

The Society of the Spectacle
GUY DEBORD

English Edition by Ron. Adams

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Originally published in Paris, France as *La Société du Spectacle* by Éditions Buchet-Chastel (Paris) in 1967. It was reissued by Éditions Champ Libre (Paris) in 1971, and Éditions Gallimard (Paris) 1992.

This annotated English edition by [Ron. Adams](#).

■ Unredacted Word
Cambridge, Massachusetts
<https://unredacted-word.pub>

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ISBN 9781736961834 (ePub)

Library of Congress Control Number: [2021936393](#)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Debord, Guy, 1931-1994 author.
The Society of the Spectacle / Guy Debord, Ron. Adams.
First. Cambridge : Unredacted Word, 2021.
pages cm
ISBN 9781736961834

Book and cover design by 0xADADA
Typeset in Source Serif Pro by Frank Griebhammer
Printed in Massachusetts

First ePub edition April 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Foreword

In this book, Debord describes and critiques the way we live. The power of these ideas lies in their ability to question, identify, and name the common assumptions of the present. Debord develops the concept of *The Spectacle*, which describes the gaze of contemporary society. From its publication just before the May 1968 revolt in Paris, and ultimately influencing Occupy Wall Street, this book continues to transform a wide range of progressive philosophical and political movements, most notably anti-capitalism, postmodernism, marxism, and anarchism.

Debord's work is not an ivory-tower philosophical treatise, it is a cold analysis of the history and development that leads directly to our present moment. He critiques various attempts to change society by comparing their advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, he makes it apparent that *a way out* is absurd, and points to only one path forward: a direct democratic movement of decentralized workers councils, a suggestion made only twice in the entire text. Most importantly, he emphasizes the importance of validating theory with practice, and as such, this book is a practical framework for revolutionaries who *think and do*.

Debord's text is concise, economical, poetic, provocative, and difficult. As Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri describe it in their notes to *Empire* as "delirious". His work contains many references to Hegel and Marx. He uses words and phrases defined in other Situationist texts, and expects the reader to be familiar with them. This is to be expected, as he demands much from the reader, and had written for a small audience of "fifty or sixty people" who were well versed in the history of the western philosophical tradition.

Debord was concerned that these ideas themselves would be recuperated by capitalism (see [thesis 203](#)), so he wrote in a way to limit them to a small and curious audience. His concerns turned out to be warranted, when a few years later in the early 1970s, the French Socialist Party under François Mitterrand co-opted the Situationist phrase "Change Life" as his campaign slogan, and Situationism became the party's unofficial ideology—much to the consternation of Debord. His ideas were difficult because they were abstract, but the abstraction meant that it continues to remain relevant, arguably even more relevant half a century later.

The very first time I read *The Society of the Spectacle*, I knew I'd need to re-read it, and possibly need to re-write it in my own words if I wanted to truly understand it. It was only once I had grasped the gist

Quoting Hardt & Negri: "...Debord recognized this spectacle as the destiny of triumphant capitalism. Despite their important differences, such authors offer us real anticipations of the path of capitalist development." And continuing in their notes: "[The Spectacle], which is perhaps the best articulation, in its own delirious way, of the contemporary consciousness of the triumph of capital." See Hardt, M. & Negri, A., 2000 (Pp. 188/444).

"fifty or sixty people": In Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, he describes his audience in the first paragraph thus: "These comments are sure to be welcomed by fifty or sixty people; a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion. But then, of course, in some circles I am considered to be an authority. It must also be borne in mind that a good half of this interested elite will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination, and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite. Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody." See Debord, G. & Imrie, M., 1998. Pp 1.

of the text, that I was then confronted with the task of understanding the philosophy behind it. Debord didn't lay out his ideas using plain language, because his ideas are austere, terrifying, and extremely dangerous. He is the kind of philosopher whose ideas and observations of the world are so bleak that one fears these ideas reaching mass consciousness.

This book isn't as much a straight translation as it is an elaboration, or 'remix' that attempts to reveal more under the text than existed in the original and its various translations. Debord hid some ideas. This is an attempt to contextualize and reveal abstract ideas by bringing in references and annotations in order to add relevance for our current time. I have added a few thoughts and examples to help elucidate difficult concepts. In the hope of making Debord's work more accessible to those unfamiliar with Marx, Hegel, and the breadth of other works and concepts alluded to in his text, I've knowingly ossified my own translation. The reader is strongly encouraged to wander from these pages back to the timelessness of the original—and beyond.

Foreign languages are much like distant places, and the act of translation is to visit these places. We may recognize similarities, but these places are unique because they have distinct histories. With languages, words not only have semantic meaning, but attachments to the rich cultural narratives that tell their histories, and these words are attached to libraries of other texts within the same cultural milieu. When translating these words, the histories, narratives, and cultural aspects most relevant to the original text aren't always translatable with words alone; words simply aren't enough to capture the rich cultural depth that exists between the words. As such, I've tried to add notes where the text made implicit

references. When translating, “[plagiarism is necessary](#)”, it demands embracing the author’s ideas, and making them semantically and culturally relevant, and if done well, it can create an entirely new work, a copy without an original.

This edition isn’t merely a translation of words, but a translation of *time*. Since Debord wrote this book, society hasn’t changed in kind, but by degree, everything is exactly the same, only *more*. Advertising is no longer prominent, but dominant. Facebook and Google aren’t merely the tech companies driving the economy, but have captured the entire advertising industry, monopolized it, and built the foundations of a new form of capital on the back of data tracking, profiling, and machine learning: surveillance capitalism. Urban development has increased separation and inequality to public goods like education and transportation. Technology is now ubiquitous and we’re all glued to personalized screens all day, mediating nearly all interactions, even the ways we find love. For Debord, none of this would be new, only *more*.

The book before you is my attempt to participate in the development of his ideas. I’ve tried to ground some of his more abstract ideas upon the terrain of the recent economic development of surveillance capitalism. The emergence of commercial social media, particularly, is the confluence of a few concepts described by Debord: celebrity culture, the perpetual present, and mass media that work to automate the commodification of personal identity backed by machine learning.

If you’re looking for a translation that aims to stay faithful to Debord’s classical French prose, this book is not that. There are editions perfectly suited for that purpose, I would direct you to the

translations by Ken Knabb, Donald Nicholson-Smith, or Fredy Perlman—all of which I referenced extensively during the preparation of this book. I'd especially like to point out how valuable Ken Knabb's annotated translation has been as a resource for this edition. His work handed me most of these references, and was instrumental in pointing me in the right direction for a few others. If you are looking for new insight and academic rigor, I would refer you to Russell, E., 2021 and Bunyard, T., 2018. All of these editions can be found in the bibliography and are well worth reading.

I've arranged the notes along the margins rather than as endnotes because they're meant to be read alongside the main text. If you are reading this book for the first time, I would suggest reading it in a particular order, as the first few chapters can be discouraging. I agree with the preface to Ken Knabb's 2014 translation, in which he suggests starting with chapter 4 and 5 because they provide relevant historical and revolutionary background that helps to contextualize the book. From there, read chapter 7 which covers the development of cities, urban development and social issues. Then move to chapter 8 which covers culture, the arts, and the history of artistic movements. Finally, read chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, and 9 which establishes his concept of *The Spectacle* and provides a comprehensive critique of contemporary society. Thus, my suggested chapter reading order is: 4, 5, 7, 8, *then* 1, 2, 3, 6, 9.

My hope is to make Debord's ideas more accessible to first time readers and to show how much more relevant *The Spectacle* is today than when it was first written. I am optimistic that together we *can* make another world possible.

Ron. Adams

March 2021

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Cambridge, Massachusetts



Preface to the Third French Edition

The Society of the Spectacle was first published in November 1967 in Paris by Buchet-Chastel. The 1968 unrest made it famous. The book, of which I have never changed a single word, was republished in 1971 by Éditions Champ Libre, who changed their name to Gérard Lebovici in 1984, after the publisher's assassination. A series of reprints continued there regularly until 1991. The present edition, too, has remained rigorously identical to the 1967 edition. The same rule will naturally apply to the reprinting of all my books at Gallimard. I am not one who corrects myself.

“The present edition...”: This preface was written for the Third French Edition published in 1992, four years after he had published *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, and roughly a year after the final collapse of the USSR (1989-1991). Debord died by suicide two years later, on November 30, 1994.

Such a critical theory does not have to be changed; as long as the general conditions of this period of history (that this theory was first to define accurately) have not been destroyed. The continued development of this period has only verified and illustrated the theory of the spectacle, whose presentation, reiterated here, can also be considered historical in a more limited sense: it testifies to what the most extreme position was at the time of the quarrels of 1968, and therefore to the knowledge that was already possible to know in 1968. The worst

dupes of that time have since learned, through the disappointments of their entire existence, what the “negation of life that has become visible”; the “loss of quality” linked to the commodity-form, and the “proletarianization of the world” has meant.

Over time, I also added other observations concerning the most remarkable developments that the subsequent course of the same process was to bring about. In 1979, on the occasion of a preface for a new Italian translation, I dealt with the effective transformations in the very nature of industrial production, as well as in the techniques of government, which began an authorized use of spectacular force. In 1988, the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* clearly established that the previous “worldwide division of spectacular labor”, between the rival reigns of the “concentrated spectacle” and the “diffuse spectacle”, had now ended in favor of their fusion, into the universal form of the “integrated spectacle”.

“the rival reigns... had now ended”:
Debord is pointing to the ideologic rivalry between the diffuse spectacle exemplified by U.S. capitalism and the concentrated spectacle exemplified by the communism of the USSR. Amazingly, two of Debord’s major works: *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* were each published one year prior to two major worldwide upheavals: *Spectacle* published a year before the civil unrest in Paris in May 1968, and *Comments* a year before the collapse of the USSR.

This fusion can be summarized summarily by correcting [thesis 105](#) which, touching on what had happened before 1967, still distinguished the earlier forms according to some opposing practices. The Great Schism of class power having ended in reconciliation, it must be said that the unified practice of the integrated spectacle, today, has “economically transformed the world”, *at the same time* that it has “used police methods to transform perceptions” (The police in this case, are of a new specialized variety).

Only because this merger had already occurred in the economic and political realms of the entire world, could the world finally proclaim

itself officially unified. It is also because of this situation that the universally separated power has reached such a predicament that this world needed to be reunited as soon as possible; to function as one block in the same consensual organization of the single global market, *falsified* and guaranteed by the spectacle. In the end it will not be unified.

The totalitarian bureaucracy, that “dominant substitute class for the market economy”, had never believed much in its destiny. It knew itself to be an “underdeveloped form of dominant class,” and it wanted to be better. Thesis 58 had long established the following axiom: [“As the spectacle is founded upon an economy of abundance, the fruits of that economy tend to dominate the spectacular market within its sphere of influence”](#).

It is this desire to modernize and unify the spectacle, combined with all other efforts to simplify society, that in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy to suddenly convert itself, as one body, to the present *ideology* of democracy: that is, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, tempered by the recognition of the Rights of Homo Spectator. No one in the West had ever once commented on the meaning and consequences of such an extraordinary media event. The progress of spectacular technology demonstrates this. Only the occurrence of a minor geologic tremor had been registered in the media. The phenomenon was dated, and is deemed to be sufficiently well understood, by simply repeating the very simple slogan-“the fall of the Berlin Wall”-which was just as indisputable as all other *symbols of democracy*.

In 1991, the first effects of modernization appeared with the complete collapse of Russia. There it is expressed, even more clearly

than in the West, the disastrous result of the general development of the economy. This disorder reigning in the East is only one consequence of that development. Everywhere the same dreadful question will be asked, the one that has haunted the world for two centuries: how can we make the poor work, when illusion has disappointed and when force has been defeated?

Thesis 111, which recognized the first symptoms of a Russian decline, the final explosion of which we have already seen, and envisaged the forthcoming disappearance of a world society which, as we can say now, *will be erased from the computer's memory*, formulated the following strategic judgment, the correctness of which should become obvious: ["In the final analysis, the collapse and failure of global alliances founded on bureaucratic mystification is an unfavorable aspect of the development of capitalist society."](#)

This book should be read considering that it was knowingly written with the intention of damaging the spectacular society. It never said anything outrageous.

June 30, 1992
GUY DEBORD

I. 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

In post-industrial societies where mass production and media predominate, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly experienced has been replaced with its representation in the form of images.

“directly experienced”: A life experience in which an individual directly participates in the major events that make up the period of their life. Under the reign of the spectacle, all historical, political, cultural, and even typical events of one’s daily life are inaccessible—except for contemplation. A simple and concrete example of the replacement of direct experience with its representation is how the previously common practice of hunting animals which will be cooked and then eaten was first replaced with packaged meat bought at a grocery store—has finally given way to the proliferation of packaged pre-cooked meals, where the natural ingredients have been obfuscated and abstracted into food products. This experience is eventually mediated to its fullest extent by way of cooking shows on TV and ‘mukbang’ (먹방) videos on social media.

2

Whereas directly lived experience is a continuum of emotion and sensation, the representational life is a stream of images detached from their living context. The original context of this directly lived reality cannot be reestablished. Living a representational life has a *completely separate*, but unified experience unto itself that exists purely in thought. As reality is increasingly represented as images to be experienced by sight alone, eventually a *completely separate pseudo-world* of images emerges—where the “actual” reality is only represented, but never actually experienced; merely performed and eventually simulated. The horizon of this representational reality is one in which individuals merely witness an image of the world in fully autonomous non-lived lives.

“fully autonomous non-lived lives”:
The original French is “est le mouvement autonome du non-vivant.” or “the autonomous movement of the non-living.” C.f. Hegel, G., Harris, H. & Knox, T., 1979. The same reference is later made in [thesis 215](#); the full quotation reads: “Need for labor, elevated into this universality, then form on their own account a monstrous system of community and mutual interdependence in a great people; the life of the dead body, that moves itself within itself, one which ebbs and flows in its motion blindly, like the elements, and which requires continual strict dominance and taming like a wild beast.”

3

The Spectacle presents itself as a *universal way* to provide representation of directly lived reality, the so-called “official language of generalized separation”. Additionally, it is a separate part of society that establishes common-ground between cultures and focuses all attention upon its spectacular images of representational reality. The stream of images provides individuals with common points of discussion and pseudo-connection. The stream of images simultaneously connects and separates individuals. The spectacle connects individuals to itself when oriented around the same topics, and atomizes individuals into niche interest-groups of one, where they become alienated from all those around them—trapped within an isolated pseudo-reality of personalized information. Ultimately the spectacle is the official language that separates individuals from one another.

“spectacular images of representational reality”: This stream of images includes television, radio, advertising, academia, news media, social media, and devices streaming personalized perspectives on reality. To only consider the media however, would be to limit understanding of the spectacle to what Russell calls a nominal reading (Russell, 2021), one that focuses on the propaganda in the mass media that is ‘merely its most superficial manifestation.’ (Debord, 1983 §24) and ignores that his analysis is simultaneously part of society, the *totality* of society, and the means of unifying society all at once. Debord himself describes the spectacle as consisting of three stages: “mere technological and ideological appearances / the reality of the social organization of appearances / historical reality” (Russell, 2021/Debord, 2005). “common points of discussion and pseudo-connection”: E.g. the office water-cooler discussion “Did you see last night’s presidential debate?”; the banal talking points that offer no personal connection or relevance, but that act as mediator to relate to the spectacle rather than with other individuals. Facebook is the mediator par excellence in that it doesn’t actually *connect people* to each other, but connects people *to Facebook*.

4

The spectacle is not merely the apparatus of media, but the relations between individuals themselves, as mediated by the stream of images that represent their daily lived experience of this pseudo-reality.

Debord's critique of society isn't merely a critique of technology and media; his concept of The Spectacle critiques the *organization* of society which includes a mediated experience of reality *by* technology the media.

5

The spectacle is not simply an overabundance of the media in everyday lived experience. It is an ideology that has become materialized. This ideology-materialized has replaced the lived experience of reality with a lived experience of a representational pseudo-reality, one accepted as objective truth.

6

The spectacle is both the product and producer of the contemporary form of reality. It is not a supplement to, or decoration of reality, but the very heart of pseudo-reality. It comes in many forms, entertainment, academic discourse, education, news, advertisements, politics, dissent, and even common sense. It is the hegemonic social culture, a *model* for the prevailing way of life. The spectacle self-validates its continued existence with the *continual affirmation* of its mode of production. Because it is continually reproduced, it justifies its own creation and reaffirms its re-creation. This guarantees both its *permanent presence* and its monopoly on time spent outside the contemporary production process.

“the very heart of pseudo-reality”:
C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991. The complete quotation reads “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of spiritless conditions.” The original French here is “Il est le coeur de l’irréalisme de la société réelle” or directly translated: “It is the heart of the unrealism of real society.” Debord uses different words to describe a fake reality, here choosing “l’irréalisme”/“unrealism”. I have chosen to translate this as “pseudo-reality”.

7

Social relationships are categorized into “real” social practice or an “image” of social practice. Both practices contain the spectacle, distorting these social activities to make the reproduction of the spectacle become the goal of all social activity. The language of these social activities consists of *signs* of the “ruling production” or the “indicators” of the most prestigious or popular ways individuals relate to one another. The creation, recreation, and adoption of these signs is the ultimate goal of this mode of production.

“real” social practice / an “image” of social practice: To illustrate an example. the former may be in-person, face to face relationships between individuals *discussing the spectacle*, while the latter may be an image or representation of a relationship such as “Liking” selfies of friends on social media.

8

One cannot compare the directly lived experience of reality with the spectacle because contemporary society and spectacle are one and the same. Each side of this duality is the same and yet separate. The spectacle that invades reality is materialized by the contemplation of the spectacle. Directly lived reality produces and absorbs the spectacle such that directly lived reality is no longer accessible, it creates a totality in which reality exists on both sides. Each of the two notions, seemingly fixed, is actually its transition into its opposite: reality emerges in the spectacle, and the spectacle is reality.

“Each of the two notions.. the spectacle is reality”: The original French is “Chaque notion ainsi fixée n’a pour fond que son passage dans l’opposé : la réalité surgit dans le spectacle, et le spectacle est réel.” or as translated by Knabb: “Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.”

9

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

“turned upside down” a détournement of Marx: “This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.” See Marx, K. (1844) “the true is a moment of the false”: C.f. the Preface to *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, full quote: “The false (though no longer as false) is a moment of the true.” This quotation follows the French translation used by Debord.

10

The concept of “the spectacle” explains many diverse phenomena. The recognition of the spectacles ability to explain the diversity of this phenomenon is itself part of the spectacle, as it organizes and *validates* all social relations according to appearances. When studied by itself, the spectacle is the *affirmation* that all human relationships are merely an image of relationship. Any sufficient and total critique of the spectacle that grasps its underlying nature reveals it as a complete *negation* of life that presents an *appearance* of life.

“an image of relationship”: This is to say, the superficial appearance of a relationship, but one devoid of any direct connection between individuals. For example, a Facebook or LinkedIn “friend” can be someone you’ve never met, nor even talked to.

“a complete negation of life”: The original French is “la négation visible de la vie”. Life in the sense (and used elsewhere) of an individual’s participation-in, and experience-of directly lived events, as opposed to mere spectating or participation in virtual or vicarious events.

11

In order to describe the spectacle, it is necessary to artificially separate and identify inseparable elements. When *analyzing* the spectacle, it is necessary to use the language of the spectacle in that we continue to operate within the methodological terrain of the society that is expressed by the spectacle. The spectacle is both the *zeitgeist* and the *ultimate goal* of this contemporary arrangement of social life. The spectacle is the historical period in which we are caught.

12

The spectacle presents itself as always positive, indisputable, and inaccessible. Because it is always recreating and regenerating itself, and is beyond dispute (generally accepted as common sense). It says nothing more than “what appears is good, what is good appears.”

The passive acceptance it demands is already imposed by its one-way dialog, a monopoly on the presentation of appearances, which presents reality as it is, as it must be.

“what appears is good, what is good appears.”: C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991. The quote is: “What is rational is real, and what is real is rational.”

13

The fundamentally indisputable, unchanging, and frozen nature of the spectacle stems from how its means are its ends. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes indefinitely in its own glory.

“the sun that never sets over the empire..”: The phrase “the empire on which the sun never sets” was applied to the Spanish Empire of the sixteenth century and later to the British Empire.

14

The society of modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular by nature, it is *fundamentally spectatorist*. The spectacle is the image of the ruling economy. Its goal is nothing, its development everything. It has no goal otherwise.

“Its goal is nothing, its development everything”: C.f. Bernstein, E., 1911. Full quote is “To me that which is generally called the ultimate aim of socialism is nothing, but the movement is everything.”

15

The spectacle presents itself as an endless parade of new products, as a repeating presentation of the systems self-validating rationale, and as an economic system that outputs an increasing multitude of image-objects. The spectacle is itself the *leading product* of contemporary society.

16

The spectacle is able to subjugate human beings to itself because the economy is its servant, having already subjugated them. The spectacle is the forcing function for the development of the economy for its own desires. The spectacle is a faithful reflection of the things produced opposed to a fictitious reflection of the objectification of the producers.

“a fictitious reflection of the objectification of the producers”
The original French is “et l’objectivation infidèle des producteurs.” This is to say, the spectacle faithfully presents itself whilst it distorts and hides the alienation and objectification of the individuals involved.

17

The result of the industrial revolution was the dominance of the economy over all of social life, degrading life from a state of *being* to a state of *having*. The contemporary phase of post-industrial society has again shifted from a state of *having* to one of *appearing*. All actual “having” must now draw its prestige and ultimate utility from appearances. All individual reality depends on and draws its power from social reality. Individual reality is only allowed to appear to the extent that it is *not actually real*.

“degrading life from a state of being to a state of having”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988. Full quote: “Private property has made us so stupid and partial that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., in short, utilized in some way. But private property itself only conceives these various forms of possession as means of life, and the life for which they serve as means is the life of private property-labor and creation of capital. Thus all the physical and mental senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses-the sense of having.”

18

When directly lived reality is replaced by a reality of representational images, the images become real and motivate new desires and hypnotic behaviors. Since the spectacle provides specific techniques of imagery to represent aspects of reality, directly lived reality can no longer be understood, appreciated, or even grasped. These images correspond to the human sense of sight, being the most general way for the spectacle to represent reality. The spectacle cannot be found by looking for it, nor even by listening for it. The spectacle escapes projects to evade it, wherever there is independent *representation*, the spectacle is reconstituted.

“When directly lived reality is replaced by a reality of representational images, the images become real...”: The original French is “Là où le monde réel se change en simples images, les simples images deviennent des êtres réels” C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 2002 (Ch. VIII 3a), the full quote is: “For one to whom the sensuously perceptible world becomes a mere idea, for him mere ideas are transformed into sensuously perceptible beings...”

The spectacle is built upon the methodological traditions of western philosophy, one that analyses reality in the limited terms of our sense of vision, and the continual development of this observation-based form of rationality. Therefore, the spectacle inherits the *weakness* of those philosophical frameworks. As such, the spectacle transforms directly lived reality into the mere observation of reality (its image as a substitute for reality). The experience of directly lived reality has been degraded to a life of *speculation*.

“transforms directly lived reality into the mere observation of reality...”: The French here is “Il ne réalise pas la philosophie, il philosophe la réalité.” Directly translated as “it does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality”. C.f. Marx, K., 1844 “you cannot supersede philosophy without realizing it”. It is here the spectacle reaches its apogee, the complete reification of reality, one in which we have fundamentally mistaken the map for its territory.

Religion is the trend in which humanity attributes power and responsibility to a source outside ourselves. Spectacular technology has not disproved or diminished this trend, it only roots the source of power as centered upon Earth, recreating the misattribution of power to technology, such that even the most basic acts of daily life become abstract and alienated from directly lived reality.

Philosophy, the act of thinking outside of context, and the power it entails; together with its contemplation of a power separate from humanity prevents it from full emancipation from theology. The development of the spectacle does not project a false paradise onto the heavens, instead offering the denial of life on Earth, a false material reality *within ourselves* but too sacred to participate in or directly access.

“full emancipation from theology”:

In this context, theology is the study of how humanity places power in The Other, and thus absolve themselves of any responsibility to power. Similarly, the technological determinism apparent in Silicon Valley approaches a new form of Digital Theology, these technological utopians absolve themselves of responsibility and power by placing blind faith in big data and artificial intelligence.

As long as our desires are socially dreamed pseudo-needs, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of contemporary reality in which the only way to achieve our dreams is to remain asleep. The spectacle is the Ambien® that maintains that sleep.

“The spectacle is the Ambien® that maintains that sleep”: Original French here is “Le spectacle est le gardien de ce sommeil.” or “The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.” C.f. Freud, S. & Brill, A., 1994 (Ch. 5, Section C), which contends that dreams reflect “the wish for sleep” and that “dreams are the guardians of sleep.” Ambien is a sleep aid sold at most pharmacies.

Those in positions of practical power within contemporary society have detached themselves from directly lived reality in order to focus on building practical power in the new empire of the spectacle. This can be explained by their continued lack of cohesion and the contradictions inherent in the exercise of that power.

“the contradictions inherent in the exercise of that power”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998. Full quotation is “But the fact that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the divisions and contradictions within this secular basis.” This is to say, the ruling classes have a purely ideological and oversimplified understanding of reality, and have shifted the exercise of power to the falsified realm of the spectacle. This idea is explored in depth in the 2016 documentary *HyperNormalisation*: “politicians, financiers and technological utopians, rather than face up to the real complexities of the world, retreated. Instead, they constructed a simpler version of the world in order to hang on to power.” see Curtis, A., 2016. Quite literally, companies like Facebook and Google have established themselves in ‘The Cloud’. They resist moderation on their platforms because they’ve absolved their moral decision making to AI systems.

The oldest social specialization is that of an individual in control of *power*. This specialization is at the root of the spectacle and acts as the representative and decision-maker for all other activities in society. It has banned all other acts of expression unless it is presented by the spectacle. The most modern specialization is simultaneously the most ancient.

“an individual in control of power”:
With the development from hunter-gatherers to agrarian societies emerged the first specialization: the tribal chieftain.

“most modern specialization is simultaneously the most archaic”:
C.f. Marx, K., 2005. Full quotation “[Some] determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient.”

The spectacle is a self-congratulatory monologue with itself, describing its own totalitarian management of the very conditions of existence. The seemingly objective relationships between television, radio, advertisements, and social media networks to the individuals who consume that media conceal the fact that these are relationships between people, but appear as relationships between classes. Humanity continually destroys our irrational yet actually existing relationships and replaces them with a synthetic copy, a poor model built upon the same deadly irrationalities as before. The spectacle is not a natural or inevitable result of technological determinism, on the contrary, the spectacle is a configuration of society that develops technology for its own sake. Limiting the consideration of the spectacle to its most apparent and superficial manifestation of the “mass media”, it would seem to be imposed upon society as a mere technical apparatus. It must be understood that this apparatus is not neutral and that its development has progressed with respect to the demands of the spectacle. If the social relationships of contemporary times can only be facilitated by the mediation of instantaneous communication technologies, then the administration of these technologies becomes a form of power; as such, this “communication” is a *unilateral one-way dialog*. The continual consolidation and accumulation of these technologies results in the accumulation of this power. The

“The seemingly objective relationships... conceal the fact that these are spectacular relationships between classes and people.”: C.f. Lukács, G., 1971. Full quotation is “The fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society... conceal the fact that they are the categories of the relations of men with each other. Instead they appear as things and the relations of things with each other.”

“Humanity continually destroys... the same deadly irrationalities as before”: The original French is “une seconde nature paraît dominer notre environnement de ses lois fatales” or “a second nature seems to dominate our environment with its fatal laws.” C.f. Lukács, G., 1971. Full quotation is “a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature.”

“The continual consolidation... results in the accumulation of this

control of communication in a one-way dialog to the passive consumer reflects the division of social labor between the *state* and the passive citizen. These divisions are the primary tools of class domination, and provide the model for a continual separation of all social relationships.

power”: To elaborate: these media conglomerates are not neutral in their relationships to people, they are unilateral communications, a one-way dialog that goes from the authority of the spectacle to the passive consumer. Communication never goes in the reverse direction. The systems that control these mediums control the dissemination of a worldview that expands their control of this power.

“...the division of social labor between the state and the passive citizen”: Since this book was first written, the emergence of the Internet and companies like Facebook and Google, combined with ubiquitous tracking and machine learning, have exploited a new division of labor in society, and thus a new form of power: *the division of learning* under Surveillance Capitalism. This is named and described by Zuboff thus: “*Who knows? This is a question about the distribution of knowledge and whether one is included or excluded from the opportunity to learn... Who decides? This is a question of authority: which people, institutions, or processes determine who is included in learning, what they are able to learn, and how they are able to act on that knowledge. What is the legitimate basis of that authority? Who decides who decides? This is a question about power. What is the source of power that undergirds the authority to share or withhold knowledge?*” See Zuboff, S., 2019.

The spectacle's primary power is its ability to *separate*. With the shift to permanent agrarian societies came the institutionalization of the social division of labor in the form of a permanent ruling class. This class was legitimated by a form of thought borrowed from the earlier hunter-gatherer period, namely the legitimization of power as bestowed by mythical power, the same source from which every subsequent power has camouflaged itself. Religion justifies the power of those in the ruling class as sacred, and excuses *their failures* by corresponding them to the ontological order of the heavens. In this sense, all power bestowed by a social division of labor has been spectacular. The adherence to a belief in this separate and frozen ruling class was largely due to a general lack of regular, actual daily participation in social activity. Contrary to the frozen order bestowed by the heavens, the spectacle promotes a subset of real social activity, creating a false opposition between that which is socially *possible* against that which is socially *permitted*. The spectacle maintains an unconsciousness about the real changes to the conditions of daily life. The spectacle is self-perpetuating, it makes its own rules: It is the contemporary pseudo-God. The spectacle makes no secret about what it is, namely, a hierarchical power developing for its own sake. The spectacle drives the division of labor into smaller, more specialized and efficient tasks until these tasks can be automated by machines. This increasing specialization creates the efficiencies required to sustain an ever-increasing global market. This specialization is so niche that workers cannot see the context or

“The adherence to a belief in this separate ruling class... actual daily participation in social activity.”: It wasn't until the emergence of cities, and the breakdown of serfdom where the peasant class could move into the cities, making it possible for the actual daily participation in social life.
 “a subset of real social activity”:
 E.g. protest in its undirected, symbolic, and mostly pointless form, the promotion of various forms of non-violence.

even the product of their labor, nor can they relate to other equally specialized workers who attend to similar tasks. Due to this alienation between worker and task, worker and worker, and worker to community, any and all shared sense of purpose are eliminated, without a clear path to reunite either in solidarity or power.

26

The acceleration of the division of labor and the depth of specialization increases the distance between the producer and the final product. This simultaneously reduces communication between producers, and eliminates any sense of accomplishment for the final product. As production processes are specialized (and aspects of the labor are outsourced to even deeper specialists) the organizer of labor continues to concentrate control over the entire production process. The abstract vision and control over the organization of all aspects of communication between vertical specialists becomes the only task of management. The measure and goal of this system of alienation is the *proletarianization* of the entire world.

“the proletarianization of the entire world.”: This is to say, the global economic system is structured to shift the *monopolization of the understanding* of the productive process to the ruling class, and to alienate the working class; first from their labor, the products of their labor, from each other, and finally from their community.

The success of division of labor and automation becomes the primary goal—the production of the division of labor and automation—is the ends. In what was previously associated with one's primary work, those whose jobs are on the leading edge of elimination by automation are finding this time associated with, and replaced with inactivity. This inactivity, however, is not free from productive power. The inactivity of the jobless is dependent on the productive output of the automated systems of production—namely in the form of consumption. The necessity of maximum efficiency rationalizes the existence of a jobless class, although it is recognized as an uneasy relationship. Individuals are either directly contributing to the spectacle, or partaking in consuming its output, but the spectacle has no space for *real* activity outside this arrangement. There is no “liberation from labor” or “increase in leisure” when at any time an individual is either contributing-to or consuming-from the system of production. None of the productive energy that was appropriated by the spectacle can be regained by the consumption of the spectacle, it all contributes to the development of the spectacle.

An economic system based on divisibility of labor continues to produce more division in a *vicious cycle of isolation*. The technology based on the isolation of concerns creates processes that further isolate. The automobile, television—technologies *selected by the spectacle* are also the weapons that perpetuate the isolation that creates our “lonely crowd”. Each technology recreates the basis of the spectacle in ever more concrete terms.

“automobile, television...”: Even more applicable is how the smartphone and the increasingly personalized nature of internet media contributes to increasingly isolating islands of perspective. “lonely crowd”: An allusion to David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, see Riesman, D., Glazer, N., Denney, R. & Gitlin, T., 2001.

The spectacle originates from the alienation as a result of the division of labor. The enormous growth of the spectacle expresses the total loss of a unified perspective shared amongst individuals. All labor, specific techniques, jobs, and skills are abstracted along with increasing abstraction of the overall production process to the point where the idea of *being concrete* is itself an *abstraction*. The spectacle *represents itself* as a perfect image of the world, a map or model of the world where the world is merely an instance of this map. Spectators are connected no longer to one another, but solely by a one-way relationship to the spectacle at the center. The spectacle connects the separated, but it connects them only *in their separateness*.

“The spectacle represents itself as a perfect image of the world... an instance of this map”: The original French is “Dans le spectacle, une partie du monde se représente devant le monde, et lui est supérieure” or “It thus tends to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.” C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998.
 “The spectacle connects the separated, but it connects them only in their separateness.” C.f. Hegel, G., Knox, T. & Kroner, R., 1975. Full quotation “In love the separate does still remain, but as something united and no longer as something separate;”

The spectator of the spectacle cannot escape alienation by unconscious or conscious thinking. The more they contemplate the spectacle and their place within it, the less they live in reality.

Conversely, the more they passively accept living in a spectacular reality the less they understand of real existence and the source of their desire. The individual no longer performs their own actions, but sees them performed by another. This is why the spectator no longer feels like they participate directly in lived reality, and feels at home nowhere, as the spectacle is everywhere.

“The more they contemplate... the less they live”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988. Full quotation:

“The more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the world of objects that he brings into being over against himself, and the poorer his inner world becomes, and the less he belongs to himself ... The greater his activity, the less he possesses”

“but sees them performed by another” Performance can take the form of spectating upon celebrities playing sports, actors enacting love in film, or his/her own video game avatar performing their actions vicariously in a virtual environment.

31

Workers do not produce their own circumstances, they produce an autonomous force of alienation independent of themselves. The *success* of this production, and the abundance of autonomous power it generates, is experienced as an *abundance of dispossession*. Under the regime of the spectacle, workers earn wages in order to buy more products that further dispossess them of lived experience and instead substitute it with objects that make lived experience *foreign* to them. The spectacle is a map of this alienated reality, one which is identical to and yet obscures the real world. The map *shows us* what we've missed in high definition detail.

"Workers do not produce their own circumstances... independent of themselves": C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988, full quotation is "The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life he has bestowed on the object confronts him as a hostile and alien force."

"The spectacle is a map of this alienated reality, one which is identical to and yet obscures the real world." An allusion to Alfred Korzybski's phrase: "The map is not the territory."

32

The spectacle is a concrete manufacturer of alienation. Economic expansion is the product of the increased demand for alienation-production. What grows with the growth of the economy is the very alienation that exists as its basis.

33

As systems of production specialize, and each worker is more alienated from the final product, and while they produce ever finer details of things in that world, they increasingly find themselves separated from participation in daily life. The closer their life seems to be at their own direction, the more they find themselves alienated from that life.

“The closer their life seems to be at their own direction... alienated from that life”: This thesis is more relevant with the recent development of “social media influencers”, those individuals who curate an image of their lives online, only to find themselves forced to continually reproduce an image of a life they no longer actually live: commodifying themselves in a process that alienates themselves from lived experience. Their lives are a labor of self-alienation.

34

The spectacle is *capital* extended to such an accumulation that it becomes a substitute for reality itself.

“a substitute for reality itself”: Original French “qu’il devient image.” or “where it becomes image.”

II. 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*

The Spectacle's basic operation is the incorporation of all the *transient*, directly experienced activities of human life into itself so as to regenerate them as commodities in frozen form. The spectacle is a process of the *inversion* of the values of daily life into purely abstract values. In these abstract values we recognize our old enemy *the commodity*, which seems trivial and obvious at first, but which is full of complexity and metaphysical subtleties.

“the inversion of the values of daily life into purely abstract values”: From Bunyard "The passage from *The Society of the Spectacle* describes the ossification of the fluidity and flux of living activity... Where revolution and historical agency constitute the flowing force that underlies fixed social forms, the 'essential movement of the spectacle' is the opposite of that force. See Bunyard, 2018 (Pp. 293-294).

“we recognize our old enemy”: C.f. Marx, K., 1856. Full quotation “In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy and the poor prophets of regression, we do recognise our brave friend, Robin Goodfellow...”

“full of complexity and metaphysical subtleties.”: C.f. Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D. 1978 (Vol I, Ch. 1, Section 4). Full quotation: “A commodity appears at first glance to be something very trivial and obvious. Analysis reveals that it is in reality a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological abstrusities”

36

The transformation of human life into commodities is the apex of commodity fetishism: a domination of society by “imperceptible as well as perceptible things”, which is to say, the very objects created by the labor of the working class. This results in a reality in which life is no longer directly experienced, but instead represented by images of experience. These images present themselves as the best possible version of reality.

“imperceptible as well as perceptible things”: C.f. Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D., 1978. Full quotation: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor. This is the reason why the products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.”

37

The spectacle *presents an image* of reality in which the commodity dominates all living experience, this image is understood to be reality itself. The development of this image, the world of the commodity, is presented plainly as its rationale directly correlates with individuals *alienation* from each other and from the collective products of their labor.

“the world of the commodity... directly correlates with individuals alienation”: The spectacle produces alienation as its predominant product, and alienation is the underlying ideology of the spectacle (accepted as common sense by society.) As such, the spectacle need not hide its alienating character, and can instead *promote* alienation since its underlying premise has already been accepted as truth.

The spectacle produces an increasing quantity of language that specifically describes the commodities it promotes and the behaviors it encourages. The resulting language gradually loses its ability to describe actual reality. This stems from a system of production that shuns reality. What remains is a large quantity of language describing its own corrupt production. A language increasingly capable of describing quantity and unable to describe quality.

“A language increasingly capable of describing quantity and unable to describe quality”: In effect, language is a shattering mirror, increasingly able to describe the quantity of its own shards, but with a diminished ability to reflect reality. The language in advertising typically describes the production process but never the qualitative aspects of the final product. More often the language explicitly describes what the product is *not*, e.g. “fat-free”, “BPA-free”, exploitation-free but fails to describe what the product *is*.

The increased quantity of language describing the spectacle lacks any qualitative aspects, but it is subject to qualitative change. The contemporary inability of the language to adequately describe the spectacle is itself evidence of the *enormous development* of the spectacle. While this development may not yet be evenly distributed across all localities, this change has progressed to such an extent that it is verified by the existence of a globalized marketplace.

“The increased quantity of language describing the spectacle lacks any qualitative aspects”: The dynamic between mythical societies and quality versus ideologic societies and quantity is well established in Situationist texts, “The myth is based on quality, ideology on quantity” see Vaneigem, R., 2010. This is all to say, in the realm of ideology, culture tends to shed its content and embrace pure quantity; the less content the media has, the more it is repeated (e.g. Retweeted), the more it distracts people from their real problems—a meme based society.

The *unconscious history* of human society is the history of the development of production systems. This history has created the material conditions of society in the pursuit of survival; it has become the economic basis of all human activity, and expands these conditions. The expansion of these conditions relies on the improvement of the underlying economic basis these developments rely on, thus creating a surplus of survival. When commodity exchange is limited to exchange between individuals, it will remain for a long time simply individual small-scale artisanal trade. The ends are still “the production of a craft” in which its quantitative aspect was limited and largely hidden. When trade conditions develop to include corporate and state size trades and the accumulation of capital—the entire economy switches to a process of pure quantitative development. This transforms craft into commodity, and craftsmanship into *wage labor* as all things produced by craft will become banalized as utility value demands equality and exchangeability across all commodities produced. The producer is freed from the natural pressure that demanded the struggle of survival, but they are in no way liberated from their liberator. The drive for survival is replaced with a drive for labor that transforms the world of survival into a world of economics. It is at this juncture where labor is alienated from craft. It is in this falsified pseudo-state within which human labor has become alienated, all human activity must remain forever *in the service* of the production of banal commodities that contribute to the expansion of this system of

“the pursuit of survival/obfuscated version of survival”: The Situationists made sharp distinctions between mere “survival” and a life of participation and direct experience. For more on this distinction see Vaneigem, R., 2010.

production. The abundance of these commodities, and the relationships of the individuals who both produce and consume them amounts to nothing more than a *developed form of survival*.

“nothing more than a developed form of survival”: The original French is “ne peut être plus que la survie augmentée” or “can be no more than augmented survival”, which is to say, a form of survival not in service towards the continuation of the experience of life, but the continuation of labor in service to the dominant mode of production.

41

The domination of the commodity, and the hidden way the world of economics became the material basis of social life remained misunderstood and unnoticed because it seemed so familiar. In societies where commodities are scarce, money is the dominating force that acts as an emissary representing the voice of the unknown power. It was with the industrial revolution, and the fordist mode of production that increased the division of labor and began production for the global market that the commodity became the *colonizing* principle of social life. It was at this moment that the political economy established itself as the dominant science and the science of domination.

“unnoticed because it seemed so familiar”: C.f. Hegel, G., 2013 (January 31). Full quotation is “What is ‘familiarily known’ is not properly known, just for the reason that it is ‘familiar’”

“the voice of the unknown power”: A concrete example is how money is used as leverage over developing nations, in the form of IMF loans, to enact socially conservative fiscal policies. These are essentially “unknown powers”, or more literally, foreign power exerted over local populations.

The spectacle is the form society takes when the commodity colonizes *all* of social life. The total commodification of social life is not only visible, we no longer see anything else as all of reality is mediated by our relationship to commodities. Contemporary economic production extends its dictatorship of the commodity both broadly and intensively. In the least industrialized places, imperialism imposed by advanced societies forces the production of a few “star commodities” upon the colonized. The alienated production of abstract commodities becomes secondary to commodity consumption. With the arrival of the “Information Revolution”, alienated consumption has become as much a duty for the working class as alienated production. The sum total of industrial production and consumer consumption is then *sold as a complete commodity*, whose production must continue at all costs—the reproduction of the spectacle. In order to accomplish this reproduction, the spectacle must be fragmented, reimagined, and regurgitated in slightly new form for consumption by individuals who are completely alienated from its production. To serve the purpose of this alienation, the science of the division of labor (i.e. specialization) further breaks down the reproduction of the spectacle into fields such as sociology, psychotechnology, cybernetics, and even semiology; which oversee the operation of this process.

“complete commodity”: I interpret this idea as the continual reproduction of the spectacle as the total and predominant product of all spectacular labor. According to Russell “the historical specificity of the spectacle unfolding in accordance with the development of the autonomy of the commodity can thereby be witnessed through a greater absorption of labour into the circulation sphere, an effort devoted strictly to the realization of surplus value, rather than to its creation.” See Russell, E., 2021 (Pp. 203).

“regurgitated”: A similar and more relevant term today would be “retweeted”.

In the primitive phase of capitalism, the political economy only considers the labor-output of the *worker*, who only needs to be allocated the minimum amount to sustain his labor contributions, without considering his leisure or humanity.

The ruling class is forced to reconsider this once the production of commodities reaches an abundance accessible to the general population. At this point, the ruling class must collaborate with the working class, the worker is no longer contemptible for a lack of labor, but treated with politeness for being a

consumer. In this way, the *commodity takes on a humane* approach, attending to the workers “leisure and humanity” for the simple reason that the *political economy* must expand from the realm of production to the realm of consumption. Thus the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the “total denial of man”.

“the political economy only considers the labor-output... without considering his leisure or humanity”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988. Full quotation: “political economy regards the proletarian... as nothing more than a worker. It can therefore advance the proposition that, like a horse, he must receive just enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him when he is not working, as a human being.”

“total denial of man”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988. Full quotation: “Thus, although political economy, whose principle is labor, appears to recognize man, it is in fact nothing more than the denial of man carried to its logical conclusion.”
Where the worker was first alienated from the fruits of his labor, he is now equally alienated from his leisure as well.

44

The spectacle gradually leads individuals to identify personal satisfaction with survival itself. This transforms satisfaction into a commodity, and transitively, survival itself becomes a commodity. Survival must always increase, thus creating a continuation of *lack*. There must never be enough satisfaction, as satisfaction begets additional lack. The accumulation of satisfaction becomes a gilded poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

45

The technical practice of automation is the vanguard of the economy. Automation of labor creates a contradiction in the development of society: the technical apparatus which eliminates manual labor must simultaneously preserve *labor as a commodity*. If society doesn't want the time involved in manual labor to decrease due to automation, then new labor must be created. Those jobs eliminated by automation will move a reserve army of the unemployed into "services" and tertiary sectors of the economy. This reserve army acts as the supply lines for the troops deployed to the production and consumption of the latest commodities at a time when increasingly excessive advertising campaigns are necessary to convince individuals to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.

"increasingly unnecessary commodities": These are the pseudo-necessities of daily survival (E.g. an iPhone and a Netflix subscription).

46

Exchange value is contingent upon, but exists merely as a proxy for a commodities use value. Exchange value won its victory over use value, utilizing the weaponization of capital to create the preconditions necessary to become an autonomous power beyond use value. Exchange value has taken precedence over use value, monopolizing all aspects of human satisfaction, thus *controlling a commodities use*. The process of exchange tightly binds itself to every possible use, subjugating use to a secondary concern to exchange. Thus, exchange value becomes the *condottiere* of use value, waging war for predominance in the ideology of the market, for its own sake.

“condottiere”: The Condottiere were the mercenary leaders fighting for the wealthy landlords during Renaissance Italy who often ended up taking over the states they were fighting for.

47

The *use value* of commodities gradually declines as the spectacle continually generates new pseudo-necessities. This creates a new form of poverty alongside the older poverty: a poverty of dispossession from spectacular pseudo-necessities. As such, wage workers are continually going after an endless attainment of money as it loses value; a sisyphian task indeed. The worker labors under the false belief that they must attain more wealth or die, when survival itself is not actually in danger. This is a sort of blackmail in which the worker only achieves an illusory wealth, in the form of increased commodity consumption but no real increase to the quality of their directly lived experience. The blackmailed are in fear of an illusion, and the commodity is the materialized illusion made manifest by the spectacle.

“survival itself is not actually in danger”: See note to thesis 40 on [“the pursuit of survival”](#).

Exchange value was previously understood as derived from use value. Now, however, within the inverted reality of the spectacle, use value must be explicitly (and with great pretension) advertised, as the actual use value of the commodity has been diminished as its connection to directly lived reality has been gradually eroded. The commodities relevance has been made obsolete by the continual development of the market economy. Thus, the pseudo-necessity of these commodities require pseudo-justifications.

The spectacle is the complement of money. Money represents the equivalent exchange of individual goods whose use value cannot be directly compared. The spectacle is the contemporary development transcending the equivalent exchange of individual goods towards a representation of the totality of the commodity market as the equivalent of what the whole of society can be and do. The first abstraction—money, useful commodities are represented for exchange, yields to the next layer of abstraction—the spectacle, in which money is *merely gazed upon*, because all use value has already been exchanged for the first abstraction. Thus, the spectacle is not only an abstraction of *pseudo-use* value, but an abstraction of the totality of the system of production of pseudo-necessities.

“Thus, the spectacle... production of pseudo-necessities”: I’ve significantly reworded the original French in hopes of making Debord’s argument more clear. Original French is “Le spectacle n’est pas seulement le serviteur du pseudo-usage, il est déjà en lui-même le pseudo-usage de la vie.” or as translated by Nicholson-Smith “The spectacle is not just the servant of pseudo-use—it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life.” This is to say, the consumer is at first separated from their labor through the dissatisfied consumption of those pseudo-needs generated by the spectacle. Second, the consumer is passively separated from the spectacle by their passive gaze upon the spectacle which no longer needs their labor, nor which creates products they need, yet produces false necessities they cannot afford.

When society reaches the level of generalized *economic* abundance, the result of all social labor becomes visible, transforming directly lived reality into the spectacle that is the product of this society's system of production. Capital is no longer the invisible authority directing the system of production; as capital accumulates, it spreads to the ends of the earth in the form of commodities. The entirety of society becomes a portrait of the capital who is its patron.

“[capital] spreads to the ends of the earth in the form of commodities.”: Capital, the once secret fuel of the system of production, now becomes an outward symbol for this system. With the hegemony of globalization, it is now possible to travel anywhere in the world and buy products that are the same everywhere, each literally printed with the name of the company that created it, a dedication to the owners of capital.

The financialization of the economy emerged victorious as an autonomous power for its own sake, simultaneously underwriting its own demise. The forces unleashed by the autonomous power of the financial economy undermine the efforts of ancient societies that put the *material needs* of humans (e.g. food, clothing, shelter) at the center of its economy. These needs are replaced by boundless financial economic growth itself, and society demands the necessity of infinite growth. The satisfaction of basic human needs is therefore replaced with the increasing growth of the generation of new pseudo-needs, and the abstract pseudo-need for this economic arrangement to continue indefinitely. Society then refocuses its basis to the maintenance and growth of these pseudo-needs at the expense of authentic needs, a result of a *social unconsciousness* dependent upon the economy of pseudo-needs. This is called the “autonomous economy”—the economy which has shifted from the satisfaction of basic social needs to the generation of pseudo-needs for its own sake. “Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, does it not fall to ruin in its turn?”

“financialization of the economy”: The original French is “La victoire de l'économie autonome...” which is “The victory of the autonomous economy...” I've changed this text to refer to the hegemony of exchange value over use value, and how that has produced a self-perpetuating (autonomous) power.

"Whatever is conscious wears out...": Quote not found, but attributed to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis.

At the moment society discovers that it depends on the autonomous economy, the economy depends on society. This formerly secret power, which has developed to such an extent that it became visible and autonomous, has lost its power. The economic *Id* must be replaced by the *I*. The individual, the subject of the autonomous economy can only emerge from the society that has organized itself for the production of the individualized pseudo-necessities of the individual—the general class struggle of each individual to create a self-determined reality against an economy prepared to create reality for its own sake. The existence of the autonomous economy is contingent upon the results of this struggle, the manifestation of which is the product and producer (i.e. the individual vs economic production) creating the economic and material basis of history.

“the economy depends on society”:
Society is conscious that its way of life depends on the consumption of pseudo-needs lest it collapse.

“[secret power] has lost its power.”:
At this point, an autonomous economy is necessary in that it has become sovereign, while simultaneously fragile with its dependence upon society to continually consume the pseudo-needs it continues to generate, a parasitic symbiosis. Once this symbiosis is realized, society must internalize the autonomous economy as an intrinsic part of itself, not something external to itself, i.e. the economy is society, and society is the economy.
“The economic *Id* must be replaced by the *I*.”: An allusion to *The Ego and the Id*, See Freud, S. & Strachey, J., 1989. Debord uses détournement with his replacement of Ego with “I”, perhaps interpreted as an allusion to the emergence of the individual in late-capitalism. The advent of the individual as the locus of self-determination, responsibility, and personal choice is a result of individuation: a social life determined less by geography, ethnicity, race, blood, kin, rank, and religion, and instead focusing on the emergence of the human as *individual consumer* separated from traditional norms, meaning, and rules. This life becomes a reality of self-choice to be discovered within the context of the global economy rather than a received destiny inherited at birth. To service this social shift, there must be an equal economic shift that organizes production around the individual, offering products and services

customized and distributed to meet individualized wants and (pseudo-)needs. For more on this topic see Zuboff, S. & Maxmin, J., 2002.

53

Under the struggle of capitalism, the worker seeks to abolish all classes and control the means of production, the consumer desires to understand the nature of their desire for pseudo-necessities, while desiring the need to be conscious of this desire; which is to say, a consumer-worker in possession of complete control over their investments of time into both consumption and production. The *opposite* of this is the society of the spectacle, in which the commodity contemplates itself in a reality of its own making.

“the commodity contemplates itself in a reality of its own making”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988. “He contemplates himself in a world that he himself has created.” In the spectacle, the product (i.e. the commodity) exists for its own sake, external to any human desire, or even society itself, organizing reality in order to reproduce itself. This is what Debord means with the term the “autonomous economy.”

III. Unity & Division within Appearances

“An intense new polemic is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country, focusing on the concepts ‘one divides into two’ and ‘two fuse into one’. 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), September 21, 1964

The Red Flag (红旗) was a theoretical political journal published by the Chinese Communist Party, published from 1958 until 1988.

54

The spectacle is simultaneously perceived as united and divided, it builds unity upon disjunction. The unity of each is contingent upon violent divisions against the other. When this contradiction is portrayed by the spectacle, its meaning is reversed: the divisions it portrays are unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.

“unity upon disjunction”: For example, Americans are unified around the concept of a two-party system, whereby Democrats and Republicans only exist in order to be opposed to one another. Similarly, when the individual sees wealth inequality, they are both disgusted and yet subsumed by the fact that the spectacle and society itself would cease to function without it. The spectacle is “A unifying force that separates”, or “to put it in terms of Hegel’s speculative, the identity of identity and non-identity.” (Russell, E. 2021 Pp. 12, 67), which is to say, a force that separates people in order to create separate separating identities.

55

The power struggle between nations internationally, political groups, and parties within each nation all present themselves as legitimate contestants opposed to one another as the ones better equipped to manage society—but in fact are united in the representation and maintenance of the spectacle. In practice they only offer the continuation of the status quo.

“parties within each nation”: These parties differ only in the style of the theatrics they present to a willing audience of spectators. There is no distinction between parties when it comes to an alternative to the spectacle.

This thesis provides a foundational definition of contemporary identity politics.

The falsified struggle between power groups (despite being theatrical), is real in that the struggle defines their identities in relation to the spectacular society. The struggle is to define the dominant characteristics as well as the form and boundaries of these characteristics in order to construct a cohesive social identity that stands apart from other identities. The difference between power groups is determined by their level of economic development or the contradictory interests of the classes that attempt to construct their social identities within these groups. The definition of these priorities are decided by the ruling group, to the detriment of, and in opposition to the minority. This impacts individuals within the nation as well as those in colonized regions inside the sphere of influence of the nation. The spectacle presents these differences as absolutely distinct forms of social organization, but in fact they are all different styles of localized capitalism that contribute to the transformation of the world into a globalized field of spectacular capitalism.

“The struggle between power groups...”: Nominally a struggle akin to Coke vs Pepsi, while both offering mere sugar water.

“form and boundaries of these characteristics...”: As political groups, each group attempts to hold a monopoly on particular political opinions, e.g. ‘we’re the party of free public healthcare’. These typically take the form: we believe in ‘x’, we are against ‘y’, we do not ‘z’, we are ‘a’.

“different styles of localized capitalism.”: E.g. social-democratic capitalism as in Europe, authoritarian capitalism as in China and Singapore, even Russia is a form of bureaucratic state-controlled totalitarian capitalism.

57

Where the economic form of the spectacle hasn't yet dominated undeveloped colonized countries, they are instead dominated by its theatrical aspects in media, and the desire for pseudo-necessities: *as the society of the spectacle*. Cultural developments influence the indigenous ruling classes and limit their agendas. These cultural dominations, just like the pseudo-necessities that never satisfy, also provide false models of revolutionary behavior to local dissidents. At the national level, the spectacle presents local and national specializations, but when looking from a global scale we see a *global division of spectacular labor*.

"local and national specializations":
E.g. the US has become the worldwide police & surveillance force, China the worldwide mass-manufacturer, and India a supplier of low-cost knowledge workers.

58

The division of spectacular labor primarily reinforces the dominance of the spectacle as a whole worldwide system, but it primarily focuses on the development of its most advanced economic sectors. As the spectacle is founded upon an economy of abundance, the fruits of that economy tend to dominate the spectacular market within its sphere of influence, despite any local authoritarian police protections or ideologies that grant the locality the appearance of independence.

"the fruits of that economy": The original French is phrased beautifully: "les fruits qui tendent finalement à dominer le marché spectaculaire." or "the fruits eventually tend to dominate the spectacular market".

As the spectacle increasingly produces new products to maintain our attention, it simultaneously increases the *banalization* of life, as the limitless choice of equivalent pseudo-necessities becomes meaningless when all of these objects fail to satisfy actual necessity. The relics of the class struggle that persist to the present day are religion and family. These two institutions continue to tout the value of moral-oppression and conservatism as the solution to the spectacular excesses of our contemporary period. The result of economic abundance is both an apathetic smugness and a new spectacular rebellion that presents an image of opposition, but cannot exist without the spectacle it opposes. This is because dissatisfaction has become a commodity recreated by the spectacle, as dissatisfaction is the raw material for spectacular society.

“The relics of the class struggle... family”: The family continues to be the primary mechanism of transferral of class status, wealth, and power from one generation to the next.

“apathetic smugness”: This smugness comes in a few varieties: complacent acceptance e.g. “lets just face the facts, we can’t change anything!” or delusional technocratic reformism: “we can reform capitalism by increasing taxation and providing universal basic income.”

“spectacular rebellion”: Recently emergent examples of this type of rebellion take the form of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, cultural resistance, aimless protest, and culture jamming.

The celebrity is a relatable living representative of the spectacle, each offering the individual a possible role for the spectacles portrayal of an *actually lived life*. The individual compensates for a life of narrow specialization in work and shallow participation in life by identifying with the celebrities they perceive as living an actually lived life—a life of complete participation that is both broad and deep. This is an identification with mere appearances. These celebrities act out various styles of living that a single individual could never live, in a *totally free manner*. The celebrity embodies the social labor made possible by individual specialists, but that the specialist can never realize themselves; namely the exercise of *power*, the enjoyment of leisure, *taking vacations*, making life-changing decisions, and the consumption of a wide variety of products and services. The celebrity is able to see and do what the individual is not—participate in both the beginning and end of the system of production. In the case of the exercise of power, the national government assumes the form of a celebrity personified, in the case of the celebrity consumption of leisure, travel, and products that present the star with the influential power over the experience of life. Ultimately, as these pseudo-lives are not representative of the totality of human lives, they offer no actual choice between real lives.

“participate in both the beginning and end...”: The celebrity represents the idealized form of life under the spectacle: a life in which the individual needs not make decisions that may foreclose other paths through life; but can live every life possible with full participation in all aspects of life. This is, of course, an image of life presented *as life*. In witnessing the ideal form of living as performed by a celebrity, the individual can themselves feel they have lived those lives.

The celebrity is the opposite of the individual; in assuming the role of the celebrity, they must accept the public identifying with them and renouncing their own unique identities. The celebrity is as much an enemy of their own individuality as to the individuality of others. Each celebrity represents an aspect of identity to be consumed by the public. In doing so, each of their unique characteristics is up for sale and is no longer their own. With each performance, the celebrity outwardly expresses different modes of living and unique personalities, demonstrating happiness across the entire realm of consumable lifestyles. These stars, across multiple roles, possess a full range of admirable human characteristics, the contradictory differences between these roles is cancelled out by the presentation of excellence in each one. Khrushchev had to be retroactively promoted to general in order to be given credit for the battle of Kursk, twenty years later. John F. Kennedy, the great orator, survived himself when his speech writer Theodore Sorenson penned his own funeral oration in the same style that created the dead man's public persona. The most admirable celebrities who personify the spectacle are those who are known for being fake: they become famous by stooping below anything an acceptable individual would do—and everyone knows it.

Khrushchev: Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (Никита Сергеевич Хрущёв). In July 1943 near Kursk, the largest tank battle in history pitted roughly four thousand Soviet tanks against roughly three thousand German tanks. Khrushchev claims to have told Stalin (over his commanding officer) "Our defensive positions are solid,... we'll be able to hold our ground." See Taubman, W., 2003. He later became the Chairman of the Council of Ministers (or premier) of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. After Stalin's death, he took power and attempted to end the purges and enact more liberal civil policies. "they become famous by stooping below anything an acceptable individual would do": C.f. Hegel, G., Hoffmeister, J., Nisbet, H. & Forbes, D., 1975. Full quotation is "Thus, the great individuals of history can only be understood within their

own context; and they are admirable simply because they have made themselves the instruments of substantial spirit.” Ex-Prime Minister of Italy Silvio Berlusconi and ex-US President Donald J. Trump are perfect examples of the celebrity politician who played themselves while in office.

62

The spectacle offers an abundance of choice, expressed as loyalties to one side of a false dichotomy. These loyalties are aligned between competing & complementary spectacles or the juxtaposition of rules within the spectacle. These false dichotomies develop into struggles between opposing teams who claim fierce allegiance to what are otherwise trivial differences. This resurrects long-dormant racism and regionalism, creating irrational and unnecessary ontological superiorities. All this sets the stage for trivial confrontations—sporting events, theatrical elections, and the like. The presence of abundant consumption pits the adults against the youth, but “real adults”, those people who are responsible for the destiny of their own lives—are in fact nowhere to be found. Furthermore, it is not the youth that makes change, but the spectacle. It is the new *commodities* of the spectacle which are young and changing. At its core, the commodities are what are directly confronting and replacing one another.

“loyalty to false dichotomies...”: e.g. Democrats vs. Republicans, Coke vs. Pepsi; which is to say, alternatives which aren’t significantly different.

“it is not the youth that makes change, but the spectacle.”: The difference and confrontation between adult and youth culture is merely the difference between the commodities they consume, and their modes of consumption. Baby Boomers may tend to consume the spectacular media via television, while Millennials consumed the spectacular media by an ever-changing sequence of social media apps: MySpace, Facebook,

Instagram, SnapChat, TicTok, etc.
They both consume the spectacular
media.

63

Beneath the abundance of false dichotomies lies a *unity of poverty*, this is the struggle for dominance of trivial differences in form, maintained within the continuation of alienation. In making either choice, individuals become united in opposition to each other—engaged in a pointless struggle, where only the spectacle benefits from the continual regeneration of this false opposition while real contradictions are repressed. The spectacle, at its most abstract level, presents itself in one of two possible forms: the *concentrated* form or the *diffuse* form. One form comes to the forefront depending on the needs of the particular stage of poverty it needs to maintain and regenerate. In either form, it results in the happy harmony around false dichotomies and spectacular oppositions that generates desolation and horror at the calm center of misery.

“pointless struggle”: Revealing this truth will present the triviality of the false opposition—revealing the perception of total agency and free will as a superficial free will, one limited to decisions that reinforce the spectacle. Behind every choice we perceive to be based upon our free will and responsible choice, is a series of prior decisions based on experiences occurring in the spectacular society which shapes these experiences and choices in ways that are hidden to us. On both sides of spectacular opposition, the spectacle is the unity both sides share in their spectacular struggle against each other, a struggle that defines their identities (in part). “the concentrated form or the diffuse form”: Debord has since updated his analysis: “In 1967 I distinguished two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse... The former, presenting an ideology concentrated around a dictatorial personality, had accompanied the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian counterrevolutions. The latter, inciting wage-earners to apply their freedom of choice to the vast range of new commodities now on offer, had represented the Americanisation of the world... Since then a third form has been established, through the rational combination of these two, and on the basis of a general victory of the

form that had shown itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the *integrated spectacle*, which has since tended to impose itself globally.” See Debord, G. & Imrie, M., 1998. “happy harmony... calm center of misery”: A detournement from Moby Dick, full quote is “And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.” See Melville, H., 1991 (Ch. 87).

64

The concentrated spectacle is primarily associated with bureaucratic capitalism, but is also the primary form used by both undeveloped economies or advanced economies to reinforce state power during moments of crisis. Bureaucratic ownership, which is to say, the ownership of the economy by the bureaucratic class is also concentrated, in that any individual bureaucrat maintains ownership only as a member of the bureaucratic community. Commodity production, while less developed under bureaucratic capitalism, takes on a concentrated form: the total control of social labor. What it controls in labor it sells back as exclusive access to the basic means of

“bureaucratic capitalism... during moments of crisis”: The bureaucratic capitalist states use a centralized state power dictated by a supreme leader, or a central party with absolute power; for example, the former socialist USSR, contemporary China, and North Korea. In Western “neoliberal” or “free market” capitalism, absolute powers are given to the ruling class during moments of crisis such as natural disasters, popular protests, pandemics, and terrorist attacks. This approach to emergency powers was named “Shock Doctrine” by Naomi Klein in a book with the same title that describes the use of crisis to push through policies that grant additional

survival. As such, the dictatorship of bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited classes any margin of choice, all consumption is carefully chosen by bureaucratic capitalism because it has to make all choices itself and independently of demand, whether regarding food, music, or anything else. This amounts to a declaration of war against any independent choice outside of itself. Whatever is produced must also be consumed, and nothing outside this system officially exists. The masses cannot have any margin of choice, because choice ultimately leads to the choice to destroy bureaucratic capitalism itself. This dictatorship enforces itself with the exclusive control of the monopoly on violence. The concentrated spectacle imposes an image of the good which encompasses everything that officially exists, and typically reflects back upon the work of a single individual, who is the guarantor of its totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this star individual or they will disappear. This individual is the master of his non-consumption, the heroic image that explains and justifies the absolute exploitation that is in fact primitive accumulation accelerated by official terrorism. If every Chinese must learn Mao, and thus have to be Mao, it is because he or she has *nothing else to be*. Wherever the concentrated spectacle dominates, the police also dominate.

powers to the state that wouldn't have been possible otherwise, see: Klein, N., 2007. Although Western capitalism has also become increasingly bureaucratized, when Debord uses the terms "the bureaucracy," "bureaucratic capitalism," "bureaucratic class," etc., he is referring to the "Communist" party's evolution into a new type of totalitarian bureaucratic ruling class. See also theses [103](#) to [113](#).

The diffuse spectacle is primarily associated with a society producing an abundance of commodities, one pursuing the fulfillment of capitalism—the production of commodities for the sake of increasing production, and the need for constant economic growth. The spectacle is its self-congratulatory mouthpiece. The star commodities argue with each other in contradictory ways, promoting conflicting social policies but allowing individuals to identify with them accordingly. The automobile achieves more efficient travel and empowers individuals to be autonomous, while destroying the environment and the organic feel of older cities that operate on a human-scale. This creates a tension between the desire for organic-feeling old cities and the tourism they attract at the expense of vehicle ownership. These tensions create a gap of satisfaction, where the consumer is *unable to satisfy the whole* of what society has to offer due to contradictions between its parts. Due to this contradiction, the whole is absent at every aspect of society.

Contradictory commodities struggle for themselves, and cannot acknowledge others. Each seeks to become predominant as if it existed alone. The spectacle is the heroic poem of this struggle, one in which the fall of Troy would not bring about its conclusion. The spectacle doesn't sing of men and their wars, but of commodities and their passions. It is in this blind struggle that each commodity, following its passion, in fact unconsciously materializes something beyond itself: the globalization of the commodity, and thus, the commodification of the globe. Thus, by a *deception of the commodity* rationale, the *individual* commodity wears itself out in battle, while the commodity-form goes towards its absolute victory in the war of self-realization.

Each commodity independently seeks to create an optimized reality where it is the driving force for change within society, adjusting reality according to the logic of itself. For example, the automobile restructured the American city from a dense assemblage of buildings seen in Boston and New York towards the exurban expanse across large tracts of land requiring the highway system and buildings set-back from the road with large parking lots which established the design for cities like Los Angeles or Las Vegas. According to the logic of the car, the world must become either a highway or a parking lot.

“the fall of Troy...”: An allusion to Homer's *Iliad*.

“The spectacle doesn't sing of men and their wars...”: C.f. the opening line of Virgil's *Aeneid*, full quotation: “Wars and a man I sing...” see Virgil. & Fagles, R., 2006. “the globalization of the commodity, and thus, the commodification of the globe”: C.f. Engels, F., Marx, K., 1975. Full quotation: “As the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly.”

“...this blind struggle that each commodity ... self-realization.”: C.f. Hegel, G., Hoffmeister, J., Nisbet, H. & Forbes, D., 1975. Full quotation: “Particular interests contend with one another, and some are destroyed in the process. But it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges. The universal Idea does not itself enter into conflict and danger; it remains in the background, untouched and unharmed, and sends forth the

particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead. With what we may call the cunning of reason, it sets the passions to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss.”

67

The tension produced between commodities in opposition reduces the satisfaction of *using* these abundant commodities. The individual consumer exhibits religious fervor for having *as commodity*, where having is an end in itself. All forms of media engage in the promotion of waves of fervor for having these commodities. A new style of fashion emerges from a film, nightlife magazines publicizes new night clubs, which in turn launch new products. The proliferation of trendy gadgets expresses the fact that when the mass of commodities slides into absurdity, the absurd itself becomes a star commodity. Gimmicks such as key-chains, for example, which are no longer bought but are additional gifts that accompany luxury commodities, or which are traded back and forth as collectibles in their own right, reflecting a mysterious surrender to the predominance of the commodity. These commodities are then manufactured specifically to be collected. Collectors prove their position amongst their cohort of the faithful by showcasing their obedience to the maintenance of accumulation, an accumulation of commodity *indulgences*—glorious tokens exemplifying the commodities physical presence among the most faithful. These commodified people proudly display the proof of their intimacy with the commodity. The

“having as commodity, where having is an end in itself”: For example, “sneakerheads”, those who collect hundreds of pairs of expensive sneakers, keeping them boxed and in perfect condition, never actually wearing them. The satisfaction comes purely from *having* them; Apple fans will wait in line for the latest Apple iPhone, while the phone in their pocket continues to work perfectly, and is nearly indistinguishable to the newer model.

“an accumulation of commodity indulgences-glorious tokens exemplifying the commodities

fetishism of the commodity reaches similar moments of fervent exaltation as old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures. The only usage that remains within this relationship is the usage of submission to the commodity on the part of the faithful.

physical presence among the faithful”: This whole thesis plays on associations with classic religious delusions, in this case the “indulgences” for forgiveness of sins peddled by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages and the doctrine of the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.

68

Undoubtedly, the pseudo-needs imposed by contemporary consumerism cannot be contrasted against any genuine material need or desire that is not itself shaped by society and history. The economy of commodity abundance represents a total break from the organic development of social needs. The mechanical accumulation of commodities unleashes a *limitless demand for pseudo-necessities* which overwhelms all material needs and desires. The cumulative power of this autonomous artificiality ends up *falsifying the needs and desires of directly lived life*.

This thesis describes the generation of demanded-necessity, where individuals are forced to satisfy their pseudo-needs in order to comply with the norms of society. For example, a luxury watch becomes a necessity for an executive at Goldman-Sachs. Under these conditions, social bonds are as tenuous as having a commodity in common with someone else, and social identities are formed around commodity ownership: “I’m a Subaru enthusiast”, “I’m a Nike Air Jordan collector”.

Society presents an image of general unification around blissful consumption, yet this is merely *postponing* consumers awareness of the actual contradictions until their dissatisfaction with the next commodity. Every new product release presents itself as the solution to our unified pseudo-need: the desire to resolve the tension between contradictory commodities. But as with parents giving seemingly unique first names to their children which end up being given to virtually all individuals of the same age, the commodities that promise to solve all consumers dissatisfaction can only be mass-consumed if it has been mass-produced. This commodity acquires prestige if it is placed at the center of social life, however briefly, as the ultimate goal of the system of production. This commodity becomes vulgar as soon as it is brought home, revealing the poor quality of its mass production, but luckily, by then another product will soon be released, again promising to resolve the tension between commodities. The new release demands a new spectacle to tout its potential success.

“blissful consumption... dissatisfaction”: This sequence is institutionalized by the system of production as planned obsolescence. Society appears happiest when the newest object/product is released. In between, we just wait for the new release (occasionally quite literally, some wait in line for the next Apple product or Star Wars film.)

Every commodity expresses its own inability to satisfy both real need and pseudo-need when the commodity is eventually replaced, proving both the fraud of satisfaction and the inability of the entire production process to satisfy any needs. The commodity, continually announcing its excellence in advertising campaigns, but having failed to satisfy, results in a new commodity which takes its place—perpetuating and regenerating the process of spectacular production. Stalin, like any other outmoded commodity, is denounced by the very forces that originally promoted him. Every *lie* of advertising is an *admission* of their previous lie, revealing the advertiser as someone who knows they produce lies. Each downfall of a figure of totalitarian power reveals the *deceitful community* that unanimously approved of them, which was nothing more than an assembly of solitudes without illusion.

Stalin: Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), totalitarian leader of the USSR from the late 1920s till his death in 1953. Following his death, his successors, who had slavishly followed him for decades, undertook a “de-Stalinization” campaign, denouncing the “excesses” of his reign.

71

The only constant within the spectacle is change. It is dogmatic only in that it has no dogma. Nothing remains constant for the spectacle, it constantly shifts and changes, and yet it presents itself as a permanent condition that has no historical events and creates an eternal present. This instability is the spectacle's natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.

“Nothing remains constant... it is completely contrary to its natural inclination”: C.f. Pascal, B. & Ariew, R., 2005. Full quotation: “When we try to anchor ourselves to any point, it wavers and leaves us; and if we pursue it, it continually eludes our grasp. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural condition, yet it is completely contrary to our inclination.”

72

The spectacle rests on the class divisions of a capitalist mode of production. This is hidden by the projection of an image of unity within spectacular opposition. These class divisions must be maintained to keep the spectacle going. Capitalism motivates producers to create commodities that promise to break class distinctions, but this causes a finer stratification between the lower classes. That which connects individuals who are freed from their local and national limitations is that which alienates them. New hyper-rationalities require continually new oversimplifications of reality, creating new irrationalities of hierarchical exploitation and oppression. That which creates new abstract powers in society generate its concrete *lack of freedom*.

“unity within spectacular opposition”: The spectacle creates an illusion that everyone is involved in the same struggle of Republican vs Democrat, working class vs capital; when in reality there are grey areas between the two, as well as individuals and groups operating completely outside these false dichotomies—and yet these groups operate within a force of unity based upon spectacular separation.

IV. 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 Report on the Insurrection of
March 18*

The title of chapter IV is copied from Schopenhauer. See Janaway, C., Schopenhauer, A., 2010.

The insurrection of March 18th refers to the Paris Commune, the radical socialist and revolutionary government that ruled Paris from March 18 until May 28th 1871. The national government continued to have authority in rural France during this time, but Paris became briefly independent, with aims of gaining control nationally. "the fearsome organization...": The parliamentary committee of the national government characterized the First International, the Executive Committee of the Commune as fearsome because of their strong influence with the National Guard and among soldiers embedded in the army.

The spectacle began when the bourgeoisie won the economy, and became visible when the bourgeois politicians put their interests into action within politics. The real movement that dissolves existing conditions—the continual progression of capitalism destroying the old way of life in which individuals created goods as craft, and their relation to the goods as an item with use value, the old static order crumbled into dust. Everything that had been directly lived has been relegated to history.

“The real movement that dissolves existing conditions”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998 (Part 1, Ch. 2, Section 5.) Full quotation:

“Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. What we call communism is the real movement that is dissolving existing conditions.”

“individuals created goods as craft..”: In its place is a thoughtless production of items bankrupt of craft, only to be consumed not for its use, but in order to satisfy an unsatisfiable pseudo-need.

“the old static order crumbled into dust.”: C.f. Marx, K., Engels, F. & Jones, G., 2002 (Part 1). Full quotation: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind, in a clear and disabused manner.”

When individuals can relate to the products they produce and consume, they understand it as direct participation in a historically cohesive context generated by their own labor and struggle, in a clear and disabused manner. This is the creation of a history that has no ends other than whatever final unconscious metaphysical vision emerges from the procession of events that make it up. The *subject* of history can only be the living, participating, and regeneration of themselves, becoming owner and master of their world—that very thing which is history, becoming *conscious of their own adventures*.

“in a clear and disabused manner.”:
See [previous quote](#) from C.f. Marx,
K., Engels, F. & Jones, G., 2002 (Part
1).

“whatever final unconscious
metaphysical vision emerges...”:
One such vision of metaphysical
history is *The Philosophy of History*,
see Hegel, G. & Sibree, J., 2004.

The class struggles of the *long era of revolutions* that was initiated by the ascendance of the bourgeoisie, arrived with *historical thought*. This is the dialectic—a line of reasoning that doesn't conclude at the definition of meaning of what exists, but aspires to understand the dissolution of everything that is—and in the process dissolve all separation.

“the long era of revolutions”: The period from approximately 1774 to 1849 in which a number of significant revolutionary movements occurred in most of Europe and the Americas. The period is noted for the change from absolutist monarchies to representative governments with a written constitution, and the creation of nation states. Arguably includes the Russian Revolution which would extend its end until 1923.

“dissolve all separation”: The role of human labor has shifted from manual labor to knowledge labor, and most recently, pure contemplation which is sufficient to call “labor.” Within this regime, class distinctions seem to dissolve, but will be (in reality) ascribed by ownership of power, capital, and signifiers of class membership. The potential for a revolution of the proletariat is then to ignore meaning in the contemporary moment, and instead create new meaning through direct action that seeks to eliminate all existing meaning and all forms of alienation. Pure contemplation can take an active form such as automation and computation (software engineering), and machine learning. The passive form includes individuals who exchange their time for television, social media, etc; their attention becomes labor in itself. For more on this see Beller, J., 2006.

The philosophy of Hegel only examined the *transformation* of history through processes (but never examined the process or results of change itself.) He limited himself to the *mere interpretation* of the transformation after the event. His work represents the *philosophical* culmination of philosophy. He sought to understand a reality that *generated itself*. His historical thinking are justifications that have arrived too late, as the meaning of reality depends on the historical *completion* of events—his analysis occurred in thought only, and as such was able to escape separation. Hegel’s paradoxical intellectual position—the subjugation of the meaning of all reality to the material conditions and events that have culminated up to that point, while at the same time revealing that very meaning as the culmination of those conditions, arises because this great thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries desired a way to *reconcile* the results of these revolutions to the specific conditions and events he was attempting to understand. “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.” (Korsch, K., 2014) Hegel performed the task of the

Hegel: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher. Although it is possible to understand most of *The Society of the Spectacle* without knowing anything about Hegel, some familiarity with his work is useful to engage in the dialectical type of radical practice initiated by Marx and further developed by the Situationists. The dialectical method cuts through traditional logic, expressing the dynamic manner in which things interact, how they divide, merge, grow, decay, and transform; sometimes even into their opposites. Because most of Hegel’s work is quite difficult, commentaries and other secondary readings are essential. A good starting place might be Peter Singer’s *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*.

“his justifications are too late...”: C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991. Full quotation: “As for trying to teach the world what it ought to be, for this purpose philosophy always arrives too late. As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there.”

“his analysis... was able to escape separation”: His work was able to cross specialized academic fields in order to articulate a line of integrated understanding.

“the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries”: Most notably in England (1640-1660, 1688), America (1775-1788) and France (1789-1799).

philosopher—“the glorification of existing conditions”—for the last time; but what already existed for him could be nothing less than the entire movement of history. Since his position rested upon the external position of thought (external to conditions and events), this position could only be maintained by identifying that thought with the apriori existence of Spirit—that heroic force that does what it willed and willed what it has done, that same force whose achievement has created the present. Philosophy, in the process of being superseded by truly historical thinking, has thus arrived at the point where it can glorify its world only by denying it, since it must presuppose that the totality of history to which it credits all present conditions has already come to its conclusion, and the only court where truth can be judged has been adjourned.

“that heroic force that does what it willed and willed what it has done...”: C.f. Hegel, G. W. F., 2019, (Vol. 1, §140). Full quotation: “great men willed what they did, and did what they willed.”

“Philosophy... can glorify its world only by denying it.”: According to Debord, Hegel’s analysis glorified only the heroes whose work contributed directly to the conditions of the present, and ignores the work of those who contributed to the precursors & processes not existent in the conclusion. This philosophy can only be written once the conclusion is available, and its logic is only valuable when it can write judgement when the full scope of history is visible to draw upon. “the only court where truth can be judged has been adjourned”: C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991. Full quotation: “over finite spirits in world history as the world’s court of judgement.”

When the working class exert their power & presence through actions, they demonstrate how they have not forgotten historical thought. Their actions demonstrate the denial of *the ends* of historical thought, demonstrating the very real possibility of new ends that they themselves will materialize. These actions will simultaneously be a validation of *their methods*.

“they have not forgotten historical thought”: C.f. Hegel, G., Hoffmeister, J., Nisbet, H. & Forbes, D., 1975. Full quotation: “Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward as Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, ‘Well done, old mole’- until grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from its sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away.”

“the ends/new ends”: Ends as in ‘the ultimate goal’ or ‘ultimate purpose’. This language comes directly from Hegel: ‘End of history’ meaning the final form of human society, or the ultimate goal of the process of human social development. It does not imply that nothing more will ever happen. This is a denial of Hegel’s idealized philosophical conclusion.

“their methods”: Hegel’s dialectical methods.

Historical thought can only be salvaged by taking these theories of the contemporary social order and transforming them into practical thought. The actions of the working class as a revolutionary force can be nothing less than a newly emergent historical consciousness operating over the entire world. The theory powering previous *revolutionary* workers movements: Stirner, Bakunin, and Marx— grew out of a critical confrontation with Hegelian thought.

Stirner: Max Stirner (1806-1856) a German individualist anarchist philosopher, and author of *The Ego and His Own*.

Bakunin: Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), Russian anarchist revolutionary. collaborator and then later opponent of Marx within the First International.

Marx: Karl Marx (1818- 1883), German philosopher, economist, historian, sociologist, political theorist, journalist, and socialist revolutionary.

Marx's theory is just as inseparable from the Hegelian method as it is inseparable from that theory's revolutionary nature, that is, from its truth. The strong ties between Marxist theory & Hegelian action was first misunderstood, later ignored, and later denounced as a weakness—which was mistakenly developing into a “Marxist” *dogma*. Bernstein, in *Evolutionary Socialism* affirmed this inseparability when he implicitly reveals the connection between the dialectical method of Hegel and *historical partisanship* in his analysis of Marx, he condemned the unscientific predictions of *The Communist Manifesto* (1847) which proclaimed the imminence of a working class revolution in Germany (and wider Europe): “This historical self-deception, so erroneous that the most naive political visionary could hardly have done any worse, would be incomprehensible in a Marx who at that time had already seriously studied economics if we did not recognize that it reflected the lingering influence of the antithetical Hegelian dialectic, from which Marx, like Engels, could never completely free himself. In those times of general effervescence this influence was all the more fatal to him.”

Eduard Bernstein's book *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation* was published in 1899. It was translated in 1911 and more recently as *The Preconditions of Socialism* in 1993. Shortly after *The Communist Manifesto* was published, both Paris and Germany erupted into the Revolutions of 1848. See Bernstein, E., 1911.

The radical *synthesis* achieved by Marx and his branch of scientific socialism was his ability to “salvage” the Hegelian method of dialectical thinking by transplanting it from its roots in German idealist philosophy to his materialist conception of nature and history; from the bourgeois revolution to the working class theory of revolution. This work did not consist trivially of swapping the development of the materialist system of production towards its historical ends—with the development of the Hegelian Spirit moving towards its ultimate encounter with itself, the Spirit whose objectification is identical to its alienation and whose historical injuries leave no scars. For once history becomes real, it no longer has an *end*. Marx’s theory destroyed Hegel’s stance on *detachment*, that events which occur during the revolutionary event always exist in some form in its conclusion, and eliminates the *contemplation* of a supreme external agent—only the events themselves exist. Thus, theory needs only know those events which occur, those actions that are not part of the swing of the dialectic as described by Hegel: revolutionary actions without theory or a perspective on reality, immanent revolutionary action that physically transcends and refutes theory. In contrast, contemporary society’s passive *analysis* of the economy is a

“his ability to ‘salvage’... by transplanting”: C.f. Korsch, K., 1931. Full quotation: “The attempt made by the founders of scientific socialism to salvage the high art of dialectical thinking by transplanting it from the German idealist philosophy to the materialist conception of nature and history, from the bourgeois to the proletarian theory of revolution, appears, both historically and theoretically, as a transitory step only. What has been achieved is a theory not of the proletarian revolution developing on its own basis, but of a proletarian revolution that has just emerged from the bourgeois revolution; a theory which therefore in every respect, in content and in method, is still tainted with the birthmarks of Jacobinism, that is, of the revolutionary theory of the bourgeoisie.”

“historical injuries leave no scars”: C.f. Hegel, G., Miller, A. & Findlay, J., 1977. A *détournement* from Hegel, original quotation: “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”

“For once history becomes real, it no longer has an end.”: The original French is “L’histoire devenue réelle n’a plus de fin”. Debord uses ‘real’ “réelle” in the metaphysical sense. In more contemporary philosophy, the term used is ‘Real’ (see Baudrillard, J., 1994) which refers to the metaphysical condition of reality as presented in the media and inscribed into history, while actual physical reality is the ‘real’. The ‘real’ is obscured by the metaphysical conditions presented

stagnant vestige from the *undialectical* aspect from Hegel's attempt to create a self-referential system. It never attempts to rationalize any higher-order aspect of society, and remains satisfied with a mere self-validation of its own methods, and doesn't need Hegelianism to justify itself or the sector of the economy it justifies. It simply validates the financialized sector of the economy where thought no longer has any place, an autonomous sector whose development dominates all others. Marx's project is that of a conscious history. The quantitative that occurs in the unthinking development of merely economic productive forces must change into qualitative historical appropriation. This is to say that the task of revolution is to reappropriate history in its actions by redefining history, both by revolutionary & productive force of action. The *critique of political economy* is the first act of the *end of prehistory*: "Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself."

by the media, while the 'Real' is portrayed as an increasing onslaught of mini-crises that play out in the daily media. Thus, once the pseudo-events of the Real are inscribed into history, the autonomous nature of the spectacle (here called history) no longer has any ultimate purpose (or ends), other than the reproduction of itself.

"Marx's theory destroyed... transcends and refutes theory": When Marx proposes a theory of a working class seizing the means of production, it must be done with practical action in addition to theory and law. It must be done in actions that change the *zeitgeist*—the common sense and spirit of the times must change to reflect these actions in order for the revolution to succeed. When revolutionary actions occur simultaneously with theory and practice—history and imagination work together to materialize an open trajectory for the emergence of a new society.

"Of all the instruments... class itself": C.f. Marx, K., 1995, (Ch. 2).

81

Marx's thought is scientific where it understands and analyses the forces that operate in society, but his thought *supersedes* science in its drive to understand the *struggles* throughout history (of the proletariat striving to achieve real power) and not merely its *laws*. "We know only a single science: the science of history."

"We recognize... the science of history.": See Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998. (Part I, Ch. 1, Section 1).

The bourgeois period wishes to explain history with science, but this science is limited to the economy, so it can only ever become a *history of economics*. The scientific and limited perspective of economics overlooks history's effect on the economy, a process that continually modifies its own scientific premises to prove its own conclusions — best exemplified by the socialist states who thought they had calculated the exact periodicity of economic crises. These crises are only mitigated by the constant intervention of the state. The project of transcending the economy, and appropriating history must indeed grasp and incorporate the science of society, but it cannot be a merely *scientific* project. The revolutionary movement will remain merely *bourgeois* if it limits itself to mastering the economy, and economic history by means of a merely scientific approach.

“a process that continually modifies its own scientific premises to prove its own conclusions”: This is the same type of ideological reasoning used by doomsday cults who continually push their predictions of the End Times into the future. Thus, The End Times are always just around the corner, and have been for the last two thousand years.

“The revolutionary movement will remain merely bourgeois if it limits itself to mastering the economy”: Debord's critique contends that existing class distinctions rely on a division of labor that continually creates separation between theorists and practitioners. Namely, there are the designer/theorists: those who know and do not act—technocrats and economists by another name. Then there are the builders/laymen: those who act and do not know. The task of the revolutionary movement is not to merely master the redesign of the economy, but to design and build a new society with both theory and practice that transcends a mere reformation of the economy.

Utopian Socialism offered a vision of socialism that was a critique of capitalism, but one that didn't go far enough, which is to say that their vision remained constrained by the limitations of purely economic science. Their utopian vision ignores history, the actual struggles of daily life, and ignores the more recent developments of society that have moved beyond the conditions that originally generated their now-dated utopian imagination of a happy society. On the contrary, they want to continue the application of rationality and science to lend social credibility to the control of power with purely scientific methods that are now centuries old. These technocrats do not consider themselves unarmed missionaries, but as warrior-monks, for they are faithful to the social power of scientific proof; or in the case of Saint-Simonism and the other utopian socialists, in the seizure of power by science. Sombart asked "How can anything that is to be accomplished by intellectual illumination, or at most by example, be achieved through *strife*?" (Sombart, W., 1896). But the utopians' scientific understanding did not include the awareness that the wealthy have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, a monopoly on force, and control the media to promote a false consciousness. Their limited perspective thus obscured the recent developments of the economic sciences itself, which were at that time largely driven by the *wealthy classes* who determined both which areas were scientifically acceptable to study, as well as which of those areas were worthy of

Utopian Socialism was the first current of socialist thought as exemplified by the work of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), Étienne Cabet (1788-1856), Robert Owen (1771-1858), and Henry George (1839-1897). Their theories were contrasted with the "scientific socialism" of Marx and Engels.

"unarmed missionaries": C.f. Machiavelli (see Machiavelli, N., Bull, G. & Grafton, A., 2003) Machiavelli compares "armed prophets" to "unarmed prophets" in Ch. 6 of *The Prince*, here I instead found missionaries and warrior-monks a cleaner comparison.

"the wealthy have vested interests in maintaining the status quo... and control the media to promote a false consciousness." C.f. Sombart, W., 1896. Full quotation is "So far as his [Owen's] followers assume that the present order of things is nothing other than a mistake, that only for this reason men find themselves in their present position, that misery rules in the world only because man has not

funding. The Utopian Socialists thus remained prisoners to the *scientific method of exposing the truth*, conceiving this truth as a purely abstract model—although one that had been imposed by an earlier stage of the development of society. Their model is an abstract image which doesn't include enough context, or resolution to be adequate or sufficient. As Sorel remarked, their science is based upon the model of *astronomy*, which they think they can use to discover and demonstrate the laws of society. The balance they aim for, which is hostile to, and disregards history, is the result of an attempt to apply the least historically dependent science of economics to the understanding of society. They described this balance as if they were Newton discovering universal scientific laws, and the happy understanding they continually promote “[that they] believed that he had found a ‘social dynamic’ which often compared to celestial mechanics.” (Sorel, G., 2018)

known thus far how to make it better—that is false. The utopists fail to see, in their optimism, that a part of this society looks upon the *status quo* as thoroughly satisfactory and desires no change, that this part also has an interest in sustaining it, and that a specific condition of society always obtains because those persons who are interested in it have the power to sustain it.”

The gap in Marx's work between practice and scientific theory is the weakness into which the wedge of ideology was forced, both during his own lifetime and even more so in the theoretical heritage left to interpretation by the workers movement. The acceptance of the individual as subject to the events and material basis of history remains postponed, and instead a dogmatic faith in historical economics dominates understanding, which only increases the oversimplification, contradiction, and misunderstanding that guarantee its eventual obsolescence. This faith ignores the theoretical vision offered by revolutionary practice, which is the only means of attaining truth. This faith sees it as essential to study purely economic development, to quietly accept with Hegelian tranquility the suffering this development imposes. Into this gap, new scientific economic models are pushed while real revolutionary actions are ignored such that actions become "a graveyard of good intentions." According to this blind faith, the self-described "science of revolutions", concludes that *consciousness always comes too soon*, and therefore requires a misguided education of the working class. "History has shown that we, and all who thought like us, were wrong" (Engels, F., 1903) Engels wrote in 1895, continuing "It has made it plain that the condition of economic development on the continent at that time was not yet ripe enough by far for the abolition of capitalist production..." (ibid). Marx maintained a consistent perspective on his theory throughout his life, but his *expression* of this theory changed as it often took place on the *terrain* of the dominant thought of the times—

"the wedge of ideology": The original French is "laquelle pénétra le processus d'idéologisation.", or "into which penetrated the process of 'ideologization.'" In this sense both Debord and Marx consider 'ideology' to be a rigid and increasingly dogmatic interpretation of the purely scientific aspects of Marxism at the expense of the practical.

"consciousness always comes too soon": C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991. A détournement from the original quote, which reads: "philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function."

taking the form of critiques of specific areas of discourse, most notably the critique of the political economy, the realm of bourgeois society. It was this constrained form of Marx's work that was gradually reinterpreted into a simplified and dogmatic "Marxism"—which ignored on-the-ground reality, instead merely reading the tea leaves of the economic sciences—which can never reveal when the ground is ripe for revolutionary action.

85

Weakened and dogmatic "Marxism" is linked to the fundamental weakness of the revolutionary proletariat of his times. The German working class failed to initiate a permanent revolution in 1848; the Paris Commune was defeated in isolation. As a result, revolutionary theory could not yet be fully realized. The dogmatic steadfastness to Marxist theory leaves the movement vulnerable to a state of inflexibility when unanticipated conditions arise from the activity on the ground. While in exile in England, Marx was reduced to refining his theory under isolated conditions working at the British Museum; the conclusions he arrived at later became obstacles and dogmatic fixtures that obscure the theory of his work for later proletarian revolutionaries.

"The German working class... 1848": See Engels, F., Marx, K., 1907.

"The Paris Commune was defeated...": See Marx, K., Kemp, A., 1968. See also *Theses on the Paris Commune* Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 398-401).

86

The purely *scientific* theoretical defense of the proletarian revolution, is insufficiently theorized in both content and form; namely in that it misidentifies the proletariat with the bourgeoisie as those *responsible for the revolutionary seizure of power*.

Marx's continual effort to demonstrate the scientific basis of a legitimate proletarian power can be seen as early as *The Communist Manifesto*, in which he cites a *repetitive* sequence of experimental precedents, leading him to support an oversimplified *linear* progression of the development of the modes of production. Furthermore, his analysis stipulated that this progression was brought on by a class struggle that results in "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." (Marx, K., Engels, F. & Jones, G., 2002. Pp. 219) In reality, it is seen that in Asia (i.e. China with the "Asiatic mode of production" that Marx had noted elsewhere) these struggles resulted in neither outcome, and in spite of all the class conflicts through historical times; nor did any serf revolt overthrow the lords during feudalism, nor did the slave revolts of ancient times result in the rule of free men. This framework of linear progression overlooks the insight that *the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever won the class struggle* —at the same time it is the only class for whom the development of the economy has been the cause and consequence of its control over society. Marx ignored the state's contributions to the economic management of class-based society. If the bourgeois revolution seemed to liberate the economy from the state, it was because the state used the economy as an instrument of class oppression during a period of economic instability. The emergent bourgeoisie developed its autonomous economic power in the medieval period when the states were weakest, in the moment of fragmentation of the feudal balanced powers. In contrast, the bourgeoisie was able to *secure their own state*

Related: "its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion and order only on the condition that their class be condemned to the same political nullity as all the other classes; that in order to save its purse, it must forfeit the crown" Marx, K. (1963).

in its contemporary form, which emerged from the institutionalization of the practice of mercantilism—this state directly supported their class interests. This state developed at the time of “laissez faire, laisser passer”, later proved to be endowed with a central power in the calculated management of the *economic process*. What Marx would later describe as “Bonapartism”, is the fusion of capital and state power, a “public force organized for social enslavement”, one in which the bourgeoisie is totally disenfranchised from the events of a historical life by a new politics of “the things created by the modes of production” to such an extent that they were “condemned to the same political nullity as all the other classes”. This statement negatively implies that the proletariat is *the only remaining inheritor to a historical life*, albeit a pretend one. Thus, the socio-political foundations have been laid for the contemporary society of the spectacle.

“laissez faire, laisser passer”: The phrase is generally attributed to Vincent de Gournay who had made it his maxim: “laissez faire, laissez passer, le monde va de lui même” or “Let it do, let it pass, the world does its own thing”. See Albon, C. d., 1775.

“What Marx would later describe as ‘Bonapartism’... ‘the same political nullity as all the other classes’”: See Marx, K., 1963 (Ch. 4). Full quote: “... that in order to restore tranquility in the country, its own bourgeois parliament must be brought to a halt; that in order to preserve its social power intact, its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion and order only on the condition that their class be condemned to the same political nullity as all the other classes; that in order to save its purse, it must forfeit the crown.” Marx’s text analyzes the process in which the social instability following the French revolution of 1848 caused the bourgeoisie to support the 1852 coup d’etat by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of the famous general Napoleon) who would save their wealth at the expense of their political autonomy.

Marx defines two classes in his theory developed in *Capital*, these are the only two revolutionary classes that have existed in history, but operating under different conditions. Bourgeois: their revolution has been completed, they control the developed economy. Proletariat: theirs is an ongoing project—built on the foundations of their previous revolutions, but they must tailor their new revolution unique to the conditions on the ground, and differing qualitatively. By ignoring the *uniqueness* of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, one hides the concrete uniqueness of the proletarian project which can achieve nothing unless it carries its own sigils and knows “the immensity of its tasks”. The bourgeoisie came to power because it is the class that arose with the developing economy. The proletariat can only come to power by becoming the *class of consciousness*. The increasing efficiency of the productive forces does not guarantee such power, in fact it only increases the dispossession of the proletariat. Nor can a Jacobin-style seizure of the state be its means to this end. The proletariat cannot use *ideology* designed to disguise the goal of a partial reimagination of society when a total reimagination of society is necessary in order to call it a society that is truly its own.

“and [it] knows the immensity of its tasks”: Marx uses this phrase in several places, e.g. “Proletarian revolutions... recoil again and again before the immensity of their tasks, until a situation is finally created that goes beyond the point of no return” Marx, K., 1963 (Ch. 1).

“The increasing efficiency of the productive forces does not guarantee such power”: It is actually quite the opposite. Under the global neoliberal economic regime that emerged in the 1980s, and the resulting wage stagnation among workers and increasing wealth of the ruling classes, it’s become apparent that all increases in productivity have benefitted the owners of capital, and not the workers themselves, resulting in an increase of dispossession. “a total reimagination of society is necessary”: The goal of the proletariat is to become the creator of a totally reimagined society which includes everybody, or it will fail as it includes nobody.

Marx never placed faith in economic forecasting. He even wrote about the limits of his theory in a well-known letter to Engels on December 7th 1867, in which he presents a critical view of his theory with the wish that Engels would submit the letter to the press as the work of an adversary. In the letter, Marx described *Capital* as limited to conclusions that were both logical and internally consistent with itself, and with respect to history, but present conditions on the ground may not actually connect with theory: "...the author's *subjective* tendency (perhaps imposed on him by his political positions and his past actions), that is to say, the way in which he pictures himself, and portrays for others has nothing whatsoever to do with his critical analysis." This contradiction revealed the full nature of his methodology of theory & practice: that the conditions that exist in reality must inform theory and theory must inform practice.

Theory and practice must go hand in hand, as one guarantees the validity of the other. At the *moment of the revolutionary event*, the proletarian class must congeal into a conscious subject with the organization of actions on the ground to

conscious subject/consciousness:
See glossary: "[Consciousness](#)".

further their own interests with the reorganization of society. This is where *practical conditions of consciousness must exist*. If this occurs, it confirms theory with practice by becoming practical theory.

"theory with practice by becoming practical theory": According to Debord this is detoured from Lukács, G., 1971.

However, the central question of organization was ignored by revolutionary theory at the time when the workers movement was beginning to take shape, that is, when this theory was still *unified* with practice it had inherited from historical thought (thought which vowed to develop into unified historical *practice*). Instead, the organizational question became the weakest aspect of radical theory, a confused terrain mired down by a revival of hierarchical command structures borrowed from the state and inherited from the bourgeois revolution.

"a revival of hierarchical command structures borrowed from the state": Or, more contemporaneously, borrowing organization and management structures from business.

Organizational forms that are co-opted from state become a weakening force that break up the unity of the movement into specialized and ideologically fragmented disciplines that will be unable to recognize the success of practical actions and unified theory of working class struggles. Instead it represses every manifestation of struggle and undermines the memory of their successes. Practice is least theorized as it requires unique conditions and unique actions responding to the dynamic changes upon the terrain underfoot. Practice must be planned immediately, as to prevent its dissemination and potential for disruption. Verification of theory emerges from successful application and deployment of practice.

The *Soviet*, for example, was never theorized, but its practice verified the theoretical truth of the existence of the International Workers' Association.

“The Soviet... was never theorized”:
The first soviet (Russian for “council”) was spontaneously formed by striking workers during the 1905 Russian revolution. No previous radical theorists had envisaged this form of popular self-organization, however obvious it may have seemed in retrospect. “its practice verified the theoretical truth of its existence...”: Détourned from Marx, K., Kemp, A., 1968; full quotation “the greatest social measure of the [Paris] Commune was its own working existence.”
International Workers' Association:
The International Workingmen's Association (IWA), often called the First International (1864–1876), was an international organisation which aimed at uniting a variety of different left-wing socialist, communist and anarchist groups and trade unions that were based on the working class and class struggle. It was founded in 1864 in a workmen's meeting held in St. Martin's Hall, London, and dissolved in the 1870s following the split between the Marxist and Bakuninist factions.

The initial successes of the First International lead it to free itself from the confused ideology existing for a while within itself. Soon afterwards it encountered defeat and repression as it split into two competing concepts of the proletarian revolution, both led by an *authoritarian* dimension that undermined the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. On one side, Bakunin fought along the anarchist line: focused on the question of power in a future revolutionary society, against the illusion that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian form of state power, warning that this would lead to the formation of a bureaucratic ruling class, and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (a technocratic meritocracy, or of those reputed to be such). On the other side was Marx, focused on the question of the organization of the current movement, who thought that the economic contradictions in democracy (democratic capitalism), and the education of the proletariat in democratic values would reduce the influence of the role of the state to a brief period of development necessary to legislate the new social relations brought into being by economic conditions—denounced Bakunin and his supporters as an authoritarian conspiratorial elite who were deliberately placing themselves above the First International with the goal of imposing on society a dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or who had designated themselves as such). Bakunin effectively recruited his followers on such a basis: “In the midst of the popular storm 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 insignia, or titles, or official status, yet all

“an authoritarian dimension that undermined the conscious self-emancipation of the working class.”: C.f. the opening line of the Rules of the First International: “Considering that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves...”

the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power.” These opposing groups were both partially true, but both lost the unity of historical thought, and still attempted to make themselves *ideological authorities*. Powerful organizations such as the Iberian Anarchist Federation and the German Social Democracy attempted to implement these working class ideologies accordingly; the results were very different from what had been intended.

“...the invisible pilots... but through the collective dictatorship of our alliance.”: Quoted from Bakunin’s Letter to Albert Richard (August 1870), excerpted from Bakunin, M. A., 1980. The "Alliance" was Bakunin’s secret organization, the International Alliance for Social Democracy.

“... the results were very different from what had been intended.”: A détournement of the introduction by Engels, see Marx, K., Dutt, C. P., Engels, F., 1895 (Pp 18). Full quotation: “the Commune was consumed in unfruitful strife between the two parties which divided it, the Blanquists (the majority) and the Proudhonists (the minority), neither of which knew what was to be done.”

Collectivist anarchism focuses on the outcome of the revolution as the *immediately present* condition of revolution itself as its ultimate goal, which constitutes both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. As such, anarchism has contempt for method and practice (the collectivist and socialist anarchist struggles are the only forms of anarchism that can be taken seriously, the pretensions of the individualist and libertarian forms of anarchism have always been laughable). Its critique of the *political struggle* remains too abstract and too ideologically pure—its methods are constrained by its single-minded focus on an ideal outcome, and focuses only on the strategy of the single blow of the general strike, or the insurrection, ignoring all historical thought of other contemporary class struggles. The anarchists strive to *realize an ideal*. In this way, anarchism is the *ideologic* negation of the state and of class society, that is to say, the negation of the very social preconditions that generate separate ideologies. Anarchism is *the ideology of pure freedom* which makes everyone equal without a class or hierarchy, and removes any notions of historical evil. This positions anarchism above the merely specific and reformist stances of other political ideologies with its singular all-encompassing demand (no classes), which provides anarchism the great merit of representing the refusal of existing conditions in favor of the unitary condition that enables the whole of life and which drive

anarchism: For a good historical overview, see Guerin, D. 2005. For an enjoyable fictional account of an anarchist civilization that implements “the revolution as the immediately present condition of revolution itself as its ultimate goal” see Le Guin, U. K., 1994.

“The anarchists strive to realize an ideal”: This is a détournement of Marx, K., Kemp, A., 1968. Full quotation: “They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending, by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historical processes, transforming circumstances of men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.”

“removes any notions of historical evil”: From the French “écarte toute idée du mal historique.” C.f. Hegel, G. W. F., Paolucci, A., 2001. Full quotation: “the Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil; people who are so wholeheartedly cheerful cannot be

all subsequent changes to daily life. At the same time, this singular demand that lacks any semblance of practice condemns anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence. This causes the movement of anarchism to be repeatedly injected into every struggle, using the same vision and all-encompassing methods every time. When Bakunin quit the Jura Federation in 1873 he wrote on the theory of anarchism: “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 attitude concludes that historical and existing revolutionary theory is sufficient, but it must be implemented in practice. It makes the assumption however, that the transition from theory to practice has already been discovered and not subject to change.

altogether evil and base.” The “Historical evil” “mal historique”, could also be translated as “the bad side of history” is also referenced in Marx, as a response to the anarchist Proudhon’s simple distinction between the “good” and “bad” sides of various historical events “It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by constituting the struggle.” see Marx, K., 1995.

Jura Federation: Anarchist leaning section of the First International based in the Jura mountain region of France and Switzerland.

Anarchists distinguish themselves from the greater revolutionary movement by their ideological fervor and conviction, they use that conviction as well as how much one can recite standardized anarchist theory as a metric to separate the ranks amongst themselves. One can determine the level of mediocrity of a given anarchist by the way their intellectual activity is limited to repeating a number of unchanging “truths” with which they cling to. Within the revolutionary organization, unanimity works well to make discussions and eliminate hierarchy, but it generates its own uncontrolled authority within the organization itself: *the freedom specialist*. They expect this form of governance to expand outwards to the general populace. This mindset refuses to take into account just how opposed their views are from general society, and how it will be impossible to reach unanimity with coexisting workers movements under such conditions. This continues to generate a permanent separation of anarchists at the very moment of the common decision, as shown by the countless number of individualist anarchist groups across the country during the Spanish Revolution, each individually destroyed at a local level because they could never gather universal cohesion.

Spanish Revolution: A workers' social revolution that began during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 until 1939 resulting in the widespread implementation of anarchist and more broadly libertarian socialist organizational principles throughout various portions of the country, primarily in Catalonia, Aragon, Andalusia, and parts of the Valencian Community. It was fought by the fascist forces of General Francisco Franco and the popularly elected Republic who was supported by the bourgeois.

The illusion explicitly maintained by anarchism is that a revolution is just around the corner, immediately proving the validity of anarchist organization and ideologies. During the Spanish Revolution an army pronouncement sparked the way for an anarchist revolution that was partially successful in establishing the most advanced model of power of all time. It must be remembered that the revolution began as a defensive reaction to the army's attempted coup. The revolution was not immediately victorious, as Franco held half of the country with the Bourgeois republicans support of the state apparatus as well as international aid since the international workers movements had already been defeated. The anarchists proved unable to extend their victories beyond their own local territory, or even to defend it. Ultimately their leaders became hostages to the state who dismantled the revolution as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

The Second International believed in “Orthodox Marxism” as its form of ideology supporting a socialist revolution. The key tenets of which were that Marxism was completely about scientifically measured objective economic processes, and the leading organization must educate the working class about these objective economic processes. The idea of educating the working class was borrowed from the utopian socialists, which mixed demonstration with *contemplative* teachings of the course of history, a style in which practice was diminished beneath theory. This was completely out of touch with the Hegelian aspect of an education of a totalizing history, and out of touch with the static image of a totality as presented by the utopian socialists (best exemplified by Fourier). Those who failed to realize that for Marx, theory was not to be separate from practice, and to do so guarantees its students to fall victim to the inevitability of finance capitalism with a contemplative and yet paralyzed response. This scientific perspective produces false dichotomies between ethical choices, and the nonsense like that of Hilferding when he claims in *Finance Capital* that 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 service to that necessity.” (Hilferding, 1981). The failure of this group was the failure to recognize that for Marx, it was a unitary historical thought that

Second International: Also known as the Socialist International, an organisation of socialist and labour parties formed in Paris on July 14th, 1889 continuing the work of the dissolved First International, though excluding the still-powerful anarcho-syndicalist movement. It broke up in 1916 when most of its constituent parties abandoned their previous internationalist antiwar policy and rallied to their respective national governments during World War I.

Fourier: Charles Fourier (1772-1837) was a French philosopher, an influential early socialist thinker and one of the founders of utopian socialism. Some of Fourier’s social and moral views, held to be radical in his lifetime, have become mainstream thinking in contemporary society. For instance, Fourier is credited with having originated the word feminism in 1837.

Hilferding: Quotation from the Preface to Hilferding, R. & Bottomore, T., 1981.

was *in no way separate from practical actions to be adopted*, and therefore the lack of *both theory and practice* that entailed the revolutionary party would fall victim to their own exercise of power.

96

The ideology of the social democratic organizations handed power to *teachers* tasked with educating the proletariat, and this passive (a curriculum that focuses mostly on theory, yet little on practice) style dictated the organization of the movement into a passive state of contemplative and *uncritical* non-action against capitalism. The Second International practiced the *reform* of a propertarian and capitalist organization of society while presenting the *illusion of revolution*. The success of the revolution would be undermined by the leaders who claimed its success. The privileged position of the bureaucrats and journalists enticed the existing bourgeois intelligentsia as well as the proletariat to join their ranks, while industrial workers who had been recruited out of struggles in the factories were transformed by the labor-union bureaucracy into mere brokers of labor-power, buying worker-labor as a commodity like any other. For the activities of these people to maintain any semblance of appearing revolutionary, capitalism would need to have been incapable of tolerating the reforms they advocated for, and yet all these reforms were easily accepted. This activity contradicts the revolution against commodification and undoes the fundamental ideology of a movement that claims to reduce commodification.

Bernstein contradicted himself in being the social democrat least attached to the grip of political ideology while at the same time most openly attached to the methodology of bourgeois science. He was honest enough to point out this contradiction, one equally demonstrated when the English workers reformist revolution had shown proof of a socialist revolution without a working class educated in socialist theory. Historical developments since have proven this again and again, without a doubt. Bernstein rejected the notion that a crisis of capitalism would force the socialists into revolution because they needed to ignite their own revolution in order to claim legitimate control. The social upheaval started by the first world war raised the consciousness of the people, but twice demonstrated the failures of the socialists to educate the German working class in revolutionary theory: first when the socialist party majority rallied to imperialist war, second in their own defeat—the party squashing those members supporting the Spartacist revolutionaries. The socialist party leader and ex-worker, Friedrich Ebert believed in sin, and hated revolution “like sin”. Ebert later went on to become the precursor to the *image of socialism*, bankrupt of its original ideologies when he became the mortal enemy of the Soviet Russian proletariat. Ebert summed up this bankruptcy when he aptly proclaimed: “Socialism means working a lot.”

Bernstein: Eduard Bernstein's book *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (“The Prerequisites for Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy”) was published in 1899, and its “revisionist” positions provoked heated debates for many years afterwards. See Bernstein, E. & Tudor, H. 1993.

Spartacist revolutionaries / Friedrich Ebert: Following the German defeat in 1918, there were mutinies and revolts throughout Germany. The Kaiser's regime was replaced by a “Socialist” government headed by Friedrich Ebert, but revolts continued, culminating in a general strike and insurrection in Berlin in January 1919 involving the Spartakist League, a revolutionary socialist organization founded by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Ebert's regime, with the assistance of the rightwing paramilitary

Lenin was a faithful and consistent *Kautskyist* when it comes to his Marxist thinking. He applied the *revolutionary ideology* of “orthodox Marxism” to the conditions in Russia that had resisted the merely reformist practices carried on elsewhere by the Second International. In Russia, the Bolsheviks lead from the *outside*, using intellectuals who transformed into “professional revolutionaries”, a clandestine group tasked with teaching and leading the working class from the top-down. This group gave rise to a genuine profession—one disinclined to make deals with the managerial class of capitalist society (the Czarist regime, by this point, was totally incapable of offering any such compromise, because the bourgeois class had emerged as an intervening power with the ability to block any compromise). The consequence of this groups specialization was the fixation upon the *management of total social domination*.

Freikorps, crushed the Spartakist revolt and murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

“Lenin... Kautskyist”: Debord notes that the Russian Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) and the German social-democratic leader Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), though bitterly at odds in certain respects, were fundamentally aligned in many others, notably the belief that a professional revolutionary “vanguard” party of specialists must lead the proletariat from the outside. Lenin cites Kautsky directly: “Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.” (Lenin, V. 1961). They both believed the proletariat were merely capable of organizing within their own soviet groups (or unions), but lacked a universal consciousness beyond their own class. This amounted to decapitating the proletariat so that the party could put itself at the ‘head’ of the revolution. The Situationist pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* is most critical of Lenin: “Contesting the proletariat’s historical capacity to liberate itself, as Lenin did so ruthlessly, means contesting its capacity to totally run the future society. In such a perspective, the slogan “All power to the soviets” meant nothing more than the conquest of the soviets by the Party and the installation of the party state in place of the withering-away ‘state’ of the armed proletariat.” See Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 426-427).

Bolsheviks: A faction founded by Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Bogdanov that split from the Menshevik faction of the Marxist

Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), a revolutionary socialist political party formed in 1898, at its Second Party Congress in 1903.

99

World War I brought about a collapse of international social democracy as nationalism took its place, and the radical authoritarian ideology of the Bolsheviks quickly spread its influence around the world. The democratic movements of the proletariat came to various bloody ends, and Russian-style Bolshevism filled the vacuum left by this crisis. The Bolsheviks brought with it a hierarchical ideology, enticing the working class to “speak Russian” by applying this model against the ruling class. Lenin didn’t denounce the Marxism of the Second International for being a revolutionary *ideology*, but for ceasing to be a *revolutionary* ideology.

The very moment when Bolshevism celebrated its victory *for itself* in Russia, and when social democracy fought victoriously *for the old world*— marked the shift to our contemporary state of affairs: which is to say, the foundation of spectacular domination: the *representation* of the working class has become the *enemy* of the working class.

“when Bolshevism celebrated its victory for itself in... for the old world”: In more detail: “The triumph of the Bolshevik order coincided with the international counter revolutionary movement that began with the crushing of the Spartakists by German ‘Social Democracy.’ The commonality of the jointly victorious Bolshevism and reformism went deeper than their apparent antagonism, for the Bolshevik order also turned out to be merely a new variation on the old theme, a new guise of the old order. ... Capitalism, in its bureaucratic and bourgeois variants, won a new lease on life, over the dead bodies of the sailors of Kronstadt, the peasants of the Ukraine, and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and finally Barcelona” See Knabb, K. 2006 (Pp. 422-423).

On December 21st, 1918 Rosa Luxemburg wrote in *Die Rote Fahne* “In all previous revolutions the combatants faced each other face to face: class against class, program against program. In the present revolution the protection troops of the old order do not intervene under the banner of the ruling classes, but under the flag of a ‘social-democratic party’. If the central question of the revolution were asked openly and honestly: capitalism or socialism, no doubt, no hesitation would be possible today in the great mass of the proletariat.” Thus, just a few days before the January 1919 destruction of the Spartacist uprising (and the murder of Luxemburg) she discovered the key secret of how the conditions leading to the formation (and the support by the proletariat) of the social-democrat coalition—lead to the support of the ruling class and the defense of the status quo—a complete undermining of the revolution. This led directly to a new social reign of appearances under which no “central question” could be “open and honestly” posed. By this point, the leaders of the proletariat had betrayed the revolution but supported its revolutionary image, that is both the cause and the result of a general falsification of society.

Rosa Luxemburg: (1871-1919) A Polish-German Marxist revolutionary and founding member of the Spartacus League. Murdered during the suppression of the Spartakist uprising. Die Rote Fahne: The Red Flag was a German newspaper created on 9 November 1918 by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin, most famously as the mouthpiece of the Spartacus League.

“supported the revolutionary image...”: In this case, in support of the social democrat party.

The organization of the Russian working class on the Bolshevik model stems first from the economic immaturity of Russian conditions, and second due to the abandoning of the revolutionary workers struggle in economically developed countries. This same backwardness unconsciously contained at its organizations initial core, a momentum towards a counter-revolutionary overthrow. Evidence of this behavior was the continuing failure of European workers movements in the face of the *hic Rhodus, hic salta* moment during the 1918-1920 period of social upheaval—a failure that included the violent destruction of their own radical minority party members. The failure of the Bolshevik party to prove itself was used to undo the gains made by the workers, and instead used to present the party to the world as the only solution to the organization of the working class. The seizure of the state monopoly on power, the representation and defense of workers power, which formed the basis of legitimacy for the Bolshevik party, *became what it already was: the party of the owners of the working class, eliminating any previous forms of ownership.*

“Hic Rhodus, hic salta”: From the Latin phrase “Prove it, right here, right now.” During the 1918-1920 period in the aftermath of World War I, Debord considered the European workers movement a failure in that they never took full advantage of favorable conditions, which included the fall of many governments, and a general sense of social upheaval. “violent destruction of their own radical minority party members”: Namely the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

The Russian social democrats argued about theory for twenty years, concerned with which conditions were most favorable to overthrow Czarism: the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the shift in power to the peasant majority, the decisive role to be played by a centralized and militant working class, and so on. Finally, practice won over theory when the revolutionary bureaucracy placed itself at the head of the working class, seized the state and imposed a new form of class rule upon society. All other theories of revolution were impossible: a strictly bourgeois revolution; a “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants” was meaningless lip service; the proletarian power fought uphill against small landowners, there was a looming threat of the national and international White movement, and the alienated people this party represented—namely the absolute rulers of the state, the economy, the press, and eventually the expression of thought. Lenin espoused the only workable theory as proposed by Trotsky and Parvus in April 1917, a theory of permanent revolution that would work in countries with an underdeveloped bourgeois economy, but even in these specific conditions it could only work when the class bureaucracy came to power. In his many clashes with the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was consistent in his push for leadership and power to be held in the hands of the ideological group of representatives: a dictatorship. He pragmatically championed solutions that

“democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants”: An early Bolshevik slogan. In French: “dictature démocratique des ouvriers et des paysans.” from the original Russian «Демократическая диктатура пролетариата и крестьянства».

White movement: The White movement was a loose confederation of anti-communist forces that fought the Communist Bolsheviks, also known as the Reds, in the Russian Civil War.

Trotsky: Leon Trotsky (1879- 1940), Russian Bolshevik leader, creator of the Red Army and most powerful figure in the “Soviet” regime except for Lenin. Following Lenin’s death in 1924, he was gradually outmaneuvered by Stalin, forced into exile, and later murdered by one of Stalin’s agents.

Trotsky and Parvus: Leon Trotsky and Alexander Parvus’s theory of permanent revolution (developed in the aftermath of the 1905 Russian revolution) held that it would be possible to proceed from the bourgeois to the proletarian stage in one continuous process, going against the previous theory that a

flowed logically from the earlier decisions of the minority group that now held absolute power: A democracy refused to peasants at the state-level should also be refused to workers, to communist union leaders, to party leaders in general, and even the highest ranks in the party hierarchy. At the 10th Congress, by then the Kronstadt soviet was violently gunned down and slandered in the press, Lenin passed a judgement of the leftist bureaucrats of the “Workers’ Opposition” party which would set the future course of leadership under Stalin: “[in] Here with us—or out there with guns in your hand—but not as an opposition (party). We’ve had enough opposition.”

bourgeois revolution as well as significant capitalist economic development was necessary to provide the material basis for the eventual emergence of a socialist society.

10th Congress: The 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) was held during March 8–16th, 1921 in Moscow. Halfway through the Congress, the Kronstadt uprising started. Kronstadt: (Кроншта́дт) In March 1921 the sailors of Kronstadt, who had been among the most ardent participants in the 1917 revolution, revolted against the Bolshevik government, calling for a genuine power of the soviets (democratic popular councils) as opposed to the rule of the “Soviet” state. Denounced as reactionaries, they were crushed by the Bolsheviks under the direct leadership of Trotsky.

“Workers’ Opposition”: A radical leftist faction within the Bolshevik Party that had its roots in the trade unions that emerged in 1920 as a response to the perceived over-bureaucratization of Soviet Russia. It was led by Alexander Shlyapnikov, Alexandra Kollontai, Sergei Medvedev, and Yuri Lutovinov. It existed until 1922, when it was defeated at the 11th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). For more see Kollontai, A. & Holt, A., 1977.

After the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921, the bureaucracy became the owner of a system of *state capitalism*—entered into a temporary alliance with the peasantry with its “New Economic Policy” internally, sabotaging any revolutionary movements at home, and used the regimented workers of the Third International to back up Russian diplomacy abroad, supporting the bourgeois foreign governments such as the Kuomintang in China (the Nationalist Party of China from 1925-1927), and Popular Fronts in Spain and France, whose support they expected in return to secure their position in international politics. In order to complete absolute social control, the Russian bureaucratic party used a reign of terror against the peasantry to achieve the most brutal primitive accumulation of capital in history. The industrialization during Stalin’s era revealed the bureaucracies ultimate intentions: to preserve and maintain the economy as the basis of society, and salvaging all essential aspects of a capitalist market, especially labor as a commodity. Thus it was demonstrated that, left independent, the economy recreated the class distinctions necessary for its own continued operation. The bourgeoisie had created a power so autonomous that it would continue to endure without the bourgeoisie. This totalitarian bureaucracy was merely a *substitute*

state capitalism: A centralized economy in which the state controls all capitalist enterprise.

“New Economic Policy”: A temporary concession (1921-1928) to the peasants that included loosening certain aspects of state economic control, eliminating forced grain requisitions and permitting the peasants to sell surplus production on the open market.

Third International (a.k.a. Communist International or Comintern): From Knabb, “The Third International, ostensibly created by the Bolsheviks to counteract the degenerate social-democratic reformism of the Second International and to unite the vanguard of the proletariat in ‘revolutionary communist parties,’ was too closely linked to the interests of its founders to ever bring about a genuine socialist revolution anywhere. In reality the Third International was essentially a continuation of the Second.” See Knabb, K., 2006, (Pp. 423)

“a reign of terror”: Primarily through the forced collectivization of the “Five Year Plans” during the period of 1928-1941. These plans were lists of economic goals under Communist Party General Secretary Joseph Stalin which centered around rapid industrialization and the destruction of traditional peasant farming plots and ways of life—in order to create massive collective farming systems and seismic shifts to cultural norms.

ruling class for the commodity economy, and not “the last owning class in history” as Bruno Rizzi had argued.

This class replaced a tottering capitalist property system with a *concentrated*, centralized, simplified, less diversified, and inferior version of itself. This class reflected the underdevelopment of the economy at its foundations, and offered no agenda other than its own development. It was a cheap hierarchical and statist remake of the capitalist ruling class, staffed by a party of the working class, but still modelled on the hierarchic bourgeois organizations. Ante Ciliga put it most succinctly writing from one of Stalin’s prisons: “Technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions.”

Bruno Rizzi: Author of what can be considered the first in-depth analysis of the class nature of the Soviet Union, see Rizzi, B. & Westoby, A., 1985.

Ante Ciliga: (1898-1992): Croatian revolutionary imprisoned by Stalin and later sent to Siberian labor camps. After Croatia’s independence, Ciliga returned to Croatia, where he died in 1992.

Leninism represents the greatest voluntaristic attempt to the revolutionary ideology of *coherence of the separate*, an attempt by authoritarianism to change both reality and society under prevailing conditions. The advent of Stalinism returned revolutionary ideology to *its fundamental incoherence* at which point ideology is no longer a tool and a weapon, but an end in itself. The lie that is not contradicted becomes insanity. Both reality and ideological purpose (to transform the basis of reality) is dissolved into a totalitarian ideology proclaiming that whatever it said is all there is, and all there ever was. This was an early, local, and primitive form of the spectacle that was fit for the underdeveloped economy, and yet essential to the emergence and development of the universal, globalized spectacle. The ideology that emerged from this context did not actually develop the world economically, as capitalism had as it reached the stage of material abundance, this ideology merely used police state methods and violence to transform the *perception* of the world.

The ideological-totalitarian class in power is the power of the world turned on its head, the stronger the class, the more forcefully it proclaims that it does not exist, and it uses its strength first and foremost to assert its non-existence. Its modesty ends there however, as it simultaneously proclaims its own non-existence it also proclaims nothing exists beyond the current status quo—the success of the status quo of course due to both the zenith of historic development and the infallible leadership of the party. The bureaucracy must always be *invisible as a class*, although always visible, thus forcing all of social life into a contorted series of lies, self-dilution, contradictions, and insanity. These social relations organized around contradiction create the corrupt foundation for the absolute lie.

“zenith of historic development”: Debord uses the Latin phrase “Ne Plus Ultra” meaning “the apex of development”, or “zenith of development”.

“the absolute lie”: I’ve chosen to directly translate the original French “mensonge absolu”, keeping it as “absolute lie” and remain consistent with this phrase. It is an ideology of balanced contradictions that obscure the nature of all social relations based on falsehoods.

Under Stalinism, the bureaucratic ruling class was officially non-existent and had no legally recognized status as an owning class, nor any juridical legitimacy to apply to its members. Their power was based on a reign of terror within the bureaucratic ruling class, and used terror to become the owner of the proletariat and the ruling class. Its status as an owning class was obscured because it was based on false consciousness. The false consciousness maintains its absolute power only through absolute terror, where all true motive is eventually lost. As members of the (officially non-existent) bureaucratic ruling class only have a collective control of the ownership of society, they are participants in-and-reproduce the fundamental lie that forms the basis of the party: they are merely part of the proletariat, working in common to govern a socialist society—actors loyal to a script of ideological disloyalty. But effective performance in this theatrical production of lies requires and reproduces actual participation. Here lies an essential tension: no bureaucrat can exert power individually, since to do so would prove their membership in the bureaucracy, and proving this status is impossible since the bureaucracy’s official policy is its official non-existence. Thus each bureaucrat is totally dependent on the *guaranteed stability* of the ruling ideology, which legitimates the collective participation in the “socialist regime” of *those bureaucrats it doesn’t eliminate*. While the bureaucrats are collectively empowered to make all social decisions as long as they are members of the bureaucratic class, their membership in this class can only be determined by the concentration of the terrorist power in a single person (that is to say, the leader: Stalin). In this single person resides the actual truth of the *ruling lie*: the power to

“Their power was based on a reign of terror within the bureaucratic ruling class”: For a wonderfully comedic take on the reign of terror within the bureaucratic class, look no further than the 2017 film “The Death of Stalin”.

determine unchallengeable party norms which are nevertheless constantly being adjusted. Thus only Stalin can decide, without appeal, who is a “proletariat bureaucrat member in power” and who is “a traitor paid by Wall Street.” These separated bureaucrats can only find their collective legitimacy in the person of Stalin—the lord and master of the world who thus comes to see himself as the absolute person, for whom no higher type of Spirit exists. “The lord of the world becomes really conscious of what he is, viz. the universal power of the actual world, in the destructive power he exercises against the self of his subjects, the self which stands over against him.” Only he can determine the terrain of political struggle, and he is also “the power that *ravages* that terrain”.

“the lord and master of the world... for whom no higher type of Spirit exists”: This phrase echoes Hegel’s description of the power of the Roman emperors over their subjects. Full quotation “the lord and master of the world holds himself in this way to be the absolute person, at the same time embracing within himself to be the absolute person, at the same time embracing within himself the whole of existence, the person for whom there exists no superior Spirit.” See Hegel, G.W.F., 1998. “The lord of the world becomes...”: Ibid.

The party in power demands total adherence to their ideological vision, and all reality must be mediated by their ideology, or else. This ideology presents itself as the only way to perceive reality, as no perspective otherwise exists. This dogmatic perspective must continually shift and contort reality itself to fit its absolute perspective, and in doing so creates the “absolute lie” that must be accepted, and thus any assertion can be rendered true when based upon its false premises. Under such a regime, empirical facts and history can no longer exist without contorting to the demands of this “ideology of the absolute lie.” This lie rewrites history as needed to create an unchanging perpetual present, under which lives the totalitarian society, where everything up to this point justifies and is accessible only to its police force, who are ready to amend, or change, or enforce the history it demands. Napoléon had formulated a similar project, that of “monarchically directing the energy of memory”—or rewriting the past to serve the interests of the present, and not just reinterpreting the meaning of the past, but in changing the facts of the past themselves. There is a price to be paid for this “emancipation” from the facts of historical reality however, which is the loss of any rational orientation which is necessary for capitalism to maintain its status as a *historical social* system. Lysenkoism in Stalinist Russia is a perfect example of an insane and irrational ideology extended to its dreadful ends. Totalitarian bureaucracy is challenged by internal contradictions in that it needs science and rationality to be effective, but refuses to

“monarchically directing the energy of memory”: From the French quote by Napoleon, in conversation with General de Caulaincourt: “L’important est de diriger monarchiquement l’énergie des souvenirs...” or “The important thing is to monarchically direct the energy of memories...” See Caulaincourt, 2002 (Pp. 153).

Lysenkoism: Lysenkoism was an anti-scientific political campaign by Trofim Lysenko, a former agronomist who claimed to have developed an agricultural technique named “vernalization”, which tripled or quadrupled crop yield by exposing wheat seed to high humidity and low temperature, and these

accept a reality it doesn't agree with. This is its primary shortcoming when compared to rationality under capitalist development. The management of agriculture and industrialized society cannot function under falsehoods, ultimately it seeks to plan in an authoritarian manner on the basis of a complete falsification of reality and a dogmatic adherence to the absolute lie.

characteristics would be inheritable by the offspring of these plants. These findings were never reproduced by western scientists. Joseph Stalin supported the campaign. More than 3,000 mainstream biologists were fired or even sent to prison, and numerous scientists were executed as part of a campaign instigated by Lysenko to suppress his scientific opponents.

Between the two world wars, the revolutionary workers movements were destroyed, in Russia by the Stalinist bureaucracy and in Germany by the fascist totalitarians who had borrowed their organizational form from the more developed totalitarian party in Russia. Fascism was an extreme defense mechanism for the bourgeois economy which was threatened at the time by working class subversion and the reparations of the Germans after World War I. Fascism is an expensive to maintain *state of siege* by the capitalist economy attempting to defend itself with an emergency dose of rationalization and massive state intervention in its economic and social management. But this rationalization is itself hindered by the immense irrationality of the methods it imposed. Fascism rallies to the defense of the conservative bourgeois ideology of the family, private property, the moral order, and patriotic nationalism. It unites the petty-bourgeois and the unemployed who have been hurt by the crisis or disappointed by the impotence of the socialist revolution—it is not by its nature fundamentally ideological, but may exhibit ideology to suit its needs. Its strength is how it presents itself truthfully as a violent resurrection of *mythic* origins—to claim the past as a “Golden Age” and a return to the successes of this golden past. It demands participation in a community held together by mythical archaic pseudo-values: race, blood, and the leader. Fascism is a *cult of the archaic fitted out by modern technology*. It revives and recreates its myth (both past and present) through the spectacle

“reparations of the Germans”: As a result of World War I, the Paris Peace Conference imposed reparations on Germany (and the other Central Powers) following their defeat in the First World War by the Allied and Associate Powers. The German people saw reparations as a national humiliation; the German government worked to undermine the validity of the Treaty of Versailles and the requirement to pay.

petty-bourgeois: A social class comprising small business owners, and the middle class whose personal identities are determined by an aspiration to the upper class bourgeoisie. Their political and economic positions tend to imitate the positions of the bourgeoisie class above them, although this position is often not in their own best interests.

using speeches, television, radio, internet, and pop culture. It is a major factor in the formation of the modern spectacle. The false mythology of this “Golden Age” is one of the fundamental factors of contemporary society, and was a primary factor in the destruction of the workers movement. Fascism however, is the most *costly* means of preserving a capitalist order due to the scale and effort required of the state to enforce the authoritarian rule of a minority with a police state apparatus. Fascism is unsustainable in the long-term, and must be pushed aside by a more efficient and rational form of power.

“Fascism however, is the most costly means...”: Debord is alluding to the direct and expensive form of authoritarian-totalitarian enforcement of false spectacular consciousness he terms “The Concentrated Spectacle”. This form is less effective and more costly than the other variants of spectacular society—“The Diffuse Spectacle”, in which individuals willingly participate in a society that is both far more effective and efficient at subduing the masses, since it appears to empower individuals through consumer choice. The diffuse spectacle of contemporary capitalism reproduces itself by exploiting the spectator’s desires and dissatisfaction with an endless cycle of promises to satiate these desires and then failing to do so; and yet offers another promise. “more efficient and rational form of power”: Neoconservative or neoliberal representational democracy being examples in the West, and ‘Capitalism with Asian values’ being examples in the East. See Žižek, S., 2010 for more on the shift to post-democratic capitalist fascism.

This thesis presciently described the collapse of the USSR twenty-two years before it occurred.

Russia eventually reached a point in its development where it had successfully seized all private property which had hampered the communist party's control of the economy. It had developed this property for the benefit of the party, and had received recognition worldwide by the great powers. Russia wanted to enjoy the tranquility of its powerful place in the world without any constraints (both internal and external), thus it began to denounce the Stalinism at its origin, to forge a new path forward unencumbered by its past. This denunciation had to remain fundamentally Stalinist, arbitrary, unexplained and continually corrected because *the absolute lie at its origins could never be revealed*. Under such constraints, the party bureaucracy cannot truly liberalize culturally or politically because the party's existence depends on its monopoly over ideology as the only property it holds title to. Ideology has certainly lost the passion of its positive affirmation, but what remains of its indifferent triviality still has the repressive function of prohibiting the slightest competition, of holding the totality of thought captive. With the shift away from Stalinism, there was a corresponding loss of the passion that swelled within Stalinism; all that remains is a hollowed-out and indifferent bureaucracy which serves only to suppress competition from any other party or ideology, and claims to be the authority of all existing political and cultural thought. Thus

"... denounce the Stalinism at its origin...": De-Stalinization was a series of political reforms in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev. It was started with a secret internal report to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 entitled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" which denounced Stalin as an individual who succumbed to paranoia and megalomania but never questioned the system which enabled his excesses. The reforms recommended changing or removing key institutions that helped Stalin hold power: the cult of personality that surrounded him, the Stalinist political system, the release of many people from concentration camps, loosening of censorship, all of which had been created by Stalin. The superficial nature of the campaign was revealed later the same year when Khrushchev sent Russian tanks to crush the Hungarian revolution. "its monopoly on ideology as the only property it holds title to.": To liberalize control of cultural or political ideology is to question its very legitimacy to power, as ideology is the only thing the party really controls.

the bureaucracy has become bound to an ideology that is no longer believed by anyone, and all original passions have been stripped away. Where the party once inspired fear, now those same tactics inspire laughter (although a sort of gallows humor, under which the fear still lurks.) It is when the bureaucracy tries to demonstrate its superiority on the terrain of capitalism when it exposes itself as a *bad knockoff* of capitalism. Just as its actual history contradicts its current reality, and its stubborn adherence to ignorance and falsehoods about reality contradict its scientific pretensions; so does its project of becoming a viable competitor to commodity capitalism contradict the very fact that a capitalist society of abundance is pregnant with an *implicit ideology* itself: an extended freedom to choose from a spectacular set of false alternatives, a pseudo-freedom which is irreconcilable with the bureaucratic ideology of the party.

“an ideology that is no longer believed by anyone”: For an in-depth examination of the collapse of belief in Soviet ideology, see Curtis, A. 2016.

At this point in the development of the bureaucracy's ideological title to property was already collapsing on an international scale. The party's nationally established power, presented as a model for international rule, must admit that it can no longer impose its system of lies beyond its national borders. The unequal economic development between the "socialist" countries has forced the public confrontation between versions of the absolute lie—the Russian lie or the Chinese lie? This makes it clear that any post-Stalinist bureaucracy in power, and any totalitarian party aspiring to power, will have to develop its own way to deal with the internal contradictions it has constructed. The dissolution and failure of the international bureaucracy exhibited its first visible symptoms of internal negation, when the workers in East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats—demanding a "government of steel workers." These actions spread to Hungary, where workers successfully established sovereign workers councils. In the final analysis, the collapse and failure of global alliances founded on bureaucratic mystification is an unfavorable aspect of the development of capitalist society. The global bourgeoisie (both the privately wealthy as well as large trans-national corporations) was in danger of losing their only viable opposition—a global union of the workers parties that objectively supported them—which was

"public confrontation between versions of the absolute lie...": This thesis is largely based on the Situationist essay *The Explosion Point of Ideology in China*, a relevant quote pertaining to this line is "The accelerating decomposition of bureaucratic ideology, as evident in the countries where Stalinism has seized power as in the others where it has lost every chance of seizing it, naturally began around issues of internationalism." See Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 240-241)

"workers of East Berlin": A reference to the East German uprising of 1953 by construction workers against the party; eventually crushed.

"actions spread to Hungary": The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was organized by a network of nationally coordinated workers councils. Eventually Soviet forces moved in and crushed the revolution, leading to a suppression of revolutionary action and a split that alienated Western Marxists and considerable losses of membership for communist parties.

"collapse and failure of global alliances founded on bureaucratic mystification": In the [Preface to the Third French Edition](#) of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord noted that the failure of workers movements

seemingly breaking apart all global alliances at the very moment of their peak development. This spectacular division of labor between two symbiotic aspects of the spectacle was coming to an end when their pseudo-revolutionary role was divided. The spectacular element of the dissolution of the workers movement will itself be dissolved.

had rapidly accelerated since the “fall of the Berlin Wall” in 1989; a point also taken by Francis Fukuyama in his book *The End of History and The Last Man*. Both Fukuyama and Žižek argue that late-capitalism no longer has an opposing ideology. See Fukuyama, F., 2006 and Žižek, S., 2010.

With the exemption of some Trotskyist tendencies, Leninism no longer has any solid foundations. Its stubborn insistence on an ideologically based and rigid hierarchical organization despite all the historical experiences that have refuted these practices. Trotskyism is able to succeed in its revolutionary critique of present day society by maintaining a differential attitude towards ideological and tactical positions already proven false when they were used in real struggle. Trotsky was fundamentally loyal to the high bureaucracy until 1927, seeking to capture it to resume a properly Bolshevik foreign policy externally (he went as far as to slander his own supporter Max Eastman in order to hide the criticism against him, contained within Lenin's famous "Testament".) Trotsky was doomed by his underlying perspective, for as soon as the bureaucracy realized its actions were counterrevolutionary on the domestic front, it had to become *similarly counterrevolutionary* on the international front (of course, in the name of the revolution at home.) Trotsky's subsequent efforts to create the Fourth International contained the same inconsistency. During the second Russian revolution, Trotsky became an unconditional believer in the Bolshevik style of bureaucratic organization, and from then on refused to acknowledge that the bureaucracy itself had become the new ruling class, a separate class apart from the working class. In 1923 Lukács pointed to the Bolshevik style of organization as the middle way between theory and

"Max Eastman... 'Testament'": The famous *Testament* was a letter written by Lenin for the Russian Communist Party during his illness in December 1922, stating his views on how the regime should proceed following his death. The letter featured a sharp attack on Stalin's brutality and deceitfulness and urged his removal from the position of General Secretary of the Party. It also criticized Trotsky's bureaucratic tendencies. The *Testament* was suppressed by the Stalinists and only officially acknowledged much later in 1956 by Khrushchev.

Fourth International: An international alliance of Trotskyist parties founded in 1938 as an alternative to the Stalinist Third International. The original French text is written as "IV^e Internationale."

"During the second Russian revolution...": the first being in 1905, the second in 1917. During the first revolution Trotsky maintained an independent

practice, where the working class are no longer mere “spectators” of events inside their organization, but consciously choose and live these events as participants; here what he was describing as the merits of the Bolshevik party were in fact everything that the party was *not*. Despite his profound theoretical work, Lukács was an ideologist promoting a power not actually available to the workers movement, and instead most grossly held by the bureaucratic class, he both believed and pretended that it was, and that he was *completely comfortable with it*. Subsequent events proved otherwise, as the aforementioned power repudiated and eliminated its servants; Lukács ended up repudiating everything he identified with and argued for in his prior work, *History and Class Consciousness*—instead identifying with *the opposite* and thus making a caricature of himself in the process. Lukács best verifies the essential heuristic that judges all the intellectuals of this century: that which they *respect* is that which is able to precisely measure their own *contemptible reality*. Lenin however was under no such allusions, he realized the party and the philosophies of its members were always one and the same, agreeing that “a political organisation cannot put its members through an examination to see if there is no contradiction between their views and the Party program.” The party whose idolized image Lukács had so inopportunately drawn was coherent and precise on one task only—the seizure of state power.

position between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. In 1917 he supported the Bolshevik Party. “In 1923 Lukács”: Debord is referring to the last chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, section “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization.”

“a political organisation cannot put its members through an examination to see if there is no contradiction between their views and the Party program”: Quotation from Lenin, V., 1909.

The success of contemporary capitalist society reveals the failure and contradictions apparent in the Trotskyist societies (rebranded as Neo-Leninist.) Neo-Leninism understandably gets the attention of corrupt governments in “underdeveloped” states, where the pseudo-socialist ruling classes present nothing more than the *ideology of economic development*. These states are forced by their status into maneuvering along the spectrum of the two global opposites: bureaucratic capitalism (e.g. China) and bourgeois capitalism (e.g. the U.S.) along with making cultural compromises to satisfy their social base (notably in Islamic states.) These ideologically compromised states end up stripping all fundamental aspects of socialism except the police. China, for example, established its bureaucratic power when an agrarian peasant revolt was used to enforce a Stalinist model of industrialization on a society even less economically advanced than Russia in 1917. Egypt is a good example of the petty bourgeoisie (specifically a group of army officers) seizing power by force and going on to industrialize the nation. Algeria, following its war of independence against France is a good example of a para-state bureaucracy that was able to run a middle campaign compromising with a weak national bourgeoisie. Finally, in Africa amongst the former European and American colonies that are still economically dependent on the former colonizer, we see tribal leaders who constitute themselves as a local bourgeoisie with a *seizure of the state*. While economic imperialism still controls the economy, the former colonizer allows the state

Egypt: The Egyptian revolution of 1952 started by the Free Officers Movement, a group of army officers led by Mohammed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser. The society underwent complete agrarian reform, and huge industrialisation programs were initiated in the first decade, leading to an unprecedented period of infrastructure building, and urbanization. The revolutionary government adopted a staunchly nationalist, anti-imperialist agenda, which came to be expressed chiefly through Arab nationalism, and international non-alignment.

Algeria: The Algerian war of independence was fought between France and the Algerian National Liberation Front from 1954 to 1962, which led to Algeria gaining its independence from France. An important decolonization war, it

to maintain the appearance of local autonomy and independence, but this is an

was a complex conflict characterized by guerrilla warfare and the use of torture.

independence from the local masses and lacks any independence from imperialism. This superficial autonomy is awarded to the local ruling class who continue to sell natural resources and labor to the former colonizers. This artificially subsidized bourgeoisie is never able to accumulate real capital as it *squanders* its two main sources of surplus value: local labor and the foreign subsidies it receives from foreign protector states and transnational monopolies. This artificial bourgeoisie is incapable of fulfilling the necessary economic functions of a government, and thus will always face opposition movements trying to seize their position and power. These movements are organized on the bureaucratic model taken from socialist or communist origins, but adapted to local myths and conditions. A successful bureaucratic movement with the goal of industrializing the economy entails its own defeat: a bureaucracy of the bourgeois, through the accumulation of capital transforms the proletariat into members of a wealthy bourgeoisie, eventually eliminating the proletariat, and negating themselves in the process.

Over the course of the complex and terrible evolution of the conditions of late capitalism, the proletariat has lost its ability to assert its own independence amongst industrialized nations. The failures of the workers movements of the 20th century caused the proletariat to drop their *illusions* to class struggle, and yet have not been eliminated as a class within society. The proletariat still exists but under the increasing alienation of late capitalism, a great majority who have lost the ability to determine how their labor—and lives are used by capital. *Once they realize this*, they must necessarily redefine themselves as the recreation of a new proletariat, after the death of the industrial proletariat sprouts the proletariat of late capitalism, which exhibits the Marxist law of negation: the force to negate this society from within. The proletariat is objectively strengthened by the virtual elimination of the peasantry and by an extension of the logic of the factory system: as the peasantry disappeared into the factory worker, so too did the factory workers negate themselves into “service workers” and “knowledge workers”. *Subjectively*, the new proletariat is unaware of their class consciousness, unable to recognize their membership within this new class, which spans across regions, factories, services, and knowledge industries; few understand the impotence and deceptions of liberal politics to improve their conditions. This new proletariat will eventually discover that its representatives in government, unions, political parties, and even the state power it claimed for the purpose of emancipating itself merely works against itself to reproduce capitalism. The class will discover through concrete historical

“factory workers negate themselves into ‘service workers’ and ‘knowledge workers’”: The original French is “«services» et des professions intellectuelles” or “‘services’ and ‘intellectual professions’” but i’ve updated the text with more contemporary terms.

experience that it is a class opposed to all forms of external representation, the technocratic power of specialists, and politicians. This proletariat must become the bearer of a revolutionary force that critiques all forms of class separation, advocating for a unified, unspecialized, integrated class of integrated difference *that cannot leave anything outside itself*. The proletariat must assume an organizational form that is adequate to these tasks. It is not possible to reform society to fix the dissatisfaction of the proletariat, no welfare state or program, no jobs guarantee, no universal basic income, no reparations, no integration of the classes, or the abolishment of hierarchic power structures, or the *righting of any wrongs*—because the entirety as a multitude will not recognize these reforms as an amelioration of their place in society, nor does the multitude consider itself to have even suffered any of these wrongs. The *absolute wrong* the entirety of the multitude recognizes is having been excluded from participating in the events of their own lives.

“the entirety as a multitude...”: ‘multitude’ is a term for a group of people who cannot be classed under any distinct category, except for their shared fact of existence with or without overlapping interests. This concept is defined in detail by political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004). I’ve used that term here as Hardt and Negri have acknowledged Debord’s influence. “having been excluded from participating in the events of their own lives.”: The original French is “le tort absolu d’être rejeté en marge de la vie.” or more elegantly translated as “the absolute wrong of being cast to the margins of life.” I’ve decided to use the term “the events of their own lives” to remain more consistent with my translations of V. *Time and History* and VI. *Spectacular Time* where Debord elaborates on alienation from participation in the events of one’s own life.

We can conclude that a new period has already begun, when amongst the economically advanced countries we see increasing signs of negation. We first witnessed the failures against capitalism with the workers movements from 1905 through the 1930s, now we are witnessing the *failure of capitalist abundance*.

We are witnessing a new spontaneous struggle on two fronts, namely the suppression of the workers struggle against capital, largely suppressed by the labor unions, and simultaneously protest by the youth that is still unorganized, untargeted, and abstract—against art, everyday life, and the old world of liberal and specialized and technocratic politics. The first symptoms of this struggle appear as *criminal* behavior: theft, vandalism, riots, piracy, etc. These symptoms are the harbingers of a second proletariat assault on class society. When these *lost boys* enter the battlefield of class struggle (which has changed and yet stays the same), they will have a new “General Ludd” at the vanguard, leading them to attack the *machinery of permitted consumption*.

“the failure of capitalist abundance”: Even under conditions of objective material abundance and relative affluence, we experience artificial impoverishment and a continual desire to **BUY MORE!** in order to satisfy continually disappointed desires. Spectacular society falsifies our needs into thinking we need to buy things we don’t need, to become more like the model-people we see in celebrities but who we don’t actually need to imitate. Simultaneously, objective material abundance is increasingly diminished as wealth is funneled to a shrinking group of oligarchs.

“lost boys”: Original French: “enfants perdus” or “lost children”; an old military term for soldiers or scouts assigned to particularly dangerous or suicidal missions; by extension, people who are on the extreme cutting edge of a movement. Debord used this term, with its multiple evocative associations in many of his works. “General Ludd”: Ned Ludd, possibly born Edward Ludlam, mythic leader of The Luddites, a secret oath-based organization of English textile workers in the 19th century, a radical faction which destroyed textile machinery as a form of protest against increasing mechanization. Over time, the term “Luddite” has come to mean one

opposed to industrialisation, automation, computerisation, or new technologies in general. "machinery of permitted consumption": This is to say, to attack advertising, brands, and the mass market industry that creates the pseudo-needs and desires to consume; an attack on the *industry of artificial impoverishment* itself.

116

The 20th century had finally discovered that "Long-sought political form through which the working class could carry out its own economic liberation" in the revolutionary workers councils. This form vests all decision making and executive powers within the councils themselves, decentralized and yet federated amongst one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to their base, and recallable at any moment. The workers council form had only a brief and experimental existence; thus far their emergence has resulted in attack and eventual defeat by a number of tactics used by the ruling class, due as well to false consciousness within the councils themselves. As Antonie Pannekoek correctly stated, the decision to set up workers councils does not provide solutions for the workers as much as it "poses problems". But that power is precisely the site where the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can find real solutions. The power of the worker councils is the only context in which the objective conditions of the historical consciousness of the proletariat revolution can truly be understood, contextualized, analyzed, and ultimately solved. It is at these councils that realize active direct communication, where specialization, hierarchy and separation end, and where an understanding of the objective conditions of their subjugation under capital can be made readily apparent, and thus

"The long-sought political form..."
Marx's characterization of the Paris Commune, see Marx, K. & Kemp, A., 1968.

Antonie Pannekoek: (1873-1960)
Dutch revolutionary, author of
Workers' Councils (1947).

vulnerable to strategy and resistance. It is here where the conditions of the status quo are transformed into “conditions of unity” amongst all workers as a unified multitude. It is here where the proletarian subject emerges from a purely contemplative role of resistance to a lived and practical organization that is both revolutionary in thought and in action—one in which their consciousness is equal to the practical organization they have given themselves, because this consciousness has become inseparable from their coherent participation in the historical events of their lives.

“conditions of unity”: C.f. Marx, full quote: “Its organization is, therefore, essentially economic, the material production of the conditions of this unity: it turns existing conditions into conditions of unity”, see Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998.

117

It is the power of the workers councils, which must replace any existing powers internationally, such that this movement is its own product, and the product is nothing other than the producers themselves. The movement is to itself its own goal, its own self fulfillment and self-actualization. Only in this way can the spectacle and its ability to create separation, alienation, and hierarchy—the very negation of life itself, be negated.

“This product is nothing other than the producers themselves”: Another détournement from Hegel, full quote “But since they draw it from within themselves, from a source which was not previously available, they appear to derive it from themselves alone; and the new world order and the deeds they accomplish appear to be their own achievement, their personal interest and creation”, see Hegel, G., Hoffmeister, J., Nisbet, H. & Forbes, D., 1975.

118

The emergence of the workers council movements during the first quarter of the 20th century was the most advanced development of the proletariat movement. This achievement has been ignored, or explained away as the workers movements collapsed and were ultimately destroyed. A final analysis of the proletariat movement however, reveals the workers councils as the only battle victory in the lost war for the workers movement. Those who are aware of the history of the workers struggle are now more conscious than ever: the councils are the distributed center of a new rising power, not a subsiding power.

119

A revolutionary organization which exists before the establishment of the workers councils can only find its appropriate organizational form through struggle. History has made it clear that any council cannot claim to *represent* the working class. The emergent workers council representative organization must recognize itself as radically outside any pre-existing aspects of spectacular or already-existing radical society. Its task is to promote a radical separation from the *world of separation*.

The revolutionary organization is a coherent expression of theory alongside practical struggles which put theory into practice. It is thus a process of practical theory: theory immediately put into practice, and theory validated by practice. Its own practice is to foster the two-way communication and coherence of these struggles. In the revolutionary event of the dissolution of social separation, this organization must dissolve itself as a separate organization.

The revolutionary councils organization must offer a comprehensive, integrated critique of every aspect of spectacular society (e.g. ecological, economic, technological, sociological.) The critique must address issues both locally and globally, and must refuse to compromise with any forms of separated, alienated, and spectacular life. The weapon in the struggle between class society and the combatants from the revolutionary organization is the *very nature of the revolutionary combatants themselves*: that is to say, the revolutionary organizations absolute resistance to any members specialization, or the promotion of a technocratic or meritocratic elite, and the separation of factions and divisions across hierarchy: their way of life is the weapon. They must constantly struggle to defend against their own deformation into the ideal form as exerted upon by the spectacular society. The revolutionary organization has a total democracy, universal participation and little representation, and the only requirement for participants is their adoption of the integrated and total critique of spectacular society, and their right to appropriate and extend this critique. This critique must be applied both in theory and practice, and only in the relationship between theory and practice does the critique remain coherent.

“the very nature of the revolutionary combatants themselves”: C.f. Hegel, G., 1998. Full quotation: “What will be the outcome of this conflict itself, what virtue learns from it, whether, by the sacrifice it makes of itself, the ‘way of the world’ succumbs while virtue triumphs—this must be decided by the nature of the living weapons borne by the combatants. For the nature of the living weapons are nothing else but the *nature* of the combatants themselves, a nature which only makes its appearance for both of them reciprocally.”

“only in the relationship between theory and practice does the critique remain coherent”: This is all to say, the essence of revolutionary life is to live and develop the practice of life outside the spectacle both in theory & practice.

As capitalism continues to expand, creating an ever specialized workforce increasingly alienated from their lives, it becomes increasingly difficult for workers to recognize, name, and struggle against their own impoverishment. Eventually, workers will be in a position where they must reject that impoverishment *in its totality or not at all*. It is here that the revolutionary organization can no longer fight alienation by fighting the individual symptoms of alienation. *The revolutionary organization must fight the integrated whole of spectacular society with integrated tactics.*

“can no longer fight alienation by fighting the individual symptoms of alienation... tactics”: I’ve significantly reworded here, but the original French “l’organisation révolutionnaire a dû apprendre qu’elle ne peut plus combattre l’aliénation sous des formes aliénées.” or more directly “the revolutionary organization has had to learn that it can no longer fight alienation in alienated forms.” This is a détournement of Hegel, G. & Sibree, J., 2004 (Pp. 407), full quotation: “The Church fought the battle with the violence of rude sensuality in a temper equally wild and terroristic with that of its antagonist.”

123

The proletarian revolution is predicated entirely on the requirement that, for the first time, theory is no longer proscriptive to practice, instead, theory is an annotation of understanding of the human experience as directly lived by the masses. This revolution demands workers become dialecticians capable of synthesizing these perspectives into a coherent theory and practice. This revolution demands more of its participants (the ‘men without qualities’) than previous revolutions had asked even of its

“men without qualities”: An allusion to Robert Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities*.

leaders that the revolution had put into power (seeing as those leaders were from the bourgeois classes who already had the qualifications to run the economy, and who were largely already in control of economic life.) It is thus the development of class society into a spectacle representing the organization of all non-lived life that inspires and eventually obliges the revolutionary project to be *recognized* for what it *essentially already was*: the organization and practice of the lived experience of daily life.

124

Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology—*and it knows it*.

V. Time & History

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

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV* (Part I)

Man, “the negative being who is solely to the extent that he suppresses Being” is identical with time.

“History is itself a real part of *natural history*, and of the transformation of nature into man” (Marx, K. Engels, F. 1988). Man’s self-determination of our own nature is at the same time our understanding of the development of the universe. This “natural history” has no actual existence other than via the process of human history, which continually reaches into time, into the past in order to recreate it, like a telescope whose sight reaches back *in time* to the creation of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not in its historical form. The mediation of society produces the temporalization of humanity, and conversely produces an equivalent humanization of time. The unconscious progression of time only manifests itself and becomes *true* within humanity’s creation of historical consciousness.

“Man... is identical with time”: see Papaioannou, K. 1962. Possibly taken from Papaioannou, who is referencing and interpreting Hegel, but Debord may have taken the phrase directly from one of Hegel’s works.

“History is itself...”: C.f. from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx, K. Engels, F. 1988.

“our understanding of the development of the universe”: Humanity perceives our place in the universe in the negative, in that we define our existence only by denying our existence as part of the whole. This is man’s general definition of time itself, as something apart from the singular time/space duality of the universe. This definition of time says much about the nature of humanity—displaying at the same time an unease and apprehension with the unfolding of the universe that operates independently of mankind.

“History has always existed...” C.f. Marx’s *Letter to Ruge*: “Reason has always existed, but not always in its rational form.” See Marx, K. 1843, September.

The concept of history is born out of the actions of human society. As human society emerged, it slowly developed language and technology, forming the intangible “real nature of man”, the “nature that is born with human history, out of the generative action of human society”, that is, a human society that is the product of their own historical actions. But a society that has mastered language and is technologically advanced is already the product of its own history, and is only conscious of a perpetual present. In this perpetual present, all knowledge is confined in the memory of the oldest members of society, and carried on by the *living*. Neither death nor birth is considered to be constrained or influenced by time. Time is motionless, unchanging, and without progression, an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally achieves consciousness of time, its project is to deny or reject it, seeing time not as something moving past, but of something returning. The static society organizes time according to its immediate experience of nature, in the model of *cyclical time*.

“real nature of man”, “nature that is born with human history...”: C.f. “Private Property and Communism” section of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts. See Marx, K. Engels, F. 1988.

I provide a diagram illustrating Debord’s concept of time as it progresses from cyclical time to irreversible time and finally to pseudo-cyclical time. See [thesis 150](#).

Nomadic societies experienced cyclical time as the dominant framework for their understanding of time because they confronted naturally cyclical conditions, repeated along every moment of their journey. Hegel noted: “the wandering of nomads is merely a formal one, because it is limited to uniform spaces.” —that is to say, they don’t stay around long enough to impact or change their environment, so they don’t differentiate between “our cultivated land” versus purely new lands: all lands are undifferentiated and therefore uniform. Once agriculture began, communities invested labor into the land, imbuing content to the local area, fixing the community to the land, and therefore enclosing the community within cultivated lands, surrounded by a differentiated region of uncultivated lands. There is a shift from the nomadic time-oriented cycle returning people to undifferentiated but similar places, giving way to the agrarian perception of the return of a set of gestures (planting, harvesting, etc) in time, attached to a single place. The transition from pastoral nomadism to settled agriculture marked the end of an idle and unattached freedom, and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production is governed by the rhythm of the seasons, and as such is the basis of cyclical time in its fullest development. Eternity is *within* this time, it is the return of the same above as it is here on Earth. Myth is the single frame of thought that conforms the whole cosmic order around the order that this society has already achieved within its own differentiated frontiers.

“the wandering of nomads...”: See Hegel, G. 1975.

The social appropriation of time and the production of humanity by means of labor develops into a society divided into classes. Prior to classed society, time was external to society, so as to be outside the reach of appropriation. Within the agrarian society of cyclical time, the class that organized its social labor built itself a power on the basis of the accumulation of wealth, and the impoverishment of the laboring class by the appropriation of the limited surplus value which was extracted from their labor. This class also appropriated the *temporal surplus value* that was the result of the organization of irreversible social time. Thus this class had the sole possession over how time was used and allocated: the irreversible time of the living. The wealth accumulated by this class was expended on lavish feasts and festivals, as well as squandering *historical time at society's surface*. This class, owning the surplus value of both labor and time, were the only ones to be in a position to have knowledge of, and experience the enjoyment of directly lived events. Historical time flows independently and above its own community of workers, separated from the social organization of time—as it is associated with labor and the reproduction of social life. (Thus there is a difference between commodified social time and the historical time—historical time being the recorded series of events as recorded by kings, queens, and rulers describing a

“irreversible social time”: Debord introduces the term “le temps irréversible du vivant”—the “irreversible time of life” for the first time. He frequently returns to this term throughout the text. Historical history presupposes the prospect of irreversible and endless economic development; it is linked to the production of surplus value, control of this value in the form of capital, and to the political management of the economic power that results. Alternately rendered as “irreversible time of the living” in translations by Knabb, 2014 and Nicholson-Smith, 1994. lavish feasts and festivals: These were a precursor to the Bread & Circuses of the Roman Empire. The term comes from Juvenal, a Roman poet active in the Second Century AD. The phrase is a critique of the political class who deliver not public services or policy, but instead public diversions, distractions, or other means of appeasing the populace with trivial or base appeals to amusement or other simple pleasures that make no lasting change or improvements to society. See Graeber, D., 2011.

narrative of their own lives and conquests.) Historical time is the official time of adventures and wars, the time from which the rulers of cyclical society pursue their personal histories; it is the same time that is contested in clashes between foreign states. Historical time is thus alien to ordinary individuals, something they don't seek out and something from which they had thought they were protected from. This history revives the negative *restlessness* (the need to move) of the people who have been temporarily asleep during the development of agrarian social forms of living.

“directly lived events”: Debord uses the term “événements vécus” or “lived events”. In the city, those who participate in the “lived events” of history are not necessarily the ones who direct them. They participate in, and spectate upon what is essentially a conflict over power. It may be considered that the people of whom Debord speaks are the ones who at the same time are deprived of an ability to direct the historical events as they occur; yet they are the ones who make the events of history possible. (Fabbri, 2008) But these events are part of a story that is not their own; that is to say, they are mere spectators, alienated from directing the most important events that define their lives.

129

Cyclical time was a period without conflict. Yet even this immature conception of history contains conflict: history struggled to become history by the adventures, conquests, and writing of the masters of society. This history creates a superficial irreversibility that consumes infinite cyclical time to construct finite historical time, expanding and constructing that time in the process.

“a period without conflict”: Compared to historical time, where kings and masters write their own history, a history measured by procession of their conflicts; cyclical time is not measured by people, but by the recurring cycle of nature.

The “frozen societies” are those that have successfully slowed down the rate of change within society, maintaining conflict within both human and natural arenas and keeping internal oppositions and conflict in an even, constant equilibrium. The vast diversity of institutions set up to maintain this constant equilibrium is ample evidence of the flexibility of human nature to invent itself. The eloquence of these institutions is only visible to an outside observer, an anthropologist *looking back* at what has been built, as filtered and influenced by historical time. The “frozen society” has a definitive organizational structure that is excluded from change. It identifies and limits all human social practice, and demands absolute conformity, there are no external limits to these practices other than the general fear of falling into a formless animal condition—the state of nature. Thus, in order for humanity to remain human, we are forced to remain the same.

There exists a relationship between the emergence of political power and the invention of technological achievements (e.g. the invention of iron smelting at the dawn of the iron age), that also coincide with the dissolution of the bonds of kinship. From the invention of iron smelting until the industrial revolution there were no pivotal upheavals to society. From then on, the succession of generations leaves the sphere of purely natural cyclical time to become an event-oriented succession of those in power. These events became the mechanism for the passing-down of power. This irreversible historical time is oriented around the succession of those in power, and its measure of success is determined by the number of successful successions. The written word (and therefore all of recorded history) is the weapon of choice of those in power. With writing, language itself attains a fully autonomous reality, an abstraction of reality that *becomes reality* when it mediates conscious thought amongst its readers. This linguistically-constituted reality, having gained independence of actual reality is just as independent of reality as the ruling class is independent to the agrarian and laboring classes. With the writing of historical time appears a new consciousness that has become autonomous, one independent of the consciousness conveyed and transmitted amongst living people: the *impersonal thoughts and memories* of the administrative apparatus of society: “Writings are the thoughts of the state; and archives are its memories” (Novalis).

Novalis: The nom de plume for the German poet and philosopher (1772-1801), Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg. The quotation is from his collection of aphorisms, *Bluthenstaub* (“Pollen”).

The historical chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of separate power. The rulers of society use this instrument to maintain the voluntaristic forward progression of their historical time by recording its past—out of which it has developed from their predecessor. The chronicles are oriented to the succession of power of each of its rulers, and recording their interests. With the eventual collapse of each ruling power, this historical orientation also collapses as these rulers and their interests become obsolete, as such, the future is opened, the historical past becomes irrelevant (or completely rewritten by the new ruling power), and the present returns to the indifferent oblivion of cyclical time—that intuitive time experienced by the rural masses who, in spite of the comings and goings of rulers and empires, never change. The *ruling powers own history*, giving it an orientation—a direction, and imbue it with *meaning and significance*. The historical chronicle of rulers develops and collapses fully autonomously as a separate sphere of abstracted reality from common reality. This explains why, from the Western perspective, the history of Oriental empires tend to be reduced to a succession of religions: all that remains of these chronicles are the autonomous histories of the administrative apparatus that served these illusory empires. China and Egypt both held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul, and the earliest of their famous dynasties are built upon imaginary reconstructions of the past. The rulers of these empires, the owners of the private property of history—protected by a

“irreversible time of separate power”: Debord uses the phrase “du temps irréversible du pouvoir” or “irreversible time of power”, here he distinguishes the power controlled by the ruling class over the direction, management, recording of historical time, a power inaccessible to the laboring and agrarian classes. This power is most visible in the historical chronicle—a story narrating the events deemed most significant to the ruling class, and often the only recorded history we have until the arrival of the printing press.

mythical past, make use of illusions to prove the legitimacy of their claim to rule. But this illusory possession, up to that very moment, was the only possession then possible, of both the common history and the historical chronicle they themselves created. The expansion of their own historical power goes together with the popularization of mythical and illusory ownership. To the extent they took historical ownership of time and to the degree with which they underwrote cyclical time with their own mythical chronicles and illusions: such as the seasonal rites of Chinese emperors to guarantee the successful changing of the seasons, that they themselves were emancipated from cyclical time.

The deified ruling class offers to its subjects a dry, unexplained chronicle of events, which is tied to its mythic history, legitimizing their claim to power. Their intention is to be understood as the earthly execution of the mythic commandments. These chronicles were destined to be transcended and become conscious history, but in order for this to occur, a lived-participation of these officially recorded events had to be experienced by a majority of those in society.

“conscious history”: A direct translation from “histoire consciente” but here Debord’s meaning seems limited to the written, recorded, and internalized personal histories of living members of society.

The resulting participation in these events is a *recognition amongst themselves* as the possessors of a unique present, a period defined by the richness of the events of their own actions, and a home built by their own lived experience. From this participation emerges a general language of *historical communication*. For members of this society, irreversible time truly exists, and within it they discover the memorability of their own history as well as the emergence of a newfound fear of *being forgotten* into the *oblivion* of natural cyclical time. “This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that things done by man not be forgotten in time, and that great and marvelous deeds, some displayed by the Hellenes, some by the barbarians, not lose their glory..”

“This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus...”: See Herodotus & Godley, A., 1920.

To examine history is also, inextricably, to *examine the nature of power*. Ancient Greece was the period when power and the changes resulting from the succession of power was first debated and understood. This occurred under a *democracy of the masters of society*, it was a system diametrically opposed to that of the despotic state—where power settles its accounts only within itself, hidden inside an impenetrable obscurity of internal affairs, by the only means of *palace revolutions* and intrigue. The eventual outcome, either successful, or ending in failure, is outside the realm of discussion and is taken ipso facto. The power shared amongst the Greek community was limited to *spending* a social life, one which existed entirely upon the separate *production* of the slave class—who were not allowed to live autonomous lives, and were kept totally separate. It was only those who do not work, that live. The principle of separation amongst the Greek city-states defined them internally, but was then focused and expressed externally where it was used to justify the exploitation of foreign cities. Greece had dreamed of a cross-community universal history, but was not able to unify itself in the face of an external enemy. It was not even capable of standardizing a calendar across its constituent cities. In Greece, historical time became apparent and manifest, but was not yet autonomous.

“only those who do not work, that live”: It was only members of the privileged ruling class who participated in events that were recorded into the historical chronicle who ‘lived’. Everyone else was forgotten as mere spectators. “The principal of separation amongst the Greek city-states...”: See Thucydides. & Smith, C. 1980.

“became apparent and manifest... autonomous”: Debord uses the word “conscient” or “conscious” and opposes it to being “self-conscious” (which I have rendered as “autonomous”), in that a society can be conscious of its own self-development, and its progression through time, but this society was

not yet capable of a self-conscious development for its own needs. Thus, he is saying that Greek society was not yet developed to the point where the social bureaucracy reaches such an extent that it autonomously directs society for its own ends; completely separate from the needs of its constituents.

135

With the disappearance of the favorable local conditions of the Greek city-states came the collapse of these states, and the regression of western thought, there was no resurgence of the ancient mythical organizations. The subsequent clashes between mediterranean people, and the emergence and collapse of the Roman Empire gave rise to *semi-historical religions* that were to become the fundamental building block of a new consciousness of time, as well as new armor for the emerging separate power.

Monotheistic religions developed a compromise between myth and history, between then hegemonic cyclical time, as it dominated the sphere of agricultural production, and the emerging irreversible historical time—which was the theater of conflict between rulers and realignments between peoples. The religions that developed out of Judaism were the fundamental building blocks universally acknowledged as useful for building new societies based on irreversible historical time. These tools have democratized the ability to create societies, but remain constrained by their own illusions. Time within these societies remains totally oriented to a single final event at the horizon of time—the so-called “Kingdom of God” which is always and perpetually at-hand. These religions grew out of the soil of their own historical time, and have rooted themselves firmly in that place; however, they radically oppose this historical *terrafirma* as they proclaim their various semi-historical starting points in historical time (e.g. the birth of Christ, the flight of Muhammad). The chronicle that rolls forwards from these beginnings introduce an accumulation mechanism towards the final event—the Islamic conquest of the world, or the increase of capital under the Christianity of the reformation. This accumulation is a religious inversion of thought, one equal but opposite to the *countdown* as time runs out to the Last Judgement; the moment before the advent of the other, true world. Eternity emerged from cyclical time, it was the time beyond cyclical time. Eternity is the force which constrains cyclical time to its irreversible flow, such that it collapses into a *fixed point at times*

“flight of Muhammad”: The Hegira “الهجرة” meaning “departure” is the migration or journey of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, later renamed by him to Medina, in the year 622.

horizon, where cyclical time has abolished itself. Bossuet said: “and by means of the time that passes, we enter into eternity, which does not pass.”

“and by means of the time that passes...” The French bishop and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Lignel Bossuet, for full quote see Bossuet, J. 1872, and Perraud, A. 1891.

The Middle Ages were an unfinished mythical world until the Last Judgement, whose perfection lays just beyond the horizon—in heaven. It was during this period when cyclical time still dominated production, the first period in which historical time began to erode its foundations. It was during this period where one’s life was measured according to irreversible time, in the form of successive stages of life, with the consideration of life as a *voyage*, as passage without return, in a world whose meaning lies elsewhere. Thus it was during this period when the *pilgrim* was seen as the one who transcended cyclical time, and manifested the symbol of the voyage of life into lived experience. Individuals found the fulfillment of their personal histories within the sphere of power: in the participation in the struggles led by power and in the struggles over disputed power; but the ruler’s irreversible time was shared amongst his people to an infinite degree, all unified to the orientation of the Cristian era (the realization of the Last Judgement)—a world of *armed faith*, where the adventures of the rulers revolve around fealty and disputes over who owes fealty to whom. Feudal society was born out of the merging of “the martial organization of the army during the actual conquest” and “the productive forces of the conquered country”—and the factors responsible for utilizing and applying these productive forces is the use and effectiveness of religious language. Under this regime, social domination was divided up into church and state powers, the latter further divided into complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage of territorial

“Individuals found the fulfillment of their personal histories within the sphere of power”: Just as the ruling classes defined themselves by waging war over disputed power, individuals attached their personal historical chronicles to these rulers —thus the knight and his story is entwined with the story of kings.

“the martial organization of the army during the actual conquest... / ...the productive forces of the conquered country”: See Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998.

tenures or urban communes. Respectively, either those on rural landed estates or as city artisans and merchants. With the collapse of the official orientation of the Medieval world (the Christian Crusades), gradual diversification of personal histories emerged, simultaneously revealing the major unseen contribution of the entire period: the emergence of a cohesive society, propelled by an underlying irreversible historical time, that once-and-for-all obliterated the mythical origins of the past and resulted in a bourgeois class who produces commodities, funds the expansion of cities, and exploits the natural resources of the planet for commercial gain.

With the waning of the Middle Ages, the encroaching hegemony of irreversible time was experienced as a generalized obsession with an aspect of the old order—death. Death of oneself, death of the mythical period. This obsession was brought about by the melancholy of the passing of the mythic world—the last world where the security of the familiar myth could still counterbalance the onslaught of historical time as written by the ruling class. This was a melancholy felt for the inevitability of all earthly things to decay. The great peasant revolts at the end of the Middle Age were a *response to the hegemony of historical time*, a time that was violently wresting the peasantry from their patriarchal sleep formerly imposed by the feudal authorities. These were revolts spurred on by a millenarian utopian vision of *creating heaven on earth*, by those who believed the status quo was full of corrupt politicians and only a destructive purge could achieve their vision, thus reviving an ethos that originated from the Christian communities that grew out of the adherents of Judaism—who believed in the Last Judgement and the eventual arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. These ancient beliefs were the response to the troubles and unhappiness of their times, where announcing the arrival of a new, legitimate king was subversive to the ruling classes of ancient society. Once Christianity developed to the point at which it shared imperial power within the Roman Empire, it officially denounced the hope of achieving Heaven on Earth as mere superstition. This

With “the waning of the Middle Ages”: The title of the 1919 book by Johan Huizinga. See Huizinga, J., 1999.

“millenarian utopian vision”: Millenarianism from Latin millenarius “containing a thousand”, is the recurring belief by many religious, social, or political groups or movements in a coming fundamental transformation of society, after which “all things will be changed”. Millenarianism has existed in various cultures and religions worldwide, with various interpretations of what constitutes a transformation. These movements believe in radical changes to society after a major cataclysm or transformative event.

denouncement came from the Augustinian proclamation, which became the ideological basis of the modern church—that Heaven on Earth had already arrived in-fact. It was nothing less than the Catholic Church in Rome. The peasant social revolts of the millenarians naturally defined themselves as an attempt to destroy that corrupt church. The theoretical problem with the millenarian revolt, however, was that it was revolting purely on the terrain of the historical, and didn't address or attempt to undermine the church's mythical basis. In effect, they were trying to rewrite their own history, but one built upon a mythical past they didn't control, thus corrupting the project at its very foundations. In his book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Norman Cohn attempted to demonstrate that the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries were not merely irrational sequels to the religious movements of the crusades, and the religious revolts of the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries. On the contrary, these revolutionary movements continue to use the false myths of religion as their very conceptual basis, while they struggle to subvert present history to control it for their own aims. What they lack however, is a consciousness that their struggle is *limited to that which is historical* and allows the mythical to remain as unconscious ideology. They fight the battle to control history but aren't aware of the war to control mythic ideology. The millenarians had to lose because they could not recognize the revolution as their own operation. Their failure was due to actions contingent upon the external sign of

Augustinian proclamation: This denouncement came from the theologian and philosopher Saint Augustine of Hippo, who rationalized the sack of Rome by the Visigoths. According to his philosophy, Heaven on Earth is quite literally the Church *itself*, and is the only way to achieve eternity with God in Heaven; a unitary physical space shared with the Catholic Church in Rome. Thus the Church *has become* the kingdom of heaven for itself. This work establishes the idea of the Catholic Church (the City of God) using any means at its disposal, to oppose those governments, political, or ideological movements aligned with the Devil (the City of the World). See Augustine. & Dods, M., 1993.

The Pursuit of the Millennium, see Cohn, N., 1970.

“God’s Will” to enable their operation, similar to today’s revolutionary movements which condition their actions upon the decisions of outside leadership. The peasant class was unable to see or understand the workings of society, and their reliance on external validation and leadership prevented any sort of unity in action, nor consciousness of thought. Instead they waged their struggles in the vain attempt to achieve the same tired vision of an earthly paradise.

With the end of the Middle Age springs forth the Renaissance. This period took possession of the historical chronicle from the ancient world, refuting the religious authority of the Middle Ages and instead establishing both its heritage and legitimacy from the antiquity of the Greeks and Romans. It is a celebratory break from the concept of the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. With it comes an irreversible time defined by an infinite accumulation of knowledge; its historical consciousness is generated-by and written according-to the actions and experiences of its democratic governments and people. With it arrives both the ability to critique and analyze the power of authority vested in the state, and, as shown by Machiavelli, an ability to say the formerly unspeakable—state legitimacy is desanctified, not bestowed by God, but by man. In the Italian cities of the Renaissance, the arts and festivals were for the enjoyment of the passage of time, but this enjoyment of transience was transient itself; which Burckhardt considered to be “the very zeitgeist of the era”: as evidenced by his reference to a song by Lorenzo de’ Medici, “How beautiful the spring of life—and how quickly it vanishes.”

Machiavelli: Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), author of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, which are early critiques of the power of the state. See Machiavelli, N., Bull, G. & Grafton, A., 2003.

“How beautiful the spring of life...”: Burckhardt refers to the fleeting nature of the Renaissance period itself along with the enjoyment of transience as emblematic of that period. The quotation is from a song by Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449-1492), an Italian statesman, enthusiastic patron of Renaissance culture, and de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic. See Burckhardt, J., 1914, (Part V, Ch. 8). The song in Italian is:

*“Quanto è bella giovinezza
Che si fugge tuttavia!*

*Chi vuol esser lieto sia;
doman non c'è certezza.”*

Roughly:

*“How beautiful the spring of life
and how quickly it vanishes
Let whoever wants to be happy, be;
There is no certainty of tomorrow.”*

140

The age of kings and monarchs was defined by their tireless struggle to monopolize and determine historical time. It was a transitional period along the way to a complete and total domination of historical time by the bourgeois class, the first class to control irreversible time. The irreversible time of the bourgeoisie is tightly coupled with labor time, they are now liberated from the natural flows and cycles of the seasons as determined by the cyclical time of the peasant classes. As the bourgeoisie gained control over historical time, their labor gradually became *a project to transform historical conditions*. The bourgeoisie was the first ruling class for which labor became a valuable commodity. With the abolition of all social privileges, nobility, and titles, they recognize value only from the exploitation of labor, and have identified the control of the commoditized body of labor as their primary form of capital. Finally, the bourgeoisie recognized the growth of labor-capital as the measure of their own progress. The class that accumulates commodities and capital continually modifies nature by modifying labor itself, by unleashing and controlling its productivity. Up to this time, all official social life had been focused upon the poverty of court life—in the trivial ornamentation and superficial etiquette of banal state administration, whose prestige culminated in the “profession of

“labor time”: see Glossary, “time of production”.

king”—to whom all individual personal histories had to be sacrificed. The era of control over irreversible time by feudal lords ended with the French wars of the Fronde in the 17th century, and with the failure in Scotland to put Charles Edward on the throne. The world was about to change its foundations.

“and to whom all individual personal histories had to be sacrificed”: The original French is “et toute liberté historique particulière a dû consentir à sa perte” or directly “any particular sense of historical freedom had to consent to its loss”. This can be interpreted as literal sacrifices to the king in the form of one’s body: as a soldier in his wars, as sacrifice of crops and wealth in the form of taxes. It can also be interpreted figuratively, as the sacrifice of one’s personal lived experience, since the historical chronicle is only ever written by kings, and laypeople are only passive spectators destined to be forgotten.

“French wars of the Fronde”: a complex series of social conflicts, revolts and civil wars in France between 1648 and 1653. Debord has variously expressed great interest in the Fronde, and even proposed to make a film about it: *Les aspects ludiques manifestes et latents dans la Fronde* (“Visible and Hidden Playful Aspects in the Fronde”). See Debord, G., 2003.

“the failure in Scotland to put Charles Edward on the throne”: The failed Jacobite uprising between 1745 and 1746 in support of Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”). Also known as the Forty-five Rebellion, Charles Edward Stuart led the Jacobite army into England, culminating in the Battle of Culloden in April of 1746, resulting in the end of Jacobitism as a significant political force.

“The world is about to change its foundations.”: A verse copied from “The Internationale” (French: “L’Internationale”) a left-wing anthem. It has been a standard of the socialist movement since the late 19th century, when the Second International adopted it as its official anthem. The original stanza

in French is:

*“Foule esclave, debout! debout!
Le monde va changer de base
Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout!”*

in English:

*“Enslaved masses, stand up!, stand
up!
The world will change its foundations
We are nothing, let us be everything!”*

141

The victory of the bourgeoisie was a victory of a *profoundly historical time*, a time dominated by an economic form of production which permanently transforms society from the top to the bottom. As long as agriculture remained the primary form of labor, cyclical time continued to constrain social life with *tradition*, which inhibited the development of historical time. The irreversible time of the bourgeois economy is brought to bear upon the remaining vestiges of cyclical time, eradicating it at every encounter across the globe. Historical time, up until the period of the bourgeois revolution, limited participation to individual members of the ruling class. It was initially documented as a mere chronology of cohesive events, generally told as a narrative. Now however; it is understood in its *generalized form*—no longer a series of actions and events of individual rulers, but the inevitable unfolding of events for itself, crushing any individual in its path. The progression of historical time is now a chronology of events of the commodity, time is no longer controlled by the ruling class but by the market imperatives of the commodity. That historical time discovered its foundations in what was previously unconscious—its substantiation in the political economy—but it must remain hidden from the light of day. This

directionless trajectory of time, a new fate led by no one and yet fully influenced by the events of the commodity, is the only thing the market economy has democratized.

“a new fate led by no one”: The original French: “une nouvelle fatalité que personne ne domine” “a new fate that no one dominates”, is strongly influenced or copied from Lukács, G., 1971 (Pp. 129): “Hitherto it had been that of the blind power of a-fundamentally-irrational fate, the point where the possibility of human knowledge ceased and where absolute transcendence and the realm of faith began”. Essentially, that historical time is no longer the events and chronicles of the ruling class, but an irrational series of events generated by society in an aimless trajectory into an unknowable future.

While history is always present as it supports the material and ideological basis of society, it tends to be invisible at the surface of daily life. The victory of irreversible historical time was the beginning of *the time of things*, brought about due to the successful deployment of its weapons of mass production, according to the law of the market imperative. The period of the object has democratized *historical time itself* from a scarce luxury accessible only to rulers into a commonly consumed commodity—but as simplified, reduced, and abstracted changing of objects that subjugate all qualitative use of life. This newly democratized historical time is the participation in the chronology of a parade of ever-changing commodity objects, primarily in the individual’s ability to consume these objects. So while cyclical agrarian time had supported an increased participation in the events that defined the period of an individual’s lived experience, irreversible historical time eliminates one’s participation in the events that define lived time.

“the time of things”: Debord uses the phrase “en temps des choses”, rendered directly into English as “the time of things”, specifically the *objects of mass production* themselves have become the subjects of society, and thus these objects are privileged over social relations and individuals. This is a direct reference to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, see glossary.

“participation in the events that define lived time”: rewording of Debord’s concept of “lived time”, originally written as “temps vécu”, a concise wording of the concept where an individual can directly experience, participate, and contribute to the historical events that define their era. Lived time is opposed to commodity fetishism, see Glossary for “lived time” and “commodity fetishism”.

The bourgeoisie presented their own irreversible historical time, only to impose it on society while denying *its use*. Presented as “once there was history, but not any more”—time has stopped once they gained control, as the owners of the economy, one tied to *economic history*, they are threatened by any other use of irreversible time which breaks from the historical chronological trajectory they control. The ruling class is made up of *specialists in the ownership of things*, who for that reason are themselves owned by things, their fate bound to the conservation of this reified history, and in doing so assure the permanence of an *unchanging present*. Meanwhile, the workers at the foundation of society are, for the first time, not materially *alienated from participation in history*, since irreversible time has been democratized, and historical events can be generated from those at the foundations of society. The demand to *live* within the historical time which it creates at its foundation, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of the entire revolutionary project; although all attempts up to now have been defeated, every attempt signals possible lines of escape to a new historical life.

“once there was history, but not any more” This quotation is from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, see Marx, K., 1995. Similar concepts of a history of the perpetual present can also be seen in *The End of History and The Last Man*, see Fukuyama, F. 2006.

“irreversible time has been democratized”: The individual now has the ability to view, buy, and consume commodity objects in the general economy, whereas it was previously limited to a social elite. More concretely, social media allows individuals to participate in history by ‘going viral’, but history quickly moves past these individual moments, as the attention—or gaze of the public—becomes commoditized and buried under the continual Spectacle, and the individual subjects of the ‘viral event’ are quickly subsumed by the global flows of an emergent Spectacular attention economy that expands autonomously according to market imperatives. Simultaneously, the viral subject finds themselves increasingly alienated from the impossible possibility of authentically living their personally branded lifestyle as

presented in the spectacle. For more on this see Odell, J., 2019 and Zuboff, S., 2019.

144

The first bourgeoisie to have seized power christened their period of irreversible time after themselves, and assigned it the value of its absolute origin: Year I of the Roman Republic. The Republic blossomed out of the revolutionary ideology of general freedom which had to first destroy the last remnants of its mythical social values and any traditional regulation of society. But the ideology of general freedom had been unable to conceal its underlying will, although draped in Roman clothes—the *freedom of commerce*. Having destroyed the social foundations of traditional society in order to establish its unchallenged rule, this emerging society of the commodity found itself unstable, and had to rebuild the social passivity that came before it, thus “Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract was the most fitting form of religion” for the reinstatement of passivity. Thus the bourgeoisie made a compromise with Christianity, one symptom of which is reflected in its presentation of time: the Republic abandoned its own calendar and its own conception of irreversible historical time—instead bound to, and extending the chronology of the *Christian era*.

“Year I of the Roman Republic”: Much like the Roman Republic, the French Revolution revised the calendar to start its chronology from the beginning of the Republic, September 22, 1792. With the rise of Napoleon, it was then reverted to the traditional Roman-Christian calendar in 1806. See Figure 1 on [thesis 150](#).

“draped in Roman clothes”: Paraphrased from Marx, full quotation “Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire...”, see Marx, K., 2008.

“Christianity ... most fitting form of religion”: Full quotation from Marx, K. Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D., 1978 (Ch. 1, Section 4).

“the Republic abandoned its own calendar”: The Romans used the Coptic calendar (also known as the Alexandrian calendar) which was used by the agrarian populace in Egypt, it was a reform of the ancient Egyptian calendar introduced by Ptolemy III. This calendar was abandoned by the Romans after the reforms of

dictator Julius Caesar and Emperor Augustus in the late 1st century BC, where it was called the Roman or Julian calendar. In October of 1582, Pope Gregory XIII introduced the Gregorian calendar, which is now the most widely used calendar in the world, officially coupling the Roman chronology with the Christian chronology. See Figure 1 on [thesis 150](#).

145

The development of capitalism entailed the *global unification* of irreversible time. Universal history became a reality, as the whole globe was unified under the development of irreversible time. This is a singular history that progresses the same everywhere at once, amounting to the End of History—a refusal of the progression of any major historical divergence. This appears the world over as a repetition of *the same day*, a uniform and equal amount of time fully allocated to the production of commodities. This is a unified irreversible historical time belonging to the *globalized marketplace*, and thus also the time of the global spectacle.

The irreversible time of commodity production is primarily the measure of commodities produced. Therefore *the conception of time generalized* across the globe refers only to the time spent laboring to produce commodities, and should only be organized by the specialist interest groups who own the production of those commodities. This conception of time is not general in character, but *merely one particular type of time*.

“the measure of commodities produced”: E.g. GDP: Gross Domestic Product.

“merely one particular type of time”: Irreversible time attempts to generalize only the time spent laboring, which serves only the interest of capital, but this is a time that is devoid of any social value. Laborers only experience exploitation with the increase in capital, and the increase in measures like GDP are completely divorced from lived experience.

VI. Spectacular Time

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

—Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*

147

The time of production—commodified time, that time which has been segmented, allocated, where every interval is equivalent in value and therefore indistinguishable. The time of production produces an infinite accumulation of these fungible intervals of time that are equivalent without equality. This effectively renders irreversible time into abstract units, of which each segment must prove on the stopwatch their quantitative equality. These abstracted units of time are, in reality, merely their use value in *exchangeability*. According to this regime of social-control by commoditized time —“time is everything, man is nothing; at best he is the carcass of time.” This is a complete devaluation of time— an inversion of the idea that time is the space in which human society grows and blossoms into the “terrain of human development”.

“time is everything, man is nothing...”: See Marx, K., 1995 (Ch. 1, Section 2).

“terrain of human development”: See Marx, K. 2005 (Ch. 13).

148

To complement the time of production—the time of human non-development, is *consumable time*. Consumable time is returned to social life as a by-product of the time of production. It is experienced as *pseudo-cyclical time*.

Pseudo-cyclical time is in fact the time of production *disguised* as time to be consumed freely by the workers. Pseudo-cyclical time exhibits the same characteristics as the time of production, namely equally segmented, fungible units of time; the qualitative dimensions of which are suppressed in favor of quantitative equality. Since this pseudo-cyclical time is a complementary by-product of the time of production, *it must maintain the hegemony and legitimacy of the time of production* as the colonizer of time itself, in which consumable time is relegated to the subservient role as gift rather than as equal. To maintain these complementary roles, pseudo-cyclical time necessarily finds itself laden with false attributions of value, and these moments are segmented into a sequence of artificially distinct events, which are merely undifferentiated moments of time perceived to be more highly valuable.

“it must maintain the hegemony and legitimacy of the time of production”: This is a significant rewording from the original French, which reads “Mais étant le sous-produit de ce temps destiné à l’arriération de la vie quotidienne concrète”. This was translated by Knabb as “But as a byproduct of commodified time whose function is to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life”. My translation abandons the “backwardness of everyday life” wording used in translations by both Knabb and Nicholson-Smith. I’ve attempted to clarify how the time of production is privileged over the subservient role of pseudo-cyclical time. See Debord’s *Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life* for more on the “colonization” of everyday life, see Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 90-99). “false attributions of value”: E.g. That the weekend is more valuable than the weekdays, the general sentiment that Mondays are worse than Fridays. These moments of time are perceived to be more valuable since the worker is able to consume this time freely.

Pseudo-cyclical time is the contemporary equivalent to the time spent surviving in nature—foraging for food, searching for shelter, but in the contemporary milieu—shopping, chores, and conducting economic transactions. Under both of these regimes, daily life is devoid of decisions, while under pseudo-cyclical time the individual is no longer bound to the natural order, but instead bound to the economic consumerist-nature thus created by alienated labor. Thus, pseudo-cyclical time returns to the same *natural* cyclical rhythms that regulated the survival of pre-industrial societies. It builds upon the vestiges of ancient cyclical time, using it as a foundation and generating new variations: day and night, weekly work and weekend rest, and the cycle of harvest festivals, holidays, and vacations.

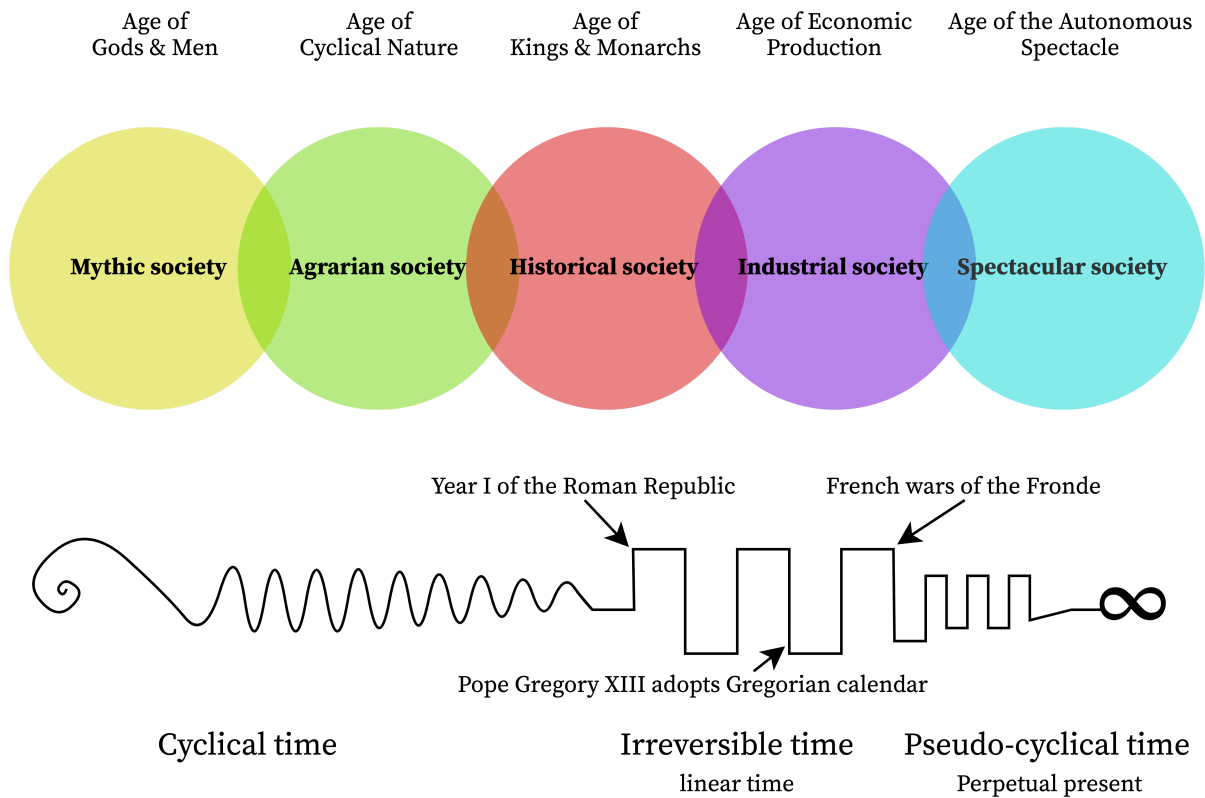


Figure 1 *Spectacular Time*

Pseudo-cyclical time is a time that has been *transformed by industry*. This time is itself a consumable commodity, one which has combined all aspects of a social life which were previously distinguished: private life, economic life, and political life. This combined consumable time of contemporary society is the raw material to be consumed by the worker how they see fit, but only as input to a set of ever-expanding products on the market of socially controlled schedules. “A product that already exists in a form suitable for consumption may nevertheless serve as raw material for some other product.”

“a time that has been transformed by industry”: The way individuals spend consumable time is determined by industries whose sole output is the creation of ever-new consumable entertainments and activities: packaged vacations, films, video games, television series, social media, etc.

“A product that already exists... other product”: C.f. Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D., 1978. (Vol. I, Ch. 7, Section 1). As the worker earns more vacation time the longer they stay at a company, this additional time must be then used to consume new films, new television series, and new hobbies that mandate the consumption of new equipment. Thus this “free time” becomes pseudo-cyclical time—a consumable commodity that is the raw material for the generation of new products and commodities.

In the most developed sectors of concentrated capitalism, the market creates “all inclusive” packaged experiences, which constitutes a single unified commodity, thus increasing the number of diverse commodities. This is made possible by the increase and ubiquity of the services and hospitality economy, the increase of leisure activities, and the “all-inclusive” luxury accommodations with pre-set vacation itineraries. This spectacular form of leisure even extends to socialization as well, with the inclusion of “exciting conversations” and “celebrity meet & greet” events. These types of events would not be taken seriously without a corresponding impoverishment of the realities they parody. Obviously, these commodities reflect the advancement in sales techniques in that they can be bought with credit.

Consumable pseudo-cyclical time is spectacular time. In the most narrow sense, it is the time allocated to the consumption of images, more broadly it is the conception of time itself as a consumable commodity (a representation of moments of time perceived as having more intrinsic value than the time of production, the so-called “real life” the worker must endure.) This consumable time is increasingly allocated to the consumption of images (images which in turn serve as advertisements for all other commodities), deepening our immersion in the spectacle. This time is the realm of the commodity, and the images are the medium with which these commodities act upon our consciousness most efficiently. This realm is the chosen battlefield from which the spectacular commodity mounts its strongest attack. The ultimate goal of this attack is to maintain our attention upon the spectacle itself, and to increase the time allocated to the consumption of pseudo-cyclical time within the spectacle. This battlefield is at once the locus of the spectacle, the center of its operation, and the most exemplary form of all consumption. The fetishization of time-saving products and services so sought after by contemporary society, whether in the increasing speeds of cars, the speed and convenience of online shopping, pre-made or instant meal replacements, and the explosion of “fast-casual” restaurants all contribute to the increased time spent consuming images. In the United States, Americans end up watching television three to six hours per day. The social aspect of

“time allocated to the consumption of images...”: Debord limits the conception of consumable time to the consumption of images, but his meaning of “images” can be interpreted loosely to include the consumption of films, newspapers and magazines, advertisements in all their forms, video games, social media, and any representative form of consumable media, products and services, and mediated experience.

“pre-made or instant meal replacements”: Debord uses the phrase “ou de l’usage des potages en sachets” or “the use of instant soup”. Most recently there’s been an explosion in home meal delivery kits such as HelloFresh, Blue Apron, and Sun Basket. As for instant meal replacements, look no

consumable time is dominated by moments of leisure and vacations—moments which are presented as fleeting, *exclusive and distant*, therefore desirable by definition, like any spectacular commodity. These moments are simultaneously presented as separate from daily life and yet more exemplary as moments of real authentic experience. These authentic moments are supposed to be looked-forward to, whose cyclical return is to be expected. But it is within these authentic, privileged moments that are supposedly more real than daily life, what is in fact being produced is a more intensified version of the spectacle: a personalized, lived, spectacular event. Thus, what has been portrayed as an authentic life turns out to be merely a life more *authentically spectacular*.

further than Soylent, the minimalist liquid meal which I myself admit to drinking during the course of writing this book.

The contemporary period of spectacular time presents itself as a time made up of many frequently recurring festivals, it is actually a period without festivities. During the period of cyclical time, the festival was a frequent and luxurious experience of communal participation in life, now impossible in a society without communities or luxury. These pseudo-parties, poor parodies of gift exchange and Jubilee typical of festivals of the previous period have been vulgarized into a surplus of expenditure, but this expenditure only results in an expanding amount of disappointment; a disappointment centered upon the promise of the next pseudo-festival, one just as equally sure to disappoint. Under the reign of the spectacle, the lower the use value (e.g. moments of leisure or pure inactive boredom) placed on time, the more highly cherished this time becomes as it is experienced as a more authentic time of real life. The reality of time has been replaced by the *advertisement* of spectacular time.

Jubilee: A periodic festival of general debt-forgiveness, and often included the freeing of both slaves and prisoners. See Graeber, D. 2011.

In ancient agrarian societies, the passing of cyclical time was perceived as the passage of their labors in sync with the natural transition of the seasons. In contrast, the consumption of pseudo-cyclical time during the contemporary period of spectacular time is in contradiction with the time of production—which is motionless; its history has reached a stable, unchanging conclusion while pseudo-cyclical time has cycles, and continues to allow change and lets the participants write their *own* history in a linear progression of time. The cyclical time of the agrarian period was motionless with its repetitive illusion of cyclicity, but the events of these cycles were authentically experienced. Spectacular time is the progression of linear time as changed by the influence of spectacular history, but this history is an illusory experience, one merely witnessed through the media.

“Spectacular time is the progression of linear time...”: The original French is a beautifully worded example of Debord’s use of détournement, so I’ve included it here: “Alors que le temps cyclique était le temps de l’illusion immobile, vécu réellement, le temps spectaculaire est le temps de la réalité qui se transforme, vécu illusoirement.”, translated as “Whereas cyclical time was the time of unchanging illusion, actually lived; spectacular time is the time of changing reality, lived illusorily.”

The process of commodity production continually innovates new, cheaper, and more efficient methods to produce the same products. As such, consumption is relegated to the mere repetition of the same products with decreasing costs, and decreasing quality. Under the reign of spectacular time, dead labor dominates living labor, and the past accumulations of capital continue to dominate the present creation of time and history.

dead labor / living labor: Dead labor is labor power that has been expended into a *thing*, a machine, a factory or even an widget. Full quote: "If the extension of output maintained the given relationship between inputs of living labour and inputs of dead labour (machinery and raw materials)..." See Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D. (1978)

"the past accumulations of capital... dominate the present": Full quote is "In bourgeois society, the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past." Ibid.

Historical time lacks the histories of individual human lives. The individual human life is still not historical since its events are not recorded and simplified into a linear narrative. Furthermore, the pseudo-events popularized and dramatized by the spectacle are not actually experienced by the individuals who watch them. In any case, these pseudo-events are immediately made irrelevant by the novelty-generation mechanism inherent to the spectacle. On the other hand, what life events have actually been experienced have no relation to the official irreversible historical time which dominates society. The actual lived experiences of life remain outside the allocation of pseudo-cyclical time (the time legitimated by the time of production.) So while work remains something perceived as 'apart from life', and 'free time' remains perceived as more authentically real life, the real lived experience of commuting, doing chores, child care, cooking, sleeping, etc, is therefore cut off, as separate from 'real life', remaining undocumented and unaccounted from any personal or historical time. This deprives daily life of language and as a formal concept, and it lacks any analysis of what events occurred within its own past, events which have not been communicated. The real time of life is misunderstood, forgotten, undertheorized, and smothered—to the benefit of the fake memories of the spectacle: a memory of the unmemorable.

158

The spectacle then, as the reigning system of social organization, is a method for the paralysis of history and memory. The spectacular society has abandoned a history based upon historical events. This is a society with a *false consciousness of time*.

159

A prerequisite for the conscription of the working class as “free” producers and consumers of commodity time was the *violent expropriation of that time*. Spectacular time was only possible after this first dispossession of the producer.

“free producers”: Free as in liberated to produce and consume as they see fit. Under Spectacular time, the worker is no longer free when they perceive time within the narrow understanding of time alternating between the time of production and consumable time. This is a false dichotomy of course. Their pseudo-free choice is in fact contingent on their time having been stolen in the first place.

The irreducibly biological element of labor is its natural human cycles: the workers dependence on sleep and waking, health and injury—both attest to the accumulation of irreversible time as the inevitable truth of aging. Contemporary production systems consider these natural and inevitable factors as *secondary* concerns. As such, aging and health are ignored by the economy of capitalist production as externalities that have no bearing on the production of consumable widgets, new inventions, and entertainment. The individual spectator trapped at the center of spectacular society can not experience a conscious sense of life as a journey moving towards fulfillment, or the inevitable march to death. Instead, life remains in stasis, on-hold for the next spectacular event. As such, we who have given up the idea of living will surely never be able to embrace our own death. Life insurance advertisements stake their business strategy on a moral falsehood that claims that it is reprehensible to die without first ensuring the continuation of one’s economic productivity. In *The American Way of Death*, death itself is advertised as an inversion, an event that attempts to maintain the *appearance* of life by means of excessive sentimentality, ostentatious displays of wealth, and an overly commercialized industry to support it. Alongside the continual bombardment of advertising, it is forbidden to get old, everyone’s “youth-capital” must be economized, while all models, celebrities and actors remain forever young. Thus, despite our collective efforts to economize youth, it has none of the lasting and cumulative properties of financial capital. The social absence of death is equal only to the social absence of life.

The American Way of Death is an allusion to the book about the American funeral industry. See Mitford, J. 1978.

161

As described by Hegel, time is the *necessary* alienation, as we age we gradually lose our sense of self and discover our true selves. Time is the environment in which we become the other, the thing outside ourselves we didn't understand, and in becoming other, we become a more fully understood self. The opposite is true of the alienation generated by the spectacle of late capitalism—this is an alienation felt as disenfranchisement from meaningfully participating in the historical events of ones lifetime. We may spectate but we cannot participate, absolute alienation in the *foreign present*. This is *spatial alienation*, the society that separates the subject from participating in the events of our own time, foreclosing our individual ability to experience self-discovery through aging. The beauties and graces of the naturally alienating process of time has instead been petrified, and the risks of *lived* self-creation and discovery have been eliminated.

162

In contrast to the *passing fashions* that preoccupy pseudo-cyclical time, the *dominant styles* that actually influence the contemporary period are carefully obfuscated and hidden—these can be recognized as the main concerns that will cause revolution if they become apparent and revealed.

“passing fashions”: Those trivialities that get the most spectacular attention in the media, but are so often immediately irrelevant soon after. Examples include “issues”-oriented political debate, political scandals and palace intrigues, clothing, diet and food fads, internet memes, television & film, and video game entertainment.

The motion of time exists despite human beings, it is only concretely experienced as moments when society consciously segments and describes time for *human use*. The perception of time for any society is determined by its stage of human labor: under agrarian labor and cyclical time, time is humanized and therefore any individual is able to participate in the historical events of their own time; under economic productive labor and irreversible historical time, that time is dehumanized—the individual cannot meaningfully participate in the lived historical events of their own period. The revolutionary project of realizing a classless society goes along with an inclusive historical life, one in which all people can participate in the events of their own historical period. This project entails the withering away of a singular measure of historical time in favor of a more humane, individualized, and *federated multiplicity of independent times*, ones which are playful in nature, where every individual time can interplay and unify on an ad-hoc basis, where all timelines are autonomous, valid, and simultaneously present. A successful realization of this revolutionary project is a generalized, fully conscious conception of time, determined by personal life events which are recorded into a new historical record, a personal chronology that can be flexibly federated into other personal chronicles voluntarily and playfully—a sort of communism that suppresses all spectacular media-driven and universalized histories. This would be a communism that suppresses and “abolishes everything that exists

“federated multiplicity of independent times”: This project entails the withering away of a unified measure of time, an allusion to the anarchist concept of replacing the nation state with federations of independent communities. This is also a postmodernist perspective of time, in that the abolition of a singular chronicle entails an abolition of grand-metanarratives as well as a unified perspective on “truth”—in favor of a multiplicity of timelines and perspectives which are all equally valid.

independently of individuals”, in essence, a project to abolish the historical time of kings, the chronicle, the government with their official time and finally to abolish spectacular time.

“abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1998 (Part 1, Ch. 4, Section 6). In essence, the autonomous spectacle and all forms of autonomous history and power will gradually disappear.

164

The world has already dreamt of such a time—it has to just wake and remember to really live it.

“The world already dreams of such a time”: See Marx, K., September 1843.

VII. The Organization of Territory

“Whoever becomes master of a city accustomed to live in freedom and does not destroy it, may reckon on being destroyed by it. For if it should rebel, it can always screen itself under the name of liberty and its ancient laws, which no length of time, nor any benefit conferred will ever cause it to forget; and do what you will, and take what care you may, unless the inhabitants be scattered and dispersed, this name, and the old order of things, will never cease to be remembered...”

—Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Capitalist production has become ubiquitous, all military, political, and trade barriers between societies have been broken down, there is no longer an outside to Capitalism. This is an extensive and intensive process of *trivialization* of unique local customs, traditions, methods, languages, and cultures. These local distinctions are commoditized and *banalized* for consumption by the global market. This created a universal space of the global market, where local goods, cultures and the places themselves are made accessible to the market, each comparable and homogeneous to better conform to the ease of exchange—therefore bankrupt of its once unique character. The corporate restrictions on craft guilds of the Middle Ages assuring the *quality* of craft production had to be destroyed to make way for the era of mass production, just as it had to dissolve the autonomy and quality of *places*. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery it uses to batter down all Chinese walls.

“it had to dissolve the autonomy and quality of places”: This can be seen happening everywhere simultaneously, with the reproduction of the same banal streets, stores, languages, restaurants, styles, and customs across the globe—the “airbnb-ification” of the world. See Chayka, K., 2016.

“The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery it uses to batter down all Chinese walls”: From the original French: “Cette puissance d’homogénéisation est la grosse artillerie qui a fait tomber toutes les murailles de Chine.” This is a direct reference to *The Communist Manifesto*, see Marx, K., Engels, F. & Jones, G. 2002 (Part 1)

166

It is in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to unchanging monotony, that the *free space of the commodity* is henceforth at all times modified and reconstructed.

167

While the spectacular society gradually eliminates geographic distance, it simultaneously replaces it with new internal distances in the form of spectacular separation.

“spectacular separation”: Society is making travel more efficient while making places more homogeneous, simultaneously making places irrelevant with technologies such as remote work, video conferencing, and virtual reality—the artificial images used as substitutes for reality itself. These geographic distances are then recreated in the form of spectacular separation—the direct experiences such as community, people, places, events and lives people once lived are substituted with ephemeral recreations and cheap copies as our new lived reality, alienating us from directly lived experiences and creating divisions within communities, families, and individual experience.

168

As a by-product of the circulation of consumer goods, tourism, the circulation of people as consumption, is fundamentally reduced to the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The application of business-style management techniques to travel guarantees the *equivalence* of places. The same modernization that has removed time from travel has also removed the reality of place.

169

Society has developed its own techniques for the task of molding the natural landscape it finds itself within. Urbanism is capitalism's direct mode of appropriation of natural and human environments. This capital appropriation gradually evolves towards absolute domination of the environment—in the form of the densely packed urban city. Urbanism continues to expand, eventually remaking the totality of the landscape into its *own elaborately decorated stage*.

Urbanism: The French word "urbanisme" means "city planning" which has an impersonal and bureaucratic connotation. Broadly encompassing urban planning, real-estate development, and gentrification.

The drive to urbanization is an imperative of capitalism, this drive results in “a freezing of life”. Described by Hegel as a predominance of “the peaceful coexistence of space” over “a restless becoming in successive moments of time.”

“A freezing of life”: A static world devoid of spontaneity, the result of land development and bureaucratic zoning laws optimized for rent seeking and increased land valuations, devoid of nature—where its residents have no ability to change their surroundings to suit daily life. All desire for change is eliminated in order to serve the profit generating imperative of capital, all autonomy of local residential use is therefore foreclosed, instead privileging real estate development as the only legitimate use. The result of this is a predominance of land organized around the valuable placement of real estate objects over the living use and alteration of land by the very people who live in these spaces, people who wish to change their surroundings over time as use-patterns and ways of living change with the seasons and with time. For more on this see 0xADADA, 2019 (April 16). “The peaceful coexistence of space”: This quote has been changed from the original: “The Object thus posited as outside the subject and in its own self as an externality is partly the quiescent side-by-sideness of space, partly a restless becoming in the successive moments of time. Space and time are abstract intuitions or Universal Forms of Intuition.” Quote taken from Hegel, G.W.F., 1986 (Pp. 151 No. 136).

The technical apparatus of the forces of capitalism (television, social media, government policy, and consumer products) should be understood as the tools of separation: grouping people into exclusionary tribes as well as alienating people from their labor and environment—exclusion from participation in daily life. The technical apparatus of urbanization is the fundamental method that makes all others possible—and far more efficient. Urbanization is the creation and preparation of the territory upon which all other technical methods are then deployed. It is the very *technology of separation*.

Urbanism is the modern method that satisfies the need to safeguard class power. This method preserves the atomization of each worker that the urban conditions of production had dangerously *brought together*. The continual struggle of capital against the organization of the labor force to improve their working conditions has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. Ever since the street-by-street battles fought in Paris by the Communards of the French Revolution, those in power have improved their methods of maintaining order on the streets, eventually resulting in the suppression of the streets themselves. In his book *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford describes a “one-way system” whereby “the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control” (Mumford, L., 1961). This system empowers the ruling class to broadcast their historical perspectives and ideologies to an alienated society who no longer has an ability to respond with its own voice or even amongst each other. Urbanism is the general trend, a global movement to isolation within the crowd, a sense of “*being alone, together*,” but in service to the needs of corporate production—we are isolated to the greatest extent allowable to maximize production and consumption. The greatest examples of how urbanism isolates us together is in the factories, cultural centers (museums, theaters, etc), vacation resorts, and housing developments—all explicitly oriented to the goal of creating pseudo-community.

“...eventually resulting in the suppression of the streets themselves”: Between 1853 and 1870 the French Emperor Napoleon III commissioned Georges-Eugène Haussmann to destroy the neighborhoods that were the very heart of the French Revolution: namely from the Quartier des Arcis to the Hôtel de Ville, including Île de la Cité, transforming these areas into broad avenues wide enough for an army to march down.

“vacation resorts, and housing developments”: The planned, gated residential community “Celebration” in Osceola County,

The dominant imperative of atomizing isolation follows the individual into the family unit, where each member is in their own room, each isolated by their own personalized television, music, and internet entertainment that are so particular to the individual that sharing common entertainment interests becomes increasingly more difficult—and therefore more isolating. The more isolated the individual becomes, the more dominant the images of spectacular society become and this is where the spectacle acquires its full potential.

Florida which was developed by The Walt Disney Company is an example of a pseudo-community where both vacation and housing developments converge. The community is primarily separated from society by gates, and each household is carefully separated from the others by heavily manicured landscaping—a type of hostile architecture leaving all shared community space to become de facto dead zones of inactivity.

“The more isolated the individual becomes, the more dominant the images of spectacular society become”: This is to say, the individual is most vulnerable to the dominating one-way conversation of the mass media when they are alone, and unable to relate what they see in the media to their isolated experience of daily life. The increase of media outlets and the explosion of personalized streaming sites like Netflix, Disney+, HBO Max, Hulu, etc, make our television habits increasingly unrelatable (meanwhile experimental television formats like “Bandersnatch” point to the horizon of personalized media in which the actual content of any single episode is personalized for each individual.) So while we are saturated with choice, and any choice is personalized for us each, we can only anticipate the apathy of making a choice knowing we’ll never be fully satisfied with our decision. We are continually held in that space between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. For more on Netflix and personalized media, see 0xADADA, 2021 (January 14)

Prior to the 20th century, innovations in architecture were exclusively designed to serve the interests of the ruling class. Now, for the first time, architectural innovations are aimed directly *at the poor*. Architects no longer build ornate, unique places but merely reproduce aesthetically bankrupt habitats characterized by their *mass*: mass-produced for ‘the masses’, dictated by the contemporary conditions of production. At the core of these conditions are an *authoritarian decision making process* by which a corporation, driven by the profit imperative, works with the local municipality to abstract a local environment into an interchangeable space of abstraction. This type of architecture develops the same anywhere in the world: the buildings use the same designs and trendy materials no matter where they are, and the same international businesses soon arrive to service the communities (e.g. McDonald’s, Starbucks, etc.) This works especially well in undeveloped countries, which is its most fertile terrain. This process is most efficient when a society’s material power is inversely proportional to its *lack of progress* to appropriate social control of this power. The delay of the conscious appropriation of urbanism corresponds equally with the power of thermonuclear weapons and genetic bioengineering (where genetically engineered human life is already possible.)



Figure 2 *Al Ain City, a housing development in Mbazzarah Al Khadra, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE
Photo by Andrzej Bochenski. Lodz, Poland.*

We live in the era of the destruction of the organic urban environment by an urbanism that is exploding the city, littering the countryside with what Lewis Mumford calls “a formless mass of thinly spread semi-urban tissue”. This explosion is exemplified by strip malls, restaurant franchises, and landscapes developed to serve the required efficiencies of automobile-oriented consumption. This is the dictatorship of the automobile, where all designs create landscapes to serve vehicles, not animals nor human pedestrians. The automobile, arguably the first example of a product produced during the first stage of commodity abundance, has come to reconfigure the human environment of the city with the dominating imperatives of speed and available parking space to create a centrifugal trend moving gradually away from the city into any nearby countryside with “undeveloped” space. The dominating force of the highway dislocated the historical, organic city centers and instead promoted an ever-growing flat expanse. Meanwhile, the countryside is developed ad-hoc around temporary “distribution factories”—poor copies of the urban centers of exchange, alienated from the street and the land around them by acres of ample parking space. Even then, these temples of conspicuous consumption themselves become victims of the centrifugal trend of suburban expansion, becoming congested and then likewise abandoned or reconfigured.

“a formless mass of thinly spread semi-urban tissue”: Quote from Mumford, L., 1961 (Ch. 16.6, Pp. 508).

“landscapes developed only to serve the required efficiencies of automobile-oriented consumption”: For an in-depth analysis on the subject of suburbanization, see Duany, A., Zyberk, E. & Speck, J., 2010. James Howard Kunstler gave an insightful and funny TED talk on the topic called *The ghastly tragedy of the suburbs*, see Kunstler, J. H., 2004.

“an ever-growing flat expanse”: Cities like Los Angeles or Las Vegas are the perfect examples of sprawling automobile oriented cities.

This gradual process of centrifugal reconfiguration of the urban and suburban environment is the sign that the city is gradually *consuming itself*.

175

Economic history has developed upon the presumption of an opposition between the town and the country, creating a race to equilibrium such that a distinction between the two have all but disappeared. The current *paralysis* of historical development, the so-called “End of History” where irreversible historical time refuses to progress—privileging the development of the independent goals of the spectacular economy, which comes at the expense of all other pursuits. This has resulted in the disappearance of both town and country instead of their *transcendence*. This is most clearly visible as bits and pieces of both urban and rural life are strewn about the landscape, each eroding the other into smooth and undifferentiated zones that are neither urban or rural, but have come to dominate the developed regions of the world.

“where irreversible historical time refuses to progress”: See commentary on [thesis 145](#).

The emergent power of the city has made a universal history possible—those events and recorded stories which is accessible to all people. Universal history emerged at the moment the city became predominant and ruled over the country. Marx considered one of the greatest revolutionary merits of the bourgeoisie was that it “subjected the country to the towns”, whose “very air is liberating”. While the history of the city is also the site for the historical struggle for freedom, it has yet to host its victory. It is also a history of the tyranny of a state administration of both city and country. The city is the *focal point of history* because it is a concentrator of social power, which makes the historical enterprise possible, as well as an awareness of the past, a universal historical consciousness. The present trend of the city consuming itself is a symptom of the spectacular economy retarding the unification of a society of people attaining freedom and a universal historical consciousness—one that will enable society to overcome the totality of its alienation.

“subjected the [rule of the] country to the [rule of the] towns”: Quote C.f. Marx, K., Engels, F. & Jones, G., 2002 (Part 1).

“very air is liberating”: Quote is from the German saying “Stadtluft macht frei” or “city air liberates” a medieval German saying, expressing how serfs could free themselves from their ties to the landed gentry by escaping to the towns.

“The country demonstrates just the opposite fact: isolation and separation” (as opposed to the city, which mixes and brings people together). As urbanism consumes the city, it replaces it with a *pseudo-countryside* devoid of any attachment to nature or the social aspects of either traditional farming villages or the mixtures of culture apparent in the organic city. This new condition of “urban redevelopment”, that densely packed and yet separate and isolated environments produces a new artificial peasantry. These new peasants are molded by their physical conditions and the influence of the spectacle: where once peasants were isolated by physical distance now find architectural separation, and where simple ignorance once reigned, instead reigns the blinding influence of the spectacular image which recreates a simplemindedness in the new peasantry. These forces, both historical and contemporary prevent the peasantry from unifying and taking action in their own best interests, to become conscious of their own responsibility as the creative historical force within society. Peasants in fact create this world, but the lies and artificiality of the spectacle continue to credit the elite; thus to seize control of society and the responsibility for its creation seems just as beyond their reach as it was for those living in an agrarian society to seize control of the natural rhythms and cycles of their labor. The agrarians lived according to a cyclical time controlled by nature, but contemporary pseudo-cyclical time is controlled by society itself. The traditional agrarian peasantry was the basis for the “Asiatic mode of production” as exemplified by the Chinese state bureaucracy, a form of “oriental despotism” which, because of its wide dispersion across

C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998. (Ch. 1 Part 4, Section 2), full quote: “The country demonstrates just the opposite fact: isolation and separation”:

“oriental despotism”: See Wittfogel, K., 1981. More recently, Žižek has

geography, necessitated a heavily centralized bureaucracy. The neo-peasantry, which has emerged from the material conditions of the pseudo-country combined with the mental influence of the spectacle differs from the traditional peasantry in that their simplemindedness, ignorance, and *apathy* to seize power has to be maintained in the present as well as *historically manufactured*. Simple ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of falsehoods. These “new cities” of pseudo-countryside, the urbanized but consumed cities where the new pseudo-peasantry reside are the clearest symptoms of a complete break from the historical time upon which they were founded. These places continually distance themselves from their own past and create an unchanging continuous present. Their motto may well be: “On this site nothing will ever happen, and *nothing ever has*.” This is all the result, obviously, because the liberation of historical consciousness has not yet occurred in these cities. Instead, we see the uncontrolled proliferation of the force of *historical absence*, which begins to compose its own exclusionary landscape.

identified a shift from authoritarian despotism to an emergent form of capitalism he calls “Capitalism with Asian Values”. See Žižek, S., 2010.

“the organized spectacle of falsehoods”: A rewording of the original French, “l’ignorance naturelle a fait place au spectacle organisé de l’erreur” or a “natural ignorance has given way to the organized spectacle of error”. The original phrasing was very abstract, I’ve tried to clarify that it is specifically about the lies and exclusions of the media. Late capitalism has reformed education by exclusion, to such an extent that it increasingly moves resources away from history, the arts, health & fitness, and the humanities. Instead, it focuses on STEM subjects and a vocational style of education most well suited to producing a specialized, short lived—and therefore disposable workforce rather than a civic-minded citizenry producing a public good. Debord’s critique isn’t a critique of technology and media per se, but of the *organization* of the Spectacle and its effects as *mediated* by technology and media. According to Russell: “The fully accessible world has not simply exorcized the notorious idiocy of rural life inasmuch as it has established a unitary idiocy between rural and city life, whose now universal parochial outlook traverses both the city centres and its concrete suburban landscape” see Russell, E., 2021 (Pp 177).

A consciousness of history that threatens the spectacle is to discover the force potentially capable of reappropriating space for lived time. The proletarian revolution is the *critique of human geography*, a critique of the environments, and social relationships that individuals are forced to navigate. Through revolutionary acts and events, individuals and communities must construct environments, events, and social relationships to provide the basis of an autonomous control of not only their own labor, but their entire history—thus creating a reality of their own. Revolution opens physical and social space to a new and dynamic mobile space of play, where the rules of play are informal, dynamic and freely chosen. These open societies liberate authoritarian spaces, and in the process rediscover the previously independent and unique character of places without making them exclusive. This is accomplished without the attachment to the land and agrarian ties to cyclical time, it is an unattached, free space determined by its own egalitarian and parallel historical times, where many chronologies are all available and equally valid. This has the potential to return society to an authentic way of experiencing directly lived reality, and thus brings back the authenticity of *travel*, and of life understood as a journey of ones own creation with its own meaning.

“reappropriating space for lived time”: The force of a consciousness of history can possibly reintroduce society and individuals to directly lived reality, a reality that enables participation in the events of one’s own contemporary time and makes the local environment conducive to living fully engaged social lives.

“critique of human geography”: See more on human geography: Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 1-14, 62-66, 69-73, 86-89).

“space of play, where the rules of play are informal, dynamic and freely chosen”: Later in life, Debord formally explored the concept of ‘play’, and most concretely, he and his wife, Alice Becker-Ho, developed a table-top game called “Le Jeu de la Guerre” or *A Game of War*. Debord’s exploration of play as it applies to his game as well as its revolutionary use against neoliberal capitalism is examined in Barbrook, R. 2014.

The most revolutionary idea about urban development hasn't emerged from urbanism, technology, nor from aesthetics. It is the decision to reconstruct the environment according to the needs of power vested with the workers councils. The environment will be configured by the *anti-state dictatorship* of the proletariat—a generalized and collective form of self-management of aligned individuals working together to create a public good, a “generalized self-management” according to the needs of the collective. The power of the workers councils can only be realized and effective if it has the ambition to transform the totality of existing conditions. It cannot assign itself trivial reformist policy or any lesser task than the total transformation of existing conditions if it is to be recognized and *to recognize itself* in a world of its own making.

“anti-state dictatorship of the proletariat”: Debord specifically chose the phrase “la dictature anti-étatique du prolétariat” to cut through the ambiguities of Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, implemented by Stalin as a dictatorship *over* the proletariat. His wording makes it very clear that he envisages a distinctly non-state form of social organization. “generalized self-management”: A Situationist term for the form of self-governance elsewhere called the “anti-state dictatorship of the proletariat”. See Raoul Vaneigem's *Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management* in Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 363-371).

VIII. Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere

“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, *Letter to Marx, March 1843*

Arnold Ruge: German philosopher and political writer glibly dismissed the idea of a revolution in his letter to Marx, it was only five years later when the Germans revolted in 1848, resulting in the Marzrevolution of 1848-1849. This quote appeared in *The Situationist International No. 12*, with this quote “Five years later that revolution had come. As an amusing example of a type of historical unconsciousness constantly produced by similar causes and always contradicted by similar results”. See *The Beginning of an Era* Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 288).

Culture, in a historical society divided into classes, is the sphere of ephemeral knowledge shared in common amongst living individuals, that is to say, it is that power of generalization which *exists independently* and autonomous to itself, as a division of intellectual labor and intellectual labor of division. A society in which culture is detached from history, a development beyond the agrarian society of a unified mythical culture-and-history is, according to Hegel, “when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connections and interactions and became autonomous.” When culture gains independence from history, it can then embark upon an imperialistic drive to make itself predominant (over history.) This drive gradually undermines culture’s historical basis and eventually negates itself, destroying this independence. The history that creates the relative autonomy of culture, and the ideological illusions about this autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. The history of culture can be read as the gradual negation of culture, a triumphant march towards culture’s self-destruction. Culture is society’s intellectual labor to search for the

“a division of intellectual labor”:
The development of historical society from its roots as a society of myth to the agrarian cyclical society is a shift from one based upon an oral history integrated and entwined with lived experience as one in the same, to a historical society which has separated written chronology from lived experience, which is represented as culture. “when human life lost its unifying power...”: What was lost with the ancient Greek oral traditions were the regular occurrence of mortals interacting with Gods. With the gradual decline of the Greek mythic society, we see a corresponding rise in the Greek philosophical tradition. Debord reworded this quote originally by Hegel: “When the power of synthesis vanishes from the lives of men and when the antitheses have lost their vital relation and their power of interaction and gain independence, it is then that philosophy becomes a felt need.” See Hegel, G. & Guth., 2013. This line by Hegel is also quoted by Georg Lukács, *History & Class Consciousness*, see Lukács, G., 1971.

loss of society's unification of history and culture. In the course of this search, culture as a sphere separate from history is destined to negate itself.

181

The struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, can only be sustained through the permanent victory of innovation. And yet, cultural development is carried forth by the total movement of history. When history discovers the self-encompassing totality of its own role in culture, it tends to ignore the importance and impact of the role of culture to society, and asserts itself as the totalizing force towards a suppression of all alternatives.

“a suppression of all alternatives”:
The original French is “la suppression de toute séparation” but I’ve translated to clarify its meaning as a suppression of all alternatives to the total dominance of the time of production. This has the effect of solidifying cultural aspects of society as implicit truth—ideology. This freezes the historical society into a specific ideological period. This is the mechanism Debord was alluding to in chapter VI. Spectacular Time, where he says “[the time of production— which is motionless; its history has reached a stable, unchanging conclusion](#)” (see thesis 155). In this case the ideology of the contemporary period is the “time of production”: an unchanging fact, society can change in superficial (e.g. cultural) ways, but the time of production is a fixed and permanent condition.

The explosion of society's general body of knowledge, which contains the understanding of history as the heart of culture, becoming an irreversible self-knowledge, which is expressed by the destruction of God. As Marx said in his Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "The critique of religion is the essential precondition for all criticism". The critique that begins with the negation of religion and therefore God is also the critique that continues forever. Without the constraints of religion, there is no longer a coherent set of rules to live by, and the lived reality of culture forces this culture to its own dissolution. Like philosophy, once it gains autonomy from the shackles of history—is bound to collapse, any single (non-integrated) discipline becomes autonomous and attempts to account for all of society with its own methodologies even within its narrow field of study. The *lack of total rationality* in favor of a narrow focus dooms these separate disciplines to obsolescence—or to have limited use because the wider integrated social sphere will always demand a cohesive understanding of culture, history, and daily life—which the specialized field alone cannot deliver.

"the destruction of God": The society's mythic past is viewed as a mere fictional narrative, and with it is the fiction of a God that previously formed its foundations. "The critique of religion is the essential precondition for all criticism": See Marx, K. 1844.

"the critique that continues forever": The society founded upon a critique without end becomes the basis of its self-perpetuating ideology.

Culture—the knowledge of lived experience shared amongst contemporary society, grew out from the historical chronology that was the dissolution of the mythic society. Culture however, has not become a fully separate discipline—it exists as a subset of, and tied to the sphere of history, with unique aspects limited to the domain of techniques of living daily life and efficient modes of communication. Culture makes up only a partial understanding of daily life within a society that is only *partially historical*. In this sense, culture only explains a small subset of historicized society. It remains the meaning in an insufficiently meaningful world.

“Culture makes up only a partial understanding of daily life ...”: Especially considering how alienation prevents everyone from equal access to participation in the daily events which define their period.

“It remains the meaning in an insufficiently meaningful world.”: Rewording of Marx: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of spiritless conditions.” See Marx, K., 1844.

The end of the history of culture manifests when it is most frozen and unable to develop in time. This occurs in two opposing forms: the development of culture as a specific domain of study that attempts to transcend history, and the maintenance of this culture, ossifying it and re-presenting it for spectacular contemplation. In this process, culture cycles through time but remains ultimately frozen. The first form has linked its fate to social criticism, and the second form defends the power of the ruling class.

“the maintenance of this culture”:
The second form of the end of the history of culture is visible with Hollywood’s continual remaking and rebooting of existing film franchises, the cycling of clothing fashions, and the reemergence of old traditions as new trends (e.g. stoicism, the paleo diet, etc.) These repeating patterns are taken up for reexamination by spectacular society and generate new spectacular images to promote the old as new again. In this process, culture superficially cycles but ultimately remains stagnant and continues to distract the proletariat from any real social critique.

Each of the opposing forms of the end of culture exists under a unitary field, within the domains of knowledge and the domains of sensory representation (which was generally considered *art* in historical societies.) The first form holds an opposition between the domain of knowledge and the theory of praxis. The domain of knowledge produces an ever growing accumulation of fragmented specializations. Each specialization eventually negates itself when the *endorsement* of the existing conditions of capitalism forces it to *renounce the knowledge* that built its foundations. This is opposed to the theory of praxis, which alone contains the integrated truth by the secret of its use. The second form, the domain of sensory representations, privileges an opposition between the critical self-destruction of *common language*—the actual ways of living and experiencing daily life as outmoded, versus the artificial necessity of “new” or “improved” ways of experiencing non-life within the commodity spectacle.

“integrated truth by the secret of its use”: Lived practice has the advantage of access to *all* knowledge, integrated. This includes the specialized set of domain-specific knowledge, integrated knowledge, *and* access to the practical techniques of their use.

“non-life within the commodity spectacle”: In privileging these “improved” illusions of the experience of daily life, the spectacle manages to recreate an artificial recomposition of daily life, assembled from a hodgepodge of traditions and past trends, but with a façade of novelty. This task is primarily accomplished within the realm of the media through the representation of this false novelty with its regeneration of the same images. This is a continually lower-fidelity copy of what was formerly considered life, thus an illusory representation of non-life.

The mythic culture of agrarian societies provided the reference points for a common language which bound these communities together with grounded truths. Once society loses these myths, they lose the reference points upon which their shared language is based, thus communication gradually breaks down, bringing community along with it. This process continues until a subsequent historical society is able to replace these once common *mythical* referents with *historical* referents. With this replacement completed, a shared language based on historical referents can emerge with its newly formed historical society. Art in the mythical society is the representation of myth itself, in a unified sense that is equally part of daily life and history—living myth. Art in the historical society is an aspect of culture, the *representation* of daily life, but separate from history. Art, in the contemporary sense, is thus independent of history, is focused on the creation of works which represent the culture of daily life within a historical society. Initially emerging from its use in the religious sphere, this limited discipline similarly follows the same course of eventual self-negation as other specialized domains (as described in thesis 185). Thus, art's declaration of independence as a total perspective for social introspection smuggles in its own inadequacy for the realization of an integrated analysis of both historical and cultural

“a common language which bound these communities together with grounded truths”: In order for any language to be able to communicate shared concepts, the symbols used to represent these concepts must reference other shared concepts; if the referents are lost, the communication breaks down, and the language is no longer shared in common, as that which were formerly shared references now point to different semantic concepts.

“Art in the historical society is an aspect of culture, the representation of daily life, but separate from history”: Art is not part of the officially recorded events of history as inscribed by those in the administration of power.

society using tools that are merely cultural. This is to say, art attempts to describe the totality of reality with a specialized set of tools dooming itself to its own self-negation.

The *positive* significance of Postmodernism, that decomposition movement which is the formal annihilation of all art as a separate sphere of discourse, is the loss of a common language of general communication. The *negative* significance of this loss is that a multitude of common languages remains to be found. Historical societies at least had the unifying and generalizing properties of a common language understood to all, and the art of that period can be characterized by an accessibility with respect to their common language. That said, this common language was limited to the *belated* announcement *to others* about what had been experienced without any real dialog. Contemporary society, on the other hand, is without a common language, each discipline speaking only to itself, unable to speak to wider society and admitting this lack of dialog as acceptable and inevitable. The problem we must undertake is to repurpose language through the participatory activity of practice, creating a community using common language to articulate all disciplines involved in the experience of daily life. The playful ways contemporary poets and artists have reappropriated language to derive new meaning within their artistic works can be broadened to exist simultaneously inside their works and outside—to include all of contemporary society, and thus possess the community of universal discourse and play with time that, until recently, was merely *represented* by poetic and artistic works.

“the loss of a common language”:
 Each discipline of study is busy redefining terminology such that individuals outside these specialized spheres of linguistic practice are unable to understand the ongoing discourse, and a highly specific language is privileged to the point where communication both within and without the field is incomprehensible. The destruction of common language is an indication of decay, eventually resulting in the self-negation of the independent discipline.

When art achieves independence, it represents reality with a flourish of color, describing it more beautifully than reality itself. It is at that moment when reality seems old and grey, a poor substitute for the reality of the art itself. Reality can no longer be perceived in its full beauty or rich color, its original beauty is available only in memory or nostalgia. The greatness of art appears at the dusk of life.

“a poor substitute for the reality of the art itself”: The original French reads “un moment de la vie a vieilli, et il ne se laisse pas rajeunir avec des couleurs éclatantes” or “a moment of life has aged, and it does not let itself be rejuvenated with bright colors”. In the spectacle, Debord describes art as more real than reality itself, and establishes the inseparability between spectacle and reality, which Baudrillard later claims as his own idea in *Mirrors of Production* (see Jappe, A., 2010 and Baudrillard, J., 1975). For more on hyperreality, see [thesis 192](#), see also Baudrillard, J., 1994.

“The greatness of art appears at the dusk of life”: The French here is: “La grandeur de l’art ne commence à paraître qu’à la retombée de la vie.” is copied from Hegel: “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only reorganized, but the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.” See Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991 (Pp. 22).

The *Baroque* period of the arts was the first period in which the historical time created by the ruling classes was able to express itself as a predominant influence in the discipline of the arts. With the beginning of the Enlightenment, the christian world and its explanation of reality was challenged by science, rationality, Lutheranism, and the Protestants. The christian world had suddenly lost its unified center, the last remaining vestiges of the mythical society which had emerged from the Roman Empire finally lost its singular grasp on society, which it had held during the Middle Ages. This was the collapse of the power of a mythical order founded in heaven and Earth. The art of the Baroque period is *the art of change*, it embodied the change of its times, it captured the ephemeral power and moralities it recognized as they shifted from a mythic modality to a historic modality. As Eugeio d’Ors put it, art during the Baroque period chose “life instead of eternity”. The outstanding achievements of art during the Baroque period were in theater and the festival, as well as the theatrical festival, a temporary (and ephemeral) constructed space in which all artistic symbolism and reference were self-contained and self-referential, thus creating a common language accessible to all within this space. The theatrical festival creates a unified space operating as *passage* to a cohesive experience away from the disorder occurring in greater society at that time. Contemporary discourse on the topic of aesthetics often places

The Baroque period: From the early 17th to the middle of the 18th century.

“life instead of eternity”: This is to say, art privileged reality in the here and now, embracing the beauty of ephemerality over the promise of an eternal place in Heaven. See Ors., Valéry, A. & Dassas, F., 2000. This work has not yet been translated into English. theatrical festival: The festival was singing, dancing, building, decorating, beauty pageantry, athletics in which the participants not only accomplished the acts but became spectacles themselves—and to others, their equals and fellow citizens, who had done just the same activities. The festival is the exact opposite of the culture of celebrity, in which one merely spectates and has no ability to participate or even engage with the

excessive importance on the concept of the Baroque, and yet this is a symptom of a growing awareness that a rejuvenation of the classical period of antiquity is impossible in a contemporary social context. Instead, the last three centuries witnessed attempts to establish brief, artificial, and limited artistic projects imitating the superficial aspects of Classicism: worship of virtue, a return to family values, etc. These attempts always promote the authority of the moment, either the nobility, the political class, or even a revolutionary vanguard; these moments are merely a promotion of the status quo dressed in Roman togas. Once the Baroque moment had run its course, subsequent artistic movements advanced as a procession of ever more individualistic arts of negation, which, from Romanticism to Cubism, each renewing their assault on the common language of previous movements and symbols, as well as history itself, until the complete destruction of the sphere of art. This disappearance of an art representing history is indicative of a ruling elite who no longer communicates using history; history had become independent of the ruling class. At the end of the Baroque period, the social basis of the elite aristocracy was limited to a playful expenditure of their own wealth; meanwhile, capitalism had appeared to usurp their power with a new form of class power (the bourgeoisie) bereft of the hereditary and ideological basis with which the elite aristocracy was laden. This new power whose foundations were the simple management of the economy, ushered in a period with no human *mastery*, but a new elite in the form of pure capital. The Baroque orchestra, an example of long-lost comprehensive artistic unity, which has long been missing from contemporary artistic *creativity*, has in some sense, been revived in the contemporary *consumption* of the totality of past art. As all of the artistic works of the past become

events of daily life. For more on the theatrical festival, see Graeber, D. 2011.

accessible for consumption, only recontextualized, stripped of the original context in which they were created, reinterpreted for consumption in a contemporary historical context. This transforms art specific to a time and place with a specific reflection of its own historical reality into a generalized, universalized “global art”: one devoid of any representation of time, place, or context. Much like how art in the Baroque period reflected an elite historical chronology of its period, global art becomes an even more abstracted edifice, a new Baroque for the contemporary period. Into this edifice all art is melded, both integrating past and contemporary art forms into a single artistic orchestra, in which the art of all ages and societies can be accepted together, a unified “recollection of memories”, signalling the *end of the world of art*. This is now the age of museums, when no artistic communication can exist, where all art is destined to become relevant *only* to its continually renewed contemporary context, and its originally intended context, referents, symbolism, and communication are abolished. Whatever particular communication problems past works of art may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication *in general*.

Art in contemporary society is experiencing its own dissolution, a movement focused on its own self-negation within a historical society where the common person does not participate in the events of daily life. Art yet strives to describe and reflect upon a chronology it is too specialized to adequately explain. Art ends up representing the attempt to achieve change, but merely succeeds in showcasing its inability to do as such, thus revealing the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its ambition, the further its realization lies beyond. This art is necessarily *avant-garde*, and *it is not*. It is *avant-garde* in its own disappearance.

“Art in contemporary society is experiencing its own dissolution, a movement focused on its own self-negation”: The Situationists explored the concept of art as an exploration of its own negation, see Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 183-188, 393-397).

Dadaism and Surrealism were two art movements that proclaimed the end of Modern art. Historically and ideologically opposed to one another but only partially conscious of the other, these two movements were contemporaries of the last great assault of the proletariat revolutionary movement, the defeat of which left both movements trapped and immobile inside the victorious social sphere of Modernity—the very same sphere these movements had opposed and had declared as dead and buried. The defeat of the revolution sealed the fate of these artistic movements within the sarcophagus of Modernity. Dadaism and Surrealism were bound to one another by their most radical contribution to the sphere of art—their opposition to the ideological critique of the other. This opposition revealed the insufficiency of their critique, each too one-sided and narrow in scope to provide an adequate and total critique of society. Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*; Surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*. The critical position elaborated since then by the *Situationists* has shown that the suppression and realization of art are inseparable aspects of the same *transcendence of art*.

“Dadaism and Surrealism”:

Dadaism rejected the rationality and the logic of capitalism, instead embracing an anti-bourgeois stance of nonsense. The surrealists embraced science to further its goals of free artistic expression, not necessarily rejecting the ideals of the past, but free of the constraints of reason and embracing the omnipotence of thought.

“Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it.”: C.f. Hegel, G., Wood, A. & Nisbet, H., 1991: “Philosophy cannot be realized without abolishing the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot be abolished without realizing philosophy.” “The critical position elaborated since then by the Situationists...: for more on the Situationists on art see Knabb, K., 2006 (Pp. 27-30, 224). This is the only use of the word “the Situationists” in this work, as Debord noted in Sanguinetti, G., McHale, J. & Debord, G., 2003.

The spectacular society produces a tendency to consume the art and cultures of the past, recontextualizing it with contemporary language to be relevant to the present and yet stripped of its original meaning, its symbolism, and its referents—leaving only a congealed mass of superficially artistic form, bankrupt of any communicative or emotional qualities. This consumption is not discerning, it captures both positive and negative aspects of culture. This consuming power is the representative voice of the spectacle in its most expressive form: the *communication of the incommunicable*, or speech without meaning for the sake of speaking. In this social environment we see flagrant attack on language and the use of certain words as having a positive value by the ruling authorities as its use results in the maintenance of the status quo. The horizon of this state of affairs is a language that is celebrated for its total absence of communicative power. The true nature of the attacks on communicative language is concealed when examining the creative expression of contemporary art and poetry, since the primary function of the spectacle is to *bury historical memory under the weight of decontextualized and non-communicative cultural artifacts*, thus the artistic referents located within art and poetry remain hidden. These cultural artifacts are continually presented as a parade of new and novel innovations, but are only recontextualizations of artifacts from the past, yet stripped of communicative value. This is a society of pseudo-novelty that continues to use a Modernist ideology and methods that make up its fundamental core.

“decontextualized and non-communicative cultural artifacts”: Baudrillard’s later concept of hyperreality and “the copy without original” draws upon Debord’s conception of the Spectacle: appropriating history in order to generate pseudo-cultural artifacts based upon the original but abstracted from it. See Baudrillard, J., 1994. An additional pointer to the concept of hyperreality is also in [thesis 198 where Debord directly references Boorstin’s book *The Image*](#), which elaborates on the concept in detail, see Boorstin, D.,

This is a strategy used in such disciplines as “neoliterature” which blatantly admits that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake, and yet acts as if this were a new approach. So while the contemporary movement celebrates the death of a universal common language as beautiful in its own right, it simultaneously executes its most atomizing practice against a generalized organization of a common society: the application of a “globalized” homogeneity onto all cultures worldwide. This approach seeks to establish the same commercial brands and “experiences” worldwide, a universal hegemonic order of the corporate global village. This results in a hodgepodge of decomposed capitalist values, marketing arts, and hegemonic “neo-artistic” aesthetics—creating a flat and banal experience of recomposed pseudo-life, applied everywhere simultaneously. This recomposed hodgepodge of “orchestral works” is most visible in the architecture and urban planning of the spectacle. The hodgepodge is the product of the spectacle: to recreate the formerly fragmented worker into a form more ideal to the efficiencies required under late-capitalism—“a personality well integrated into the group” an increasing trend described by American sociologists Riesman

1992. More concretely, the culture of social media promotes the spread of banal memes which, each day, bury themselves under a continual onslaught of ‘non-communicative cultural artifacts.’

“neoliterature which admits that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake”: Another example is how so much postmodern film uses the breaking of the fourth wall to involve the viewer as a participant in the action, and yet Shakespeare had used this technique long before, and yet it is presented as a novel innovation.

“global village”: Another proponent of hyperreality, Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village”; understood as a global coexistence altered by transnational commerce, migration, and culture. See McLuhan, M. & Lapham, L., 1994. McLuhan was also an influence on Baudrillard’s conception of hyperreality.

“a flat and banal experience of real life, everywhere simultaneously”: It is now possible to hang out in the same coffeeshops in any major city worldwide, taste the same flavors, listen to the same music, and see the same art on the walls. You are everywhere and yet nowhere. See Chayka, K. 2016.

“This recomposed hodgepodge of ‘orchestral works’ is most visible in the architecture and urban planning”: An example of how the spectacle seeks to create “integrated spaces” where artists, software engineers, and workers exist side-by-side and yet their specialized languages make

and Whyte. Ultimately the project of late-capitalism is the same everywhere: to *reorganize society without community*.

universal communication impossible. These workers become isolated, together; an aggregate of unmixed elements.

“a personality well integrated into the group”: A reference to Riesman, D., Glazer, N., Denney, R. & Gitlin, T., 2001. See Whyte, W., 2002.

“Whyte”: William H. Whyte, writer of *The organization man*. See Whyte, W. (2002).

193

Once culture becomes commodified, it must become the flagship commodity in the society of the spectacle. Clark Kerr, in *The Uses of the University* who studied the trends of the knowledge industry stated that the industry of production, distribution, and consumption of *knowledge* was already 29% of annual gross-domestic product in the United States. He predicted that the second half of the 20th century would be driven by the knowledge industry, similar to how automotive drove the first half, and the railroads drove the last half of the 19th century.

The Uses of the University: Quoting Kerr, “The production, distribution, and consumption of ‘knowledge’ in all its forms is said to account for 29 percent of gross national product according to Fritz Machlup’s calculations”, see Kerr, C., 2001 (Pp 66).

The advancement of increasingly specialized fields of academic study result in the destruction of common language and evolves into *spectacular thought*, thinking that must justify a society without justifications. Spectacular thought invades knowledge and culture because the spectacle funds only those fields of discourse that either legitimize the status quo or refuses to investigate the material basis that constitutes spectacular society. Discourse that doesn't defend the status quo will not be taken seriously. This leaves only a general science of false consciousness, a pseudo-science that can never, and will never seriously investigate the material basis of the spectacular system.

“Discourse that doesn't defend the status quo will not be taken seriously”: Debord doesn't say this in thesis 194, but says as much elsewhere in the text; as it is relevant here, I have taken the liberty to include it in the hope that it clarifies his position.

Spectacular thought, the officially funded lies that legitimate spectacular society, act to obscure the actual organization of society around the lies and images they promote: *subcommunication*—a language without meaning. The discourse within spectacular thought does not know that “conflict is at the origin of everything in its world”. The specialists operate within the sphere of spectacular thought, using the specialized non-language of the spectacle to yield the absolute power of one-way communication that corrupts absolutely. These individuals are corrupted by their contempt, contempt for their use of non-language, contempt of gaining success by using contempt, and the contempt they feel is validated by how *truly contemptible* the spectator of spectacular society really is.

“conflict is at the origin of everything in its world”: C.f. Heraclitus: “Conflict is the origin of all things.” Debord uses Heraclitus but simultaneously points towards Hegel, in which the world is fundamentally made and continually remade by the balancing of oppositional forces through conflict and resolution, thesis & antithesis in order to reach its state of balance—synthesis; the dialectic. In [thesis 196 Debord directly attacks the non-dialectical criticism of spectacular thought](#) and his position is that Spectacular thought is not aware that it is locked in a dialectical struggle. “an absolute power... that corrupts absolutely”: C.f. Lord Acton’s famous remark, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In the specialized thinking of the spectacular system, a new division of labor and specialized discourse arise, as the very perfection of this system poses new problems. One example of this trend is the opposition between *the spectacular critique of the spectacle* undertaken by sociology on one hand and the *apologetics of the spectacle* taken up by the various disciplines of the structuralist school on the other. Sociology uses over-specialized language and methods to present false despair, a non-dialectical critique that is devoid of meaning beyond publicity. The structuralist school promotes a false optimism of the benefits of the spectacle, a practice of non-thought that becomes the *official omission* of all historical practice. Between these two forms of enslaved thought, however, exists no valid critique of spectacle, only thought submissive to the ideology of the spectacle.

the structuralist school: An area of sociological discourse, primarily a methodology that implies human society must be understood by way of their relationships to broader, overarching systems and structures, and these structures underlie all things humans do, think, perceive, and feel. It is most prominently linked to the thinkers Claude Lévi-Strauss, linguist Roman Jakobson, and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Sociologists (primarily in the United States) have focused their study on gathering vast quantities of empirical data about the conditions of contemporary social life, but have failed to fully grasp the complete object of their study because their critique limits itself to the purely social and economic perspective of an object that itself contains their critique. As a result, this isolated sociology can only make small suggestions to reform society within spectacular ideology, but cannot step beyond this ideologic frame. This sociology can only make changes that are either rooted in claims to morality, moderation, common sense; suggestions that are all irrelevant when it comes to making practical changes to the everyday material basis of society. Since this critique is only examining the superficial symptoms of spectacular society, it is only able to make superficial recommendations in regard to symptoms, not its causes. The lack of a deep consciousness of history and the root ideology of spectacular society leaves this realm of discourse completely ignorant to the underlying issues at hand. This critique can only ever describe a surface irritation affecting an otherwise perfect world—hence as an apologia for the continuation of the status quo. Thus, the critique of this sociology becomes a false goodwill, directing outrage at symptoms but directing energy away from the deep underlying causes to which it is most ignorant. Ultimately it *apologizes* for the problems of the system while reinforcing its underlying basis with its presuppositions and methods.

Those who criticize the wastefulness of “disposable” products and planned obsolescence within the society of economic abundance do not understand the necessity of waste under the reign of capitalism. These critics condemn waste with ingratitude, but without this waste, the capitalism they promote would collapse. In *The Image* Daniel Boorstin describes the conspicuous consumption of commodities and manufactured news events created to satisfy an endless consumer appetite for novelty and celebrity. He is never able to arrive at the concept of Spectacle because he preemptively restricts his critique of conspicuous consumption to unscrupulous advertising and frivolous purchasing behaviors on the part of the consumer; exempting an erroneous concept he terms “honest commodities” sold with presumably “honest ads” to presumably “honest consumers”. His critique is undertheorized since it treats private life separately from the corporate excesses he deplores, and fails to grasp the all-encompassing nature of the spectacle, where the social consumption of the spectacular image ultimately corrupts all it touches: the advertising spectacle, the commodity, and finally the consumer himself.

“Those who criticize the wastefulness of ‘disposable’ products”: Probably an indirect reference to *The Waste Makers* by Vance Packard. In this book Packard coined the term “consumerism” from a positive term describing a healthy socio-economic system of abundance to one with connotations of excess materialism and vapid trend-following, generating massive waste. See Packard, V., 1963. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* See Boorstin, D., 1992.

“honest ads”: Ironically enough, The Honest Ads Act is a bill in the United States Senate legislature regulating campaign advertisements placed online by advertising companies such as Facebook and Google.

“the social consumption of the spectacular image ultimately corrupts all it touches” As an example, even the humble wood-nail purchased by the weekend home carpenter is aspiring to build his home in *the image* of the spectacular American Dream, a symbol of having “made it”, more

than as a home of spectacular
convenience, and even more than
the practicality of the home itself.

199

In *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin describes the excesses of conspicuous consumption and the predominance of mass produced images as something inherently alien to late-capitalism. His analysis of the superficial reign of images implies a “normal” (or non-excessive) basis of social life, a fanciful ideal that has no basis in reality, either in his book or in his lifetime. He implicitly grounds his criticism of contemporary society against this normal strawman, with his moralizing and psychologized judgements, attributing our drives to excess as a product of “our extravagant pretensions.” Boorstin’s strawman is one that already existed in our past as a society centered on submission to religion, a society whose time has concluded. His strawman blinds him to the contemporary arrangement of society around images, advertising, and conspicuous consumption. This leaves his critique without comprehension of the true depth of society’s reliance on images. The truth of this society is nothing other than the *negation* of this society.

Boorstin's sociology is one that considers industrial rationality as a concern independent from daily life; one that is likewise liable to consider communications technology and systems of mass production as separate from general economic development. Thus, his analysis arbitrarily separates the improvements in the technological means of the mass production of images from the excessive appetite for sensationalism on the part of the public; instead he finds merely "unfortunate" symptoms and can never discover underlying causes. This amounts to blaming the spectacle on our individual desire to be mere spectators. Boorstin does not understand the proliferation of the "pseudo-events" he so deplors. This stems from the simple fact that the overwhelming reality of today's social and media existence prevents people from actually experiencing events themselves. Actual history remains a spectre haunting contemporary society, forever risking the status quo if individuals became generally conscious of history. The spectacle must fabricate pseudo-history at all sites of the consumption of daily life in order to preserve the threatened balance of contemporary *frozen time*.

"pseudo-events": Media spectacles, according to Boorstin, in a limited sense, those manufactured by the media and labeled "the news"; in a wider sense, the cultural artifacts produced by the spectacle for consumption by spectators as the replacement for lived experience.

"actual history remains a spectre haunting contemporary society": C.f. the first line of *The Communist Manifesto*, "A specter is haunting Europe", see Marx, K., Engels, F. & Jones, G., 2002. Debord used this quote to gesture towards Marxist practice: were our society to become conscious of history, we would be inclined to overturn the status quo of unchanging spectacular time, and recreate our own events in our own period, transforming them from alienating pseudo-events to directly experienced "lived time", events of our own making, creating our own historical time.

The current trend of *structuralist* analysis is based on an explicit or unconscious assumption that our unchanging contemporary period will continue to last forever. This is an ahistorical mode of thinking that refuses to consider the material basis of a system that was never created and will never come to an end. This thinking has its roots in a misunderstanding of structural linguistics and anthropology, using its models and methods inappropriately from the start, models that had *already been proven invalid in their original contexts*, and continuing to misapply them to the current period. The continuation of this irrational rationality is due to the instant gratification for a group of academic *middle-managers* who continue to be fascinated by the success of their own models to describe a fantasy world designed only to prove the accuracy of their models. Ultimately their models simplify existing reality to fit within the constraints of their models—all error is attributed to an unfortunate externality to the otherwise perfection of their models.

“middle-managers who continue to be fascinated by the success of their own models to describe a fantasy world designed only to prove the accuracy of their models”: This is the perspective later described by the documentary film *HyperNormalisation*, in which Curtis argues that governments, financiers, and technological utopians have, since the 1970s, given up on the complex “real world” and built a simpler “fake world” run by corporations and kept stable by politicians. See Curtis, A. 2016.

In order to make sense of any of the “structuralist” theories, you must presume the existing material conditions of existence (which are, in fact, a product of history) and only then do the theories hold. These theories are not only theories of form, but tightly bound to existing conditions without which they would not hold true on their own. Just as one would not judge the character of a man based upon his appraisal of himself, one cannot trust the judgement of society based upon a critique that was funded by society and speaking its official language to itself. “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...”

Structure is the daughter of present power. Structuralism is the *official thought of power, sponsored by the state*, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as a natural and absolute fact that is and must remain. Structuralism is limited to the observation of the finished product, not the basis of spectacular communication, it fails to see the complete picture and serves only to reinforce the top-down hierarchy of communication from those in power to those without. Thus, it is not structuralism that serves to prove the validity of the society of the spectacle (since it is ill-equipped), but on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself upon reality and underwriting it such that it appears to prove the frozen fantasy of structuralism.

“Just as one would not judge the character of a man...”: Paraphrased from Marx, K., 1970.

“We cannot judge such a period...”: Quoted from Marx, K., 1970. “Structure is the daughter of present power” A quote from Jonathan Swift: “Praise is the daughter of present power”, see Swift, J., 2007. They say every work of philosophy needs to have a joke. This is my personal favorite in this work. A savage burn 🔥 against Structuralism.

Without a doubt, the critical concept of “the spectacle” is susceptible to recuperation by capitalism, twisting it into an empty sociologico-political talking point designed to apologize for the status quo and thus attempt to rationalize the necessity of the spectacle. This empty rhetoric will denounce the *entirety of the existing order in abstract terms* but will offer no alternatives, thus reinforcing the spectacular system. Such discourse proclaims: obviously no ideas can lead beyond the spectacle—but they can only generate new ideas about the spectacle. To effectively destroy the society of the spectacle, we must utilize both theory, and more importantly, put practical force into action. Any critical theory of the spectacle can only be validated if it is put into motion by the practical actions that move in opposition to, and against the spectacle in order to negate it. This practical movement is the rebirth of a revolutionary class struggle, and only through its practical actions can it create its own historical events during a period of its own making—and in doing so may it become conscious of itself as a master of its own period, surrounded and embedded in a historical chronicle and material conditions that lead to its current place. Thus it develops a critique of the spectacle, which is the theory of its material basis in reality, revealing the conditions of its oppression. With these conditions revealed, only then is it clear what strategies of negation to oppose the spectacle could be, and conversely reveals the secret of what this movement can be. Together, the theory and practical strategies should expect no miracles from the working class. The working class, as well practiced in

“...no ideas can lead beyond the spectacle—but they can only generate new ideas about the spectacle”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 2002 (Ch VI 3.c), full quote is “Ideas can never lead beyond an old world order but only beyond the ideas of the old world order... In order to carry out ideas men are needed who can exert practical force.”

“the theory and practical strategies should expect no miracles from the

work, will always be up to the task at hand. The theory and strategy will envision a reconstitution of the basis of society at the demands of the working class, and views this as a long-term task. Make no mistake, there is no distinction between theory and practice of the negation of the spectacle, as laid out here, the constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot exist without *rigorous practice*. One always informs and reinforces the other. It is certain that the paths of obscure and difficult critical theory must be trodden by those working on the practical actions at the scale of society.

working class” C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998 (Section 3). Full quote is “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune.”

The critical theory of the spectacle must be *communicated* in its own language—the language of contradiction, where words and meanings must be reappropriated from their debased meanings in contemporary usage, and either restored or reinvented. This critique must be dialectical in both form and content. It is critique of the totality and historical critique. It is not some “writing degree zero”—a text devoid of meaning and substance, but the opposite; a text pregnant with substance and significance. This critique must not be a negation of style, but a style of critique capable of communicating the negation of the society of the spectacle.

“where words and meanings... restored or reinvented.”: This sentence is not in the original text, but I’ve added it for additional clarity. Spectacular society continually strips words of their meaning through repetition in debased contexts, or recuperates their meaning through capture in ad campaigns and the spectacular media. It is the task of critical theory to clearly showcase the debasement of language and reappropriate it in order to communicate its final critique.

“dialectical in both form and content”: Debord was influenced by the military theory of Prussian general Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz, and frequently referenced his work as having employed a form of ‘dialectical thought’ in his strategic theory. “For Debord, dialectics is fundamental to the conflicts and interactions that compose human historical existence... An attacking force must attain its goals before this reversal of strength occurs, just as a defender must try to hasten this moment, so as to ensure that it arrives before those goals are achieved.” See Bunyard, 2018 (Pp. 366-367).

“writing degree zero”: A form and style of writing independent of language, one totally stripped of substance and meaning, leaving nothing but the text itself; writing unto itself, for its own sake. See Barthes, R., 1970.

The very style of dialectical theory is an abomination to the prevailing standards of language, corrupting the sensibilities of those who use these standards. While this theory uses existing concepts, it knowingly rediscovers the *fluidity* of these concepts, and the inevitability of their destruction.

“The very style of dialectical theory... and the inevitability of their destruction.” C.f. *Marx’s Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital*. See also Marx, K., Mandel, E., Fowkes, B. & Fernbach, D., 1978. While this theory uses terms from existing and seemingly concrete concepts, it uses them knowing the fluidity of concepts renders the semantic meaning pliable to subversion and ultimately, the undermining of the existing conditions of oppression.

The style of exposition in dialectical theory must exhibit a mastery of the form of critique, including a critique of itself, a dominating account of all of the historical works *of its entire past*. This style of expository critical writing will thus exemplify the negative spirit in its style as much as its contrarian and negating content. The truth, says Hegel, does not “remain detached..., like a finished article from the instrument that shapes it.” This dialectical theory is the communication of a movement, a movement whose history and actions must remain visible; this is kept visible by the overthrowing of the presently authoritative relationships between concepts held together by lies; this is accomplished by the *détournement* of all previously successful critical efforts—which is to say, the reappropriation, misappropriation, or outright hijacking of previous critical efforts into new critical forms. Hegel was a pioneer of his epigrammatic style, where his practice of reversing the genitive became his way to distill historical revolutions into a mechanism of thought. The young Marx was influenced by the writing style of Feuerbach’s systemic reversal of subject and predicate, and by borrowing from it he was able to achieve the most cogent development of this *insurrectional style* of writing, thus a phrase like “the philosophy of poverty” becomes “the poverty of philosophy”. The technique of *détournement* re-radicalizes previously critical conclusions that have been recuperated by the spectacle and thus turned into safe and official lies. Kierkegaard had also made use of *détournement* deliberately,

“[nor does truth] remain detached from diversity, like a finished article from the instrument that shapes it.”: See Hegel, G., 2013. This is to say, critical theory communicates its ideas using contrarian language and style, but its final analysis is always subject to the biases of its language.

“reversing the genitive”: Reversing the possessive pronoun with the possessed noun, e.g. “The police arrested the rioters” becomes “the rioters arrested the police”.

The Philosophy of Poverty was written by Proudhon in 1846, which Marx answered with *The Poverty of Philosophy* in 1847.

and made his own comment on the subject: “but despite all your twists and turns, just as the jam always return to the pantry, you always manage to introduce some little word or phrase which isn’t yours which triggers disturbing memories.” It remains important however, that the use of détournement requires maintaining one’s *distance* towards whatever has been turned into falsified “official truths” according to the spectacle. Later in his book, *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard opines on the topic of détournement “one further remark on your many complaints that I’ve introduced borrowed expressions into my exposition. I do not deny that I did so, nor should I conceal the fact that I’ve done so 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 clothe the problem in its historical costume.”

“but despite all your twists and turns...”: See Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. & Hong, E., 1985.

détournement: The original French word (day-tor-nuh-maw) means to detour, reroute, misappropriate, to purposefully hijack. See glossary.

“one further remark on your many complaints...” See Kierkegaard, S., Hong, H. & Hong, E., 1985.

Ideas improve. The meaning of words, freshly imbued with détoured semantics, participate in the development of these ideas. Plagiarism is necessary, progress demands ideas embracing the author's phrasing, exploiting their expressions, erasing an official lie and replacing it with correct ones.

"Plagiarism is necessary": C.f. Lautréamont. & Lykiard, A., 1994. Lautréamont was the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), the mysterious author of *Maldoror* and *Poesies*, both of which make extensive use of détournement. In Debord's autobiographical work *Panegyric* he described his experience of storms in the mountainous region of central France, "Just once, at night, I saw lightning strike near me outside; you could not even see where it had struck; the whole landscape was equally illuminated for one startling instant. Nothing in art has ever given me this impression of an irrevocable brilliance, except for the prose that Lautréamont employed in the programmatic exposition that he called *Poesies*." See Debord, G., 2004.

Détournement is the opposite of quotation, that seemingly official authority that is immediately false because it has been quoted—which is to tear a fragment from its context, from its original inertia to lend itself to new inertia, torn from its original frame of reference within the text and time period in which it lived, to one that is either appropriate or erroneous. Détournement, is the flexible language of anti-ideology. This language is aware of its inability to always guarantee the same semantic meaning definitively, and makes no claims to certainty, today nor tomorrow. It is a language that cannot be confirmed by any previous or supra-critical reference, the language is self-referential only. The language of détournement contains its own internal coherence, and is adequate in as much as the practices it makes possible are then validated by the realities of daily life. It is only the success of this practice that validates the core kernels of truth détournement has brought back into play. Détournement grounds the basis of its cause and claims on nothing but its own truth as critique of contemporary spectacular society.

“The language of détournement contains... the realities of daily life.”: To phrase more simply: detourned theory, when put into practice successfully—becomes self-verifying.

“Détournement grounds the basis of its cause and claims on nothing...”: C.f. Stirner, M. & Leopold, D., 1995. Full quote is “I have found my cause on nothing” from the original German: “Ich hab’ Mein Sach’ auf Nichts gestellt”, used as the opening line of Goethe’s poem *Vanitas! Vanitatum Vanitas!* which Stirner used as the opening and closing sentence in *The Ego and Its Own*.

209

To include an element of *overt détournement* in any theoretical work is to explicitly eliminate any potentially autonomous or durable dogmatism from the resulting work. Introducing *détournement* directly into theoretical discourse is to inject the same type of *violent subversion* that disrupts and overthrows every existing authority that upholds the status quo—not with actions, but with ideas.

Détournement reminds us that theory is nothing by itself, it must be put into action with the full consciousness of its material basis in history and only theory and practice truly allied can manifest the *historical correction* that is its own validation.

“*Détournement* reminds us that theory is nothing by itself...” To put simply: *détourned theories* are musical instruments, inert and quiet unless played. Our task is to play loudly and more beautifully.

210

The real negation of culture is the only way to keep its value; as the actions, traditions, and elements of daily life. The negation of cultural culture can not be merely *cultural*.

What shall remain of culture when we negate or oppose its cultural aspects will be one that remains at the level of everyday life, a life that is universally accessible, imbued with renewed meaning, and points to a direction beyond itself.

“The negation of cultural culture can not be merely cultural”: The original French is “La négation réelle de la culture est seule à en conserver le sens. Elle ne peut plus être culturelle”, roughly “Only the negation of culture retains its truth. It can no longer be cultural”. To oppose dominant culture with “counterculture” isn’t sufficient, as it can never negate the entire non-cultural social field. Culture will always be captured by capital and become autonomous unto itself. Put simply: Culture can no longer be independent and self-justifying.

The language of contradiction, détournement, is a *unified* critique of culture, in so far as it dominates the whole of culture, its knowledge as poetry—manifesting itself as an integrated form of theory aligned with practice that is not separable from a critique of the social totality. This *unified theoretical critique* of all of society goes along with its manifestation as a *unified social practice*.

IX. Ideology Materialized

“Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself only insofar as it exists in and for another self-consciousness; that is, it exists only by being recognized and acknowledged.”

—Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

Ideology is the intellectual *basis* of class societies throughout the course of all established history, a history rife with conflict. Ideological facts were never pure fictions or outright falsehoods, but rather distorted perspectives of the nature of reality, misunderstood causation, or oversimplified narratives. These forms have been major factors that have and continue to influence human actions that go on to produce actual distorting effects on reality itself. These distorting effects gradually produce a *materialization* of the very ideology that underpin the human actions performed in response to the distortions of ideology. Ideology materializes in the form of the spectacle, through the concrete human actions brought about through systems of autonomous economic production. The resulting social reality is built upon the effects of an autonomous system of false belief leading to actions that create a reality custom-tailored to reflect the false model of reality: this is ideology materialized. In this way, ideology remodels reality in its own image, and becomes self-confirming.

Ideology: Generally taken as the social consensus around beliefs that are commonly accepted as true—which may not be. For Debord, ideology isn't simply wrongheaded common sense, or the class-oriented battle of ideas, it is instead the dominant thought over the entire social field, distorting its false image of reality and making that reality manifest.
 “a history rife with conflict”:
 History is indeed rife with conflict, but infrequently conflicts over the bases of ideology.

When ideology, which is the *abstract* will of a universal reality and its illusion made manifest, finds itself legitimized by universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion in contemporary society, there is no longer a need for this ideology to prove its own claims, it is no longer a voluntarist struggle of a multiplicity of perspectives, but the triumph of the universal ideology of the spectacle. Thus, it is no longer ideology; all competing ideologies cease to exist. What was previously considered historical choices are now accepted as obvious facts, what were once ideologic pretensions are now reality. Even the *names* of alternative ideologies cease to exist as they are irrelevant to the new basis of reality. What was previously considered specifically ideologically oriented labor is now the “epistemological base” that is simply presumed to be without ideology: mere assertions of undeniable fact. Materialized ideology at this point has no *name*, no historical agenda, and it pretends to play the role of the nature of this materialized reality, it is the “way it is” and “the way it will always be”. This amounts to saying that the history of *coexisting ideologies* is over.

The spectacle has transformed what was formerly ideological theory into the universal and common understanding of reality itself, manifesting an oversimplified model into reality. This is how a distorted map becomes the very territory upon which we walk. Ideology turns what were formerly official lies first into common sense, then into physical existence.

“what were ideologic pretensions are now reality...”: Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* traverses the same terrain as Debord, claiming some of these ideas as his own, saying: that which were once models of reality, but were in fact oversimplifications, have the pretense of *being* reality. These are not reflections of reality, nor perversions of reality—what had the pretense of reality is now fully simulacrum—that which bears no relation to reality whatsoever. See Baudrillard, J. 1994.

“it is the ‘way it is’ and ‘the way it will always be’”. Francis Fukuyama gave a name to this concept as “The End of History.” in which he describes the collapse of socialism in the USSR as the final victory of neoliberal capitalism: the only remaining ideological vision to describe the terrain, organization,

and reality of human society. Debord, twenty five years earlier had described it succinctly here in the original French as “l’histoire des idéologies est finie” or “the history of ideologies is over.” See Fukuyama, F., 1992.

214

Ideology has its own internal logic that gradually leads to what Mannheim calls “total ideology”. Total ideology is a state of reality in which the theoretical ideas and perspective of social theory are manifested as common sense consciousness of reality—a despotic theory of oversimplification and a fragmentary perspective accepted as the *total* understanding of reality, albeit a reality that is frozen, unchallenged and unquestioned. This worldview is a *totalitarian* vision that distorts all perceptions into a singular false image—one presented through the spectacle as a series of pseudo-events in which the individual has no ability to participate; a series of non-events that are ordained as historically significant by the spectacle, but are in fact non-historical. Ideology is fulfilled when it fully dissolves into the whole of society, both underwriting it and disappearing. It is only with the *practical dissolution* of society can the *final delusion* which blocks access to our participation in the historical events of the contemporary period, also disappear.

“Total ideology”: See Mannheim, K., 1985. Debord believed that the spectacle operated by the same ‘internal logic’ that Mannheim described as the ‘Total ideology’ of a ruling class that imposed its totalitarian worldview in service to their own interests as the interests of the whole of society. For Debord, the spectacle manipulates ideology in service to the materialization of itself.

The spectacle is ideology par excellence, for once manifest in its complete form, it exhibits the essence of all ideological systems: the oversimplification, impoverishment, and the very negation of real life; the reduction of beauty to banality. The spectacle has an impact on real life, materially it is “the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man”—which is to say, it presents a unique perspective of reality for each, isolating each on false islands of separate reality. Through this isolation arises “the new power of deception” which is the basis of all spectacular power. It is the increase in the production of images, television, film, and social media—“within the mass of objects grows the mass of alien powers to which man is subjected” and the personalization and customization of this media which has enabled an alien power of deception, demanding a shift in our attention to the spectacle, which is mistaken for real life. This state of alienated unreality is the supreme stage of expansion of the spectacle, which has finally replaced lived experience with need. “The need for money is for that reason the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates.” This was elaborated upon by Hegel, “the life of the dead body, that moves itself within itself”, which is to say, the spectacle turns all human decisions into

“the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man”: Quote from Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1988 (Section “Alienated Labor”).

“isolating each on a false island of separate reality”: Since *The Society of the Spectacle* was written, we’ve witnessed a quantitative proliferation of images, but also of qualitatively personalized content. Commercial social media companies like Facebook, Youtube, and Netflix lead this charge, isolating individuals onto islands of their own personalized media, but the next phase of innovation points beyond personalized *choice of content* to *personalized content* whereby media is customized for each individual—leaving them unable to relate their perspectives with others. For more on this, see 0xADADA, 2021 (January 14).

“the new power of deception”: Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1988 (Section “Alienated Labor”).

“within the mass of objects... to which man is subjected”: Ibid., section “Human Requirements”.

“The need for money is for that reason the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates.”: C.f. Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1988 (Section “Human Requirements”). The rise of social media has augmented the need for money with the need for social

considerations of economic value, weighed and distorted by the decision to need more money and improve wealth above all other considerations—the privileging of money over life itself.

validation on social media, as described by Jenny Odell: “we submit even our leisure for numerical evaluation via likes on Facebook and Instagram, constantly checking on its performance like one checks a stock, monitoring the ongoing development of our personal brand.” See Odell, J., 2019. “the life of the dead body, that moves itself within itself”: See Hegel, G., Harris, H. & Knox, T. 1979. See note for [thesis 2](#) for the complete quotation. This is to say, the spectacle is the autonomous movement of appearances as the organizing force of society, acting upon the dead labor that animates the non-living spectators of the spectacle.

The spectacle stands directly in opposition to the theory laid out in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*—his project of a philosophy that realizes a practice able to transcend the opposition between materialism and idealism. The spectacle imposes a false consciousness of reality not merely based upon its materiality but simultaneously by pseudo-concreteness of the spectacular universe it presents. The older and outmoded discourse of materialism (that earlier form leaned upon by Marx that idealized and privileged the purely material nature of reality)—is finally fulfilled by the spectacle, where human actions are subjugated by the commodity. The material commodity has finally become the automatic master of social life, shaping the world to its own needs. Similarly, the *dreamed activity* of idealism (or that which is purely ideological) is also fulfilled in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of images and media; that realm of signs and signals repeated often enough to change perceptions of reality and to enact behaviors—which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.

“Theses on Feuerbach”: See Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998.

“The spectacle imposes a false consciousness”: The spectacle, once fully realized, is able to impose its total ideology of false reality upon both the material aspects of daily life as well as ideology itself—using the economic effects of production in the creation, promotion and reproduction of distorted perspectives of reality that act directly upon the shaping of our perceptions, emotions, and aspirations.

“...privileged the purely material nature of reality”: Historical materialism stipulates that all of present reality is made up *only* by the configuration of the physical material objects in the world *and* the history leading up to that configuration. The human ideologies that *produced* that configuration are totally discounted.

“ultimately materialize an abstract ideal”: What were once abstract concepts, theories, and dreams have become a waking nightmare made manifest.

Joseph Gabel, in his book *False Consciousness*

False Consciousness: See Gabel, J., 1975.

draws a parallel between ideology and schizophrenia, this relationship should be considered in the context of the spectacle's domineering influence on the economic process of production that manifests concrete reality. Society has become what ideology already was. Wherever the spectacle dominates there is the promotion of its false perspective of reality, a disintegration of the practice of everyday life and the anti-dialectic false consciousness that accompanies it. This repression is imposed at every moment of daily life subjected to the spectacle. The repression of the practice of lived experience should be understood as an organized attempt to destroy the "faculty to encounter"—our very ability to perceive, experience, participate, and enjoy the realities of daily life; replacing this faculty with a *social hallucination*. The social hallucination is a falsified proxy for experience, an "illusion of encounter". Within this alienated terrain, we are unable to *recognize* others, and unable to recognize our own reality. It is here where ideology is home, and alienation has built its own reality for us each.

"illusion of encounter": The illusion of encounter is the experience of manufactured pseudo-events, participation in the spectating of real events, or witness of the non-events of mass media. That which was once real is replaced by that which is proxied, virtualized, or simply spectated upon.

"alienation has built its own reality for us each": The original French was "la séparation a bâti son monde" or "separation has built its world". Separation is felt concretely with the elimination of lived and therefore shareable experiences, entailing the direct replacement of social bonds with relations that are mediated by technology, relationships *to* technology rather than to each other.

"It is here where ideology is home, and alienation has built its own

“In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia”, says Gabel in *False Consciousness*, “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.” Accordingly, the spectacle disintegrates the universe of lived reality and human experience only to replace it with a life imprisoned behind screens, a flattened image of reality which has separated the individual from reality itself. Bound up within this false reality on all sides by screens, we become mere spectators unable to participate in meaningful activity, alienated from the events that make up the narrative of our lives, we no longer recognize our friends or family, or even ourselves. We only recognize the celebrities, those *fictitious interlocutors* of the spectacle as the mouthpiece of merchandise, subjecting us to a one-way dialog promoting the consumption of their commodities as the means to articulate our politics. The spectacle in its totality is our “mirror sign”, a false reflection mistaken for reality itself—yet we see nothing but dramatizations of escape from this socialized form of autism.

reality for us each.”: See Proverbs 9:1, “Wisdom has built her house, she has carved out its seven pillars.”

This thesis describes the apogee of the spectacle, a life in which one does not live through their own actions and experiences, but delegating them to a false mediator, in this case the celebrity. As the mediator themselves merely acts out these actions and experiences, no experience is ever actually experienced; thus all lived experience is staged, what remains of all our lives is a form of autism—disconnection from ourselves and others, surrounded by a cacophony of sensory input, or as schizophrenics, identifying more with the spectacle than with our lived experience. The spectacle is a pair of glasses we wear, “correcting” our vision of reality.

“In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia... seem closely interrelated”: See Gabel, J., 1975.

“mirror sign”: Translated from the French “signe du miroir” is a psychiatric term referring to a schizophrenics inability to recognize oneself in the mirror, and obsessively observing that illusion and mistaking it as a genuine encounter with another person.

The spectacle obliterates the boundary between self and world by crushing the self beneath a constant siege that saturates perceptions of lived experience with the continual presence / absence of the world. The spectacle obliterates the distinctions of true and false by burying the true lived experiences of reality beneath the *real presence* of falsehood maintained by the predominance of spectacular media. The individual is condemned to passive resignation to an alien everyday reality—where one has little to no real lived experience except through proxy or as mediated by media. Passive resignation results in symptoms of insanity, the belief that the magic of conspicuous consumption is the only pseudo-response available to the one-way communication that forms their reality—that the repetition of buying grants access to real lived experience, that is to say, buying things is lived experience. The consumers need to imitate the images and modes of life portrayed in the spectacle is an infantile one, the need to feel as participant in everyday life, the need for the pseudo-necessities generated by the spectacle itself, and finally the need determined by their actual dispossession of any actually lived experience. As Gabel described a pathology: “the abnormal need for representation here makes up for a torturing feeling of being on the edge of existence.”

“a constant siege that saturates perceptions of lived experience with the continual presence / absence of the world”: The original French is “qu’assiège la présence-absence du monde” or “besiege the presence-absence of the world”. Douglas Rushkoff refers to this concept as it manifests in technology as *presentism*, an obsession with the now at the expense of the future and the past, a continual present. In the face of this obsession, we “end up reacting to the ever-present assault of simultaneous impulses and commands.” See Rushkoff, D., 2013. Jenny Odell aptly described our contemporary state of reactionary social media as it saturates our experience thus: “social media so often feels like firecrackers setting off other firecrackers in a very small room that soon gets filled with smoke.” See Odell, J., 2019 (Pp. 60).

“the abnormal need for representation here makes up for a torturing feeling of being on the edge of existence.”: See Gabel, J.,

1975 (Pp. 199). This is to say, individuals attempt to recognize themselves and their subjective experience within the spectacle and reality, but are unable to find any as such. The only available reaction is to blindly search in the mode of consumption to fill a missing experience of reality with spectacular reality, thus exhibiting a form of schizophrenia.

220

What is considered academic discourse within the spectacular society is nothing but false consciousness—spectacular thought, the official lies sponsored by the spectacle. The critique offered by false consciousness is not capable of grasping at its own underlying ideology, its logic cannot truthfully know itself. The search for critical truth about the spectacle must be comprehensively true criticism. This is a critique performed in both theory and practice by those who are absolutely irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and who must admit the critique is nothing without them. Actions that rush to secure short term reformist concessions, or pseudo-revolutionary collective actions in the present moment are driven by the abstract desire for immediate effectiveness—falling prey to the ruling law of spectacular thought, adopting the spectacular mindset, one in which we can expect nothing more than to see an image of progress from the perspective of *tonights evening news*. This is how delerium forms within the ranks of the very camp that claims to be fighting it. The critique seeking to move beyond the spectacle must *know how to wait*.

“What is considered academic discourse... the critique is nothing without them.”: I’ve taken the liberty of changing this translation significantly by injecting phrases from previous theses by Debord, in hopes that it contextualizes his attack on spectacular thought as a critique blinded by the ideology of the spectacle.

“falling prey to the ruling law of spectacular thought...” This type of thought is evident as the reformist desire to move laterally from neoliberalism to something more like Keynesian social democracy—which puts limits on capital, limits that capital already knows how to overcome. Long-term solutions take long-term vision and practice,

there is no room for short-term compromise that only maintains the current reign of the spectacle.

221

Self-emancipation in the contemporary period is emancipation from our material basis within falsified reality. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can not be accomplished by the isolated individual nor by the atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the “class that is able to dissolve all classes” by returning power to the disalienating, participatory, and universalized form of democracy. This is the power of the workers councils, in which practical theory controls itself and self-validates with its own actions. This can only be made possible when individuals are “directly linked to world history”—where dialog within the council arms itself to defeat its own conditions.

“historic mission of establishing truth in the world”: C.f Marx, K., 1844. The full quotation is “The task of history is thus to establish the truth about this world once the otherworld has proved illusory.”

“class that is able to dissolve all classes”: Marx refers to the working class, quoted as “a class that is the dissolution of all classes.” Ibid.

“directly linked to world history”: See Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998 (Part I, Ch. 2, Section 5).

Glossary

Debord writes in a provocative style of classical French, often overloading terms with meanings defined in other Situationist texts. This makes reading the text impenetrable until his use of the terminology becomes apparent to the reader through its consistent use.

absolute lie (*mensonge absolu*)

The original French “mensonge absolu” or outright lying, or “the absolute lie” is an idea Debord developed and often refers to, encompassing an ideology of balanced contradictions that obscure the true nature of all social relations—ones based on falsehoods.

the autonomous economy (*l'économie autonome*)

In the spectacle, the product (i.e. the commodity) exists for its own sake, external to any human desire, or even society itself, organizing economic activity in order to reproduce itself.

bourgeoisie / bourgeois

A class of people with a certain cultural and financial capital belonging to the middle or upper middle class who stand opposite the proletariat class. From “those who live in the borough”, that is to say, the people of the city (including merchants and craftsmen), as opposed to those of rural areas. The city dweller was a legally defined class of the Middle Ages in France, that had the rights of citizenship and political rights that rural peasants did not have, as they were legally tied to the lands. Bourgeoisie is the class, Bourgeois is the individual.

chronicle (*la chronique*)

A story or narrative explaining the events of the *ruling classes* leading up to the present moment. The narrative is based upon a foundation of mythical origins, and the wars, conquests, and personal events of its leaders, leading directly to the contemporary moment.

commodity fetishism

Part of Karl Marx’s critique of political economy, the perception of the social relationships involved in production not as relationships among people, but as relationships among the money and commodities exchanged in market trade. As such, commodity fetishism transforms what were previously subjective, abstract aspects of economic value into objective, real things that people believe to have intrinsic value. The gradual process of commodity fetishism results in the alienation of the subject from contemporary historical time, which tends to eliminate all experience and participation, except for the empty participation in the consumption of ever-changing commodities.

consciousness

The emergence of a universal understanding within a class of its own unified history and the material conditions that constitute their cohesiveness as a class. When the working class generally has ‘consciousness’, they understand the nature and conditions of their own exploitation under capitalism. When this occurs, most Marxist thinkers would agree that the conditions are ripe for the working class to take control of the organization of society.

cyclical time (*le temps cyclique*)

The time of agrarian societies, one in which nature recurs with time, the coming and returning of the seasons and celestial bodies. Evidenced by nomadic peoples journey to hunt and their return to pasture according to the migratory patterns of wild game and local flora. This model of time dominated human societies until the creation of subsistence farming villages. See thesis 126.

détournement

The original French word (day-tor-nuh-maw) means a diversion, a detour, a rerouting, to misappropriate, to hijack on purpose. Turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself—as when slogans and logos are turned against their advertisers or the political status quo. It means *putting everything that was frozen back into play*, a game in which “all components of a past culture must be reinvested, or else disappear.” See Vaneigem, R., 2010 (Pp. 237).

diffuse spectacle

A society in which individuals willingly participate in a society that is both far more effective and efficient at subduing the masses, since it appears to empower individuals through consumer choice. The diffuse spectacle of modern capitalism reproduces itself by exploiting the spectator's desires and dissatisfaction with an endless cycle of promises to satiate these desires and then failing to do so; and yet offers another promise, an endless series of unsatisfying consumer promises.

historical time (*temps historique*)

A conception of time whereby the ruling class records their personal histories with the narratives of personal events (see also, chronicle), conquests, wars, battles and administrative events. These events mark changes in the material world that provide a framework for the general society to understand their place within reality.

ideology

The generally accepted beliefs (both conscious and unconscious) that are commonly accepted as true—which may not be. The hegemonic ideology is the socially normative meta-idea that serve to explain the existing conditions of reality. Debord argues that when the commodity becomes the “essential category” of society, that is, when the process of commodification has developed to its fullest extent, the image of society presented by commodity-ideology describes all life as constituted by ideas and objects that derive their value as commodities tradeable in terms of their exchange value (not necessarily even use value), this in turn colonizes all aspects of life and reduces life to representation, or as he calls it “non-life”.

irreversible time (*temps irréversible*)

As opposed to cyclical time, irreversible time is the perception of time as a series of linear developments of progress in terms of the economy, technology, knowledge, and personal chronicles. Within this framing, time does not recur, but progresses along a fixed trajectory to the horizon. This is the time of permanent agricultural settlements, villages, towns, and cities. This new form of irreversible time is irreversible in that it assumes the accumulation of knowledge can only develop with a forward trajectory.

lived time (*temps vécu*)

Debord's concept of lived time, originally "temps vécu" and also translated as "lived experience" is a concept where an individual can directly experience, participate, and contribute to the historical events and environment that defines the era in which they live. Thus, lived time is opposed to commodity fetishism.

petty-bourgeois

A social class comprising a small business owning class, and the upper-middle class whose personal identities are determined by an aspiration to the upper class bourgeoisie. Their political and economic positions tend to imitate the positions of the bourgeoisie class above them, although this position may not be in their own best interests.

pseudo-cyclical time (*temps pseudo-cyclique*)

Also called “consumable time” and “free time”, this is time created outside the time spent working (see time of production), largely weekends, holidays, vacations, and festivals. It is the same as the time of production in that it is a homogeneous, fungible, and equally segmented unit of time. This time is subservient to time of production in that it is created as a by-product of labor, given as a gift to the workers from the owners of the time of production. It is valued more highly by the workers because of the ability to consume this time freely.

proletariat

Working-class people, contemporarily the “blue collar working class.” From Latin proletarius “producing offspring”, is the class of wage-earners in an economic society whose only possession of significant material value is their labor-power. A member of such a class is a proletarian.

recuperation (*récupération*)

Recuperation is the process by which politically radical ideas and images are diluted, twisted, co-opted, absorbed, defused, incorporated, annexed and commodified within media culture and bourgeois society, and thus become interpreted through a neutralized, innocuous or more socially conventional perspective.

separate power

A form of power inaccessible to the laboring and agrarian classes.

time of production (*temps du travail*)

Time an individual spends working. The exploitable time of the laboring class. In an industrialized society, it is the time that has been atomized, segmented, allocated, and turned into a commodity where each slice of equal interval is equivalent in value and indistinguishable. These slices of time are bought and sold on a marketplace for labor. This time is the inverse of consumable time.

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Guy Debord (right)

Guy Debord was the most influential figure in the Situationist International, the subversive group that inspired the May 1968 revolt in France. His book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, originally published in Paris in 1967, has been translated into more than twenty other languages and is arguably the most important radical book of the 20th century.



Ron. Adams (left)

Ron. Adams lives in Somerville Massachusetts. His writing covers the intersection of media, technology, and power. He discovered the work of Debord and The Situationists through his participation in Occupy Wall Street in 2011. His writing is online at <https://Oxadada.pub>.

