of the existing sys-
tem, flatly reduces all reality to the existence of the system.

202

As in all historical social science, in order to understand "structur-
alist" categories it must always be kept in mind that the categories ex-
press forms of existence and conditions of existence. Just as one cannot
appraise the value of a man in terms of the conception he has of him-
self, one cannot appraise—and admire—a determined society by taking
as indisputably true the language it speaks to itself; "...so can we not
judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on
the contrary; this consciousness must rather be explained from the con-
tradictions of material life. ..." Structure is the daughter of present
power. Structuralism is the thought guaranteed by the State which
thinks the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an
absolute. Its method of studying the code of messages is itself nothing
but the product, and the recognition, of a society where communication
exists in the form of a cascade of hierarchic signals. Consequently it is
not structuralism which serves to prove the transhistorical validity of
the society of the spectacle; it is on the contrary the society of the
spectacle imposing itself as massive reality which serves to prove the
cold dream of structuralism.

203

Undoubtedly the critical concept of spectacle can also be vulgarized
into some kind of hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric to ex-
plain and abstractly denounce everything, and thus serve as a defense of
the spectacular system. It is obvious that no idea can lead beyond the
existing spectacle, but only beyond the existing ideas on the spectacle.
For an effective destruction of the society of the spectacle, what is
needed is men putting a practical force into action. The critical theory
of the spectacle can only be true by uniting with the practical current
of negation in society; and this negation, the resumption of the revolu-
tionary class struggle, will become conscious of itself by developing the
critique of the spectacle which is the theory of its real conditions,
practical conditions of present oppression, and inversely by unveiling
the secret of what it can become. This theory does not expect miracles from the working class. It envisages the new formulation and the realization of proletarian wants as a long-range task. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical struggle and practical struggle—since on the basis here defined, the very constitution and the communication of such a theory cannot even be conceived without a rigorous practice—it is certain that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory should also be the lot of the practical movement acting on the scale of society.

204

Critical theory must be communicated in its own language. This is the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in its form as it is in its content. It is critique of the totality and historical critique. It is not a "zero degree of writing" but its overcoming. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

205

In its very style, the exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination in terms of the rules of the dominant language and for the taste which they have educated, because in the positive use of existing concepts it at the same time includes the knowledge of their rediscovered fluidity, of their necessary destruction.

206

This style which contains its own critique must express the domination of the present critique over its entire past. Through it the mode of exposition of dialectical theory makes visible the negative spirit within it. "Truth is not like a product in which one can no longer find any trace of the implement." (Hegel). This theoretical consciousness of movement within which the very trace of movement must be present, manifests itself by overthrowing the established relations between concepts and by displacement of all the acquisitions of previous critique. The overthrowing of the genitive is this expression of historical revolutions, consigned to the form of thought, which was considered the epi-grammatic style of Hegel. The young Marx, advocating the replacement of the subject by the predicate after the systematic use Feuerbach made of this, achieved the most consistent use of this insurrectional style which, out of the philosophy of misery, drew the misery of philosophy. Displacement leads to the subversion of past critical conclusions which were frozen into respectable truths, namely transformed
into lies. Kierkegaard already used it deliberately, adding his own denunciation of it: "But despite all the tours and detours, just as jam always returns to the pantry, you always end up by sliding in a little word which isn't yours and which bothers you by the memory it awakes." *(Philosophical Fragments)*. It is the obligation of *distance* toward that which was falsified into official truth which determines the use of displacement, as was acknowledged by Kierkegaard in the same book: "Only one more comment on your numerous allusions aiming at all the grief I mix into my statements of borrowed subjects. I do not deny it here nor will I deny that it was voluntary and that in a new continuation to this brochure, if I ever write it, I intend to name the object by its real name and to clothe the problem in a historical attire."

207

Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It squeezes the phrase of an author, makes use of its expressions, rubs out a false idea, replaces it with a true idea.

208

Displacement is the opposite of citation, of the theoretical authority which is always falsified by the mere fact of becoming a citation; a fragment torn out of its context, its movement, and finally its epoch as a general reference and as a precise choice which it was within this reference, exactly recognized or erroneous. Displacement is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It appears within communication which knows that it cannot pretend to hold any guarantee in itself and definitively. It is, at its highest point, the language which cannot be confirmed by any ancient and supra-critical reference. On the contrary, it is its own coherence, within itself and with practicable facts, which can confirm the ancient grain of truth which it brings out. Displacement has not grounded its cause on anything external to its own truth as present critique.

209

That which, in theoretical formulation, openly presents itself as *displaced*, exposing all durable autonomy of the sphere of the theoretically expressed, *through this violence* bringing about the intervention of ac-
tion which deranges and carries away the entire existing order, is a reminder that this existence of theory is nothing in itself, and can only know itself with historical action and the *historical correction* which is its real loyalty.

210

The real negation of culture is the only preservation of its meaning, *It can no longer be cultural.* As a result it is what remains in some way at the level of culture, although in a completely different sense.

211

In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture presents itself *unified:* in the sense that it dominates the whole of culture—its knowledge as well as its poetry—, and in the sense that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. It is this *unified theoretical critique* which goes alone towards the encounter with *unified social practice.*
Philosophy.
Phenomenology of Mind.

IX. IDEOLOGY MATERIALIZED
Ideology is the *basis* of the thought of a class society within the conflictual course of history. Ideological facts have never been simple chimaeras, but deformed consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors in turn exerting real deforming action. All the more reason why the *materialization* of ideology brought about by the concrete success of autonomized economic production, in the form of the spectacle, is in practice confused with the social reality of an ideology which was able to reduce everything real to its own model.

When ideology, which is the *abstract* will of the universal and its illusion, finds itself legitimated by the universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion in modern society, it is no longer a voluntaristic struggle of the partial, but its victory. From this point, ideological pretention acquires a sort of flat positivistic exactitude: it is no longer a historical choice but a fact. Within such an affirmation, the particular *names* of ideologies have disappeared. The very role of properly ideological labor in the service of the system no longer conceives of itself as more than the recognition of an "epistemological platform" which wants to be outside of all ideological phenomena. Materialized ideology is itself nameless, just as it is without an expressible historical program. This is another way of saying that the history of *ideologies* is over.

Ideology, whose whole internal logic led to "total ideology" in Mannheim's sense, the despotism of the fragment which imposes itself as a pseudo-knowledge of a frozen *totality*, the *totalitarian* vision, is now accomplished within the immobilized spectacle of non-history. Its completion is also its collapse within the whole of society. Ideology, the *last unreason* which blocks access to historical life, must disappear with the *practical collapse* of this society.
The spectacle is ideology par excellence, because it exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, the servitude and the negation of real life. The spectacle is materially "the expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man." Through the "new power of fraud" concentrated at the basis of the spectacle in this society, "... the new domain of alien beings which man serves grows together with the mass of objects." It is the highest stage of an expansion which has turned need against life. "The need for money is thus the real need produced by political economy, and the only need it produces" (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). The spectacle extends to all of social life the principle which Hegel (in the Realphilosophie of Jena) conceives as the principle of money: "it is "the life of what is dead, moving within itself.""
In opposition to the project summarized in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (the realization of philosophy in praxis which overcomes the opposition between idealism and materialism), the spectacle simultaneously preserves and imposes (within the pseudo-concrete of its universe) the ideological character of materialism and of idealism. The contemplative side of the old materialism which conceives the world as representation and not as activity—and which ultimately idealizes matter—is completed in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatically the masters of social life. Reciprocally, the *dreamed activity* of idealism is equally completed in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and signals—which finally materialize an abstract ideal.

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia established by Gabel (*La Fausse Conscience*) must be placed within the economic process of materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was. The removal of praxis and the anti-dialectical false consciousness which accompanies it are imposed during each hour of daily life subjected to the spectacle; this must be understood as a systematic organization of the "failure of the faculty of encounter" and as its replacement by a *hallucinatory social fact*: the false consciousness of the encounter, the "illusion of the encounter." In a society where no one can any longer be *recognized* by others, every individual becomes unable to recognize his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.

"In the clinical bulletins of schizophrenia," says Gabel, "the decadence of the dialectic of totality (with its extreme form in dissociation) and the decadence of the dialectic of becoming (with its extreme form in catatonia) seem solidly united." The consciousness of the spectator, prisoner of a flattened universe, limited by the *screen* of the spectacle, behind which his own life has been deported, knows only the *fictional speakers* who entertain him unilaterally with their commodity and with the politics of their commodity. The spectacle, in all its extent, is his "sign in the mirror." The stage is here set with a false exit from a generalized autism.
The spectacle, which is the elimination of the limits between self and world through the destruction of the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world, is equally the elimination of the limits between true and false through the repression of all truth lived under the real presence of the lie ensured by the organization of appearance. One who submits passively to his alien daily fate is thus pushed toward a folly which reacts illusorily toward this fate by turning to magical techniques. The acceptance and consumption of commodities are at the heart of this pseudo-response to a communication without response. The need to imitate which is felt by the consumer is precisely the infatile need conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. In the terms applied by Gabel to a completely different pathological level, "the abnormal need for representation here compensates for a torturing feeling of being on the margin of existence."

If the logic of false consciousness cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle and admit that it is absent where they are absent. It is the laws of the ruling thought, the exclusive point of view of the here and now, that accept the abstract will of immediate efficacy when the ruling thought throws itself into the compromises of reformism or into the common action of pseudo-revolutionary garbage. In this way delirium reconstitutes itself within the very position which pretends to combat it. On the contrary, the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.

Emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth—this is what the self-emancipation of our epoch consists of. This "historical mission of installing truth in the world" cannot be accomplished either by the isolated individual, or by the atomized mass subjected to manipulation, but still and always by the class which is able to be the destruction of all classes by taking all power into the alienating form of realized democracy, the Council in which practical theory controls itself and sees its own action. Only there are individuals "directly tied to universal history;" only there does dialogue arm itself to make its own conditions conquer.
ERRATA

Chapter III, Title page: the second sentence of the quotation from The Red Flag of Peking should read: "This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, . . ."

Chapter III, paragraph 63: line six begins with "denies."
The Society of the Spectacle

For the eponymous film, see The Society of the Spectacle (film).

The Society of the Spectacle (French: La Société du spectacle) is a 1967 work of philosophy and Marxist critical theory by Guy Debord. In this important text for the Situationist movement, Debord develops and presents the concept of the Spectacle. Debord published a follow-up book Comments on the Society of the Spectacle in 1988. [1]

1 Book structure

The work is a series of 221 short theses. They contain approximately a paragraph each.

2 Summary

2.1 Degradation of human life

Debord traces the development of a modern society in which authentic social life has been replaced with its representation: “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.” [2] Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing.” [3] This condition, according to Debord, is the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life.” [4]

The spectacle is the inverted image of society in which relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, in which “passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity”. “The spectacle is not a collection of images,” Debord writes, “rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” [5]

In his analysis of the spectacular society, Debord notes that quality of life is impoverished, [6] with such lack of authenticity, human perceptions are affected, and there’s also a degradation of knowledge, with the hindering of critical thought. [7] Debord analyzes the use of knowledge to assuage reality: the spectacle obscures the past, imploding it with the future into an undifferentiated mass, a type of never-ending present; in this way the spectacle prevents individuals from realizing that the society of spectacle is only a moment in history, one that can be overturned through revolution. [6][9]

Debord's aim and proposal is “to wake up the spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images,” “through radical action in the form of the construction of situations,” “situations that bring a revolutionary reordering of life, politics, and art”. In the situationist view, situations are actively created moments, characterized by “a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience”. [10]

Debord encouraged the use of détournement, “which involves using spectacular images and language to disrupt the flow of the spectacle.”

2.2 Mass media and commodity fetishism

The Society of the Spectacle is a critique of contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism, dealing with issues such as class alienation, cultural homogenization, and the mass media.

When Debord says that “All that was once directly lived has become mere representation,” he is referring to the central importance of the image in contemporary society. Images, Debord says, have supplanted genuine human interaction. [2]

Thus, Debord's fourth thesis is: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” [11]

In a consumer society, social life is not about living, but about having; the spectacle uses the image to convey what people need and must have. Consequently, social life moves further, leaving a state of “having” and proceeding into a state of “appearing”; namely the appearance of the image. [12]

“In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false.” [13]

2.3 Comparison between religion and marketing

Debord also draws an equivalence between the role of mass media marketing in the present and the role of religions in the past. [14][15] The spread of commodity-images by the mass media, produces “waves of enthusiasm for a given product” resulting in “moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism”. [16][17]

Other observations Debord makes on religion: “The re-
mains of religion and of the family (the principal relic of the heritage of class power) and the moral repression they assure, merge whenever the enjoyment of this world is affirmed—this world being nothing other than repressive pseudo-enjoyment.”[18] “The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, ... These religions arose on the soil of history, and established themselves there. But there they still preserve themselves in radical opposition to history.” Debord defines them as Semi-historical religion.[19] “The growth of knowledge about society, which includes the understanding of history as the heart of culture, derives from itself an irreversible knowledge, which is expressed by the destruction of God.”[20]

2.4 Critique of American sociology

In Chapter 8, Negation and Consumption Within Culture, Debord includes a critical analysis of the works of three American sociologists. Debord discusses at length Daniel J. Boorstin’s The Image (1961), arguing that Boorstin missed the concept of Spectacle. In thesis 192, Debord mentions some American sociologists who have described the general project of developed capitalism which “aims to recapture the fragmented worker as a personality well integrated in the group;” the examples mentioned by Debord are David Riesman, author of The Lonely Crowd (1950), and William H. Whyte, author of the 1956 best-seller The Organization Man.[21] Among the 1950s sociologists who are usually compared to Riesman and Whyte, is C. Wright Mills, author of White Collar: The American Middle Classes.[22] Riesman’s “Lonely Crowd” term is also used in thesis 28.

3 Translations and editions

- Translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone, 1994).

3.1 1983 edition

The book cover of the 1983 edition is derived from a photograph by the Life magazine photographer, J. R. Eyerman. On November 26, 1952, at the Paramount Theatre (Oakland, California), the premiere screening of the film Bwana Devil by Arch Oboler took place as the first full-length, color 3-D (aka ‘Natural Vision’) motion picture. Eyerman took a series of photographs of the audience wearing 3-D glasses. 1983 edition of Society of the Spectacle Life magazine used one of the photographs as the cover of a brochure about the 1946-1955 decade.[23] The photograph employed in the Black and Red edition shows the audience in “a virtually trance-like state of absorption, their faces grim, their lips pursed;’” however, in the one chosen by Life, “the spectators are laughing, their expressions of hilarity conveying the pleasure of an uproarious, active spectatorship.”[24] The Black and Red version also is flipped left to right, and cropped.[25] Despite widespread association among English-speaking readers, Debord had nothing to do with this cover illustration, which was chosen by Black and Red.

4 See also

- Culture industry
- History and Class Consciousness
- Hyperreality
- Vance Packard
- No Logo
5 Notes

[6] For example:

- from Debord (1977) thesis 19: “The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe.”
- from thesis 17: “The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of being into having” and now “of having into appearing”
- from thesis 10: The Spectacle is “affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance”
- from thesis 6: “The spectacle ... occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production.”
- thesis 30: “The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.”
- from thesis 8: “Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle”
- from thesis 16: “The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them.”
- from thesis 37: “the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived”
- from thesis 60: “The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived.”
- thesis 68
- from thesis 192: “The critical truth of this destruction the real life of modern poetry and art is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture”
- from thesis 114: in the “intensified alienation of modern capitalism”, “the immense majority of workers” “have lost all power over the use of their lives”
[14] from Debord (1977) thesis 20: “The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion.”
[17] from Debord (1977) thesis 132: “The masters who make history their private property, under the protection of myth, possess first of all a private ownership of the mode of illusion: in China and Egypt they long held a monopoly over the immortality of the soul ... The growth of their real historical power goes together with a popularization of the possession of myth and illusion.”
[21] Debord (1977) theses 192, 196-200,
[22] American Quarterly 1963
[23] Cover of the brochure that accompanied an exhibition of photographs from Life magazine held at the International Center of Photography (New York) and entitled: The Second Decade, 1946-1955. Image at Getty Images:

6 References


7 External links

- The Society of the Spectacle full text at marxists.org
- Translation from the Situationist International Library
- Translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith
- Translation by Ken Knabb
- Thoughts on Society of the Spectacle at the Wayback Machine (archived July 13, 2008), free audiobook from the Audio Anarchy project
- Observations on the English translation of Guy Debord’s *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complettes* (Broken.)
- Pdf of the original 1970 English translation in *Radical America*
- A critical review of Guy Debord’s analysis of the spectacle.
8 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

8.1 Text


8.2 Images


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