

WE
UNHAPPY
FEW

The Communist Group

Communism will be an intense and unpredictable struggle for life on the part of the species, which no one has yet brought to a conclusion, since the sterile and pathological solitude of the Ego does not deserve the name of life, just as the treasure of the miser is not wealth, not even personal wealth.¹

1. Amadeo Bordiga,
'The Guignol in History', *Il
programma comunista* 7
(April 3-17, 1953).

THE CASE OF THE PRAXIS GROUP

A group of people who met through their participation in various struggles decide to produce a theoretical magazine. What they produce could be described as a Marxist journal for anarchists, combining reports of struggles and movements, many of which they participated in, with longer historical and theoretical material. It also embodies a set of assumptions about the role of those who want revolution, assumptions that could be summarized along the following lines: you intervene or involve yourself in struggles not as teachers or provocateurs, but as fellow proletarians who share a desire for revolution. While ready to make friends and comrades in the struggle, you never make growing a group the goal. Instead, you push struggles as far as they will go by being open to the radical potential of any given moment. You ruthlessly oppose bureaucratic manipulators of all stripes, and all those who for whatever reason are wedded to the return to normality. To do this you must draw on the rich history of proletarian struggle, a history that—from the Paris Commune to May '68, from the emergence of workers' councils in the early twentieth century through to the refusal of work and the "Movement of '77"—demonstrates again and again the spontaneous capacity of proletarians to leap ahead of their situation, to educate their educators.

This way of orienting itself to struggles worked well for the group both in its practice and in its capacity to make theoretical sense of what was going on in the world. However, when confronting a sophisticated theory that challenged some of these assumptions, the group proved unable to deal with the crisis that the new ideas provoked. A division emerged between a group orthodoxy and dissidents attracted to the new ideas. The group's internal discussion, which had been characterised by an openness and seriousness towards critique, became polarised between these two sides: one side feeling it had given the discussion as much time as it deserved, the other wanting to pursue it to the end. The discussion became stuck. Following a logic of conflict escalation—trust broke down, motives became suspected. One side argued that the ideas it was fed up with did not really make sense or add up to that much. They suspected that behind the other side's insistence on pursuing the theoretical discussion there was a destructive impulse towards the group's

previously shared aim. The other side saw a defensiveness and bad faith in the first side's argumentation, which they traced back to the discussion, implicitly questioning some key unstated assumptions of the group. At a certain point, the group seemed to arrive at a thoughtful way of going forward. The orthodox side agreed to develop their critique of the new ideas. Although this course of action seemed to offer the possibility of real progress, it was suddenly abandoned. The orthodox side moved from talk to action, expelling the dissidents without any further discussion. Thus, despite the group having enshrined a critique of the sect-like behaviour prevalent in other groups, it had split and had done so in an acrimonious and unpleasant way, which had a wrenching, traumatic character for both sides. Those who had left or been expelled reformed as a discussion group taking a great deal of time to work through what had happened. The residual group redirected itself to practical matters, to what it saw as its prime task—the production of the magazine—and rarely discussed what had happened and why.

THE CASE OF THE THEORY GROUP

A small group of individuals meet regularly, reading and discussing a variety of texts, talking about whatever is raised that is considered worth talking about. The group imposes a very strict frame for its discussion: everyone is expected to do the reading, come to every meeting, and be committed to the process for at least a couple of years. The notion is that such rigid boundaries will allow the content of the group—the conversational process—to be unconstrained and attain a depth that would not be achievable if the commitment to the process was less demanding. Whilst an interest in struggles, in communism and in the revolutionary overcoming of capitalism forms a background to why the group had come together, this purpose is not held to tightly in the conversation, which is instead allowed to take its own course. There is an idea of being maximally open to what is happening in the world rather than trying to fit it into any existing theoretical framework. One or more people take up subjects for research with the intention of writing something and bringing it back to the group. There is an idea of eventually publishing in some form, but there is a desire not to rush into it. There is a faith in the idea that if one takes one's time

something truly worthwhile may emerge. That approach seems to be paying off. The discussions are rich and creative. There seems to be something like a collective field between the participants: ideas flow freely, with each adding to others' contributions without much sense of anyone owning the ideas. There is a shared sense of making progress together and that something worthwhile, even important, is developing. The comparison is made to the good feeling of a band jamming whose music is really coming together.

However, at other points, relations between individuals and between individuals and the group as a whole become troubled. Distrust, hostility, even paranoia emerge that negatively mirror the intensity of the positive feelings when the group is working well. At times what is going on feels for some members strange, distressing, even a bit mad. At such moments the group which seemed to thrive on the freely given creativity of its members suddenly makes great demands of time and emotional effort to understand and manage its internal tensions. With some members engaged in post-graduate academia, one fear that emerges is that the ideas freely given to the group's collective discussion may be appropriated by some members to pursue individual academic careers. When one member states his desire to go abroad to study and requests altering the group's way of operating so that he can continue to be involved in some way, a strong reaction is provoked. His departure is felt by everyone as a big loss and a threat to the group's continuity. However, while some might be willing to facilitate "membership from afar", others feel the group must take this member's decision to leave the country as a complete break; this, or they themselves cannot continue with the group. The group is consumed by a tension that is only resolved when this member "agrees" to cease group membership. Less than a year later, an individual who has played a leading role in the group resigns, expressing exhaustion with the "politics of groupuscule life". Going forward, efforts by new people to become involved are as often as not difficult either for the new members, the existing ones or both. The group survives these and other stresses, eventually producing a publication that has a measure of success, but the feeling in the group rarely touches either the exhilarating creativity or the tension and struggle of the earlier period.

These stories express some of the gratifying but also frustrating and unpleasant sides of being together in groups, in this case "political" groups. Neither group were sects in the normal sense: they were not orientated towards recruitment and numeric growth but focused on specific tasks. They were composed of people with a degree of maturity and experience in struggles and theory. Indeed, the way in which the Praxis Group related to struggles (an orientation largely shared by the Theory Group) is perhaps about as good an approach as can be suggested. Participation in struggles on such a basis creates moments of connection with others that can be profoundly transformative. However, the emotionally charged way some of the conflicts were expressed underscores a darker side of group life that is also a common experience.

What was striking about the experience of the Praxis Group was that it prided itself on openness and non-dogmatism towards struggles, but in its own discussions succumbed to an intractable conflict resolved only by resorting to actions that it did not even try to explain rationally. The Praxis Group pattern of conflict between a side representing the established position and a dissenting tendency is one often repeated in political groups, frequently leading to acrimonious and venomous splits that those outside the group — and even participants themselves — often find hard to understand.

In the case of the Theory Group, there was a sudden switch to hostility and distrust after it had functioned at a high degree of almost effortless cooperation. This case captures something experienced by other groups and projects we have heard of, namely an inability to sustain themselves at an initially exhilarating, intensely rewarding, and high level of cooperation and shared creativity without at some point crashing into an opposite experience of suspicion, mistrust, and antagonism.

These experiences seemed quite baffling until we came across some psychoanalytic theories of group dynamics. These theories can help explain these and other cases, and we will return to them later.² However, we might wonder what relevance such small group experience really has to getting beyond capitalism...

If "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves";³

2. See parts III and IV below.

3. 'Address and Provisional Rules of the Working Men's International Association', 1864 (MECW 20), 14.

if communism is a matter of billions ceasing through revolution to produce and reproduce capital, changing their form of life and thus themselves, then how do we understand the existence and activity of those “minorities” (including ourselves), who in the apparent absence of such a general movement develop an explicit consciousness of the need for “revolution” or “communism”? Do they have certain “tasks” now or in the future? Is it possible to be revolutionary in the absence of revolution or to be communist in the absence of communism? If not, then how do we understand ourselves and our activity?

We?

This is a text about the *we*. Who do we think we are? How do we understand what we are doing? Naturally, we do not mean only the “we” that produces this journal but a wider we whose boundary remains unspecified. This text attempts to look in two directions at once. In one lies the group phenomena that will produce communism—this will clearly be at the level of class struggle and social movements, mass strikes, occupations, assemblies, crowds, riots, insurrections, and ultimately revolution(s) and communisation. In the other direction is the experience of being in a small group, more or less formal, orientated mostly to thinking about capitalism and the real movement of its overcoming. Drawing on a distinction made by Henri Simon, we can say that the former phenomena display the features of *spontaneous organisation* while the latter is characterised by forms of *willed organisation*.⁴

Spontaneous organisation emerges from a given collectivity acting to defend its interests in an immediate, concrete situation and is able to change its forms and goals as that situation develops. By contrast, willed organisation is defined by a “a limited (often very limited) number of people” coming together on the basis of some pre-established ideas of their interests, which they then attempt to promote.⁵

Such a polarity corresponds to an experience of the division between the small formal or informal willed groups we participate in and the wider, dynamic movements and collectivities of struggle that rise and

fall with a logic that goes beyond our wills. Those involved in willed organisation are often very attracted to movements of spontaneous organisation because they recognise it is the pole out of which social transformation will come.

What is the relation between the willed communist group explicitly thinking about the overcoming of capitalism and the spontaneous group phenomena that will carry out that overcoming? There is a naïve conception among some communist groups, in which they feel that their key role is to persuade other people of the validity of their ideas and/or to lead the masses or class in its struggles. Faced with their lack of impact on the world, their main activity often becomes to increase in numbers—build their group, organisation or party—so that they can have greater influence.

Of course, within the spontaneous organisation of existing struggles and social movements, there are tasks performed by those involved. Often those performing these tasks or taking such roles emerge from the situation of struggle itself; at other times, a role can be played by those connecting to such struggles from a pre-existing political identity or “willed group” involvement. In a revolutionary movement, there would also be tasks to be done. However, it is not at all clear that there are *revolutionary* tasks in relation to *existing* social movements and struggles. Nor is it clear in any future revolutionary conjuncture what role (good or bad) those with pre-existing political identities will be able to play.

It is with some caution then that we attend to the question of who we are and what we do in terms of the pole of willed organisation. The focus on the small group or milieu can look like navel-gazing in the face of the enormity of developments in the world that seem to beg for attention. Talking about who we are, even in a critical way, risks falling into issues of identity formation and position-taking, and is reminiscent of some of the bad habits of unreconstructed “revolutionaries” who spend most of their time talking about (and to) themselves and their “movement”.

A relatively healthy impulse perhaps would be to avoid the identitarian question entirely—what matters is to express theoretically what one is able to learn from struggles. If, as suggested by Debord

5. Ibid. This distinction has the merit of not posing the ‘problem of organisation’ as one of spontaneity on the one hand and organisation and consciousness on the other. In Simon’s formulation consciousness and organisation exist at both poles but in different forms.

4. Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organization’, *Anarchist Review* 5 (Cienfuegos 1979). Henri Simon was a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SouB), and *Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières* (ICO), and since 1975 has produced *Echanges et Mouvement* where this text first appeared. For an account of his life see the film: ‘Henri Simon – The Story of a (Non-) Militant’ (labornet 2018).

(following Marx and Hegel), theory is the expression of our times and its struggles in thought, it is a matter of indifference who expresses it.⁶ Yet, of course, those who actually produce works of theory like Hegel's *Logic*, Marx's *Capital*, or Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* do tend to be people with time to read, to discuss, and to think.

As Wilfred Bion suggests, if the "I" or the "we" of a statement is to the fore, then that is a sign that something false is at work.⁷ Ideas that seem indelibly imprinted with the supposed identity of those who have them—whether an individual ("this is my opinion"), a group ("here is what we think"), or even an imagined lineage such as Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, anarcho-syndicalism, council and left communism, or situationism⁸—are nearly always suspect. Even if such traditions emerged once as a dynamic way of making sense of the experience of a period of class struggle, they tend to become hardened frameworks into which experience is forced to fit.

One can see such "isms" as so many apparatuses for thinking which in fact have generally become apparatuses for *not* thinking too much. We would hope that the texts that have appeared in *Endnotes* simply give expression to some true thoughts about the world, about capitalism and the movement of its overcoming, rather than imply our identity as a group, as individual authors, or as a political tendency.

However, we are, on some level, also a group composed of a number of individuals, and our participation in larger group processes and struggles are also mediated through this. As we draw from our own experience of being a small (anti-)political group oriented to the development of theory, we are aware that this is a pretty peculiar and unfashionable experience. However, the task that we set ourselves—thinking about capitalism and the possibility of its overcoming—is one that we suggest is not so alien, at least to our readers, and is perhaps, at some level, "in everybody's heads". We engage in self-reflection about what we do and how we do it. That is why, in this text, we are sharing aspects of how we do this.

6. As we shall see, the Situationist International (SI) actually felt that being able to give expression to such theory placed heavy demands on the revolutionary organisation and the individuals who composed it.

7. See back cover quotation and part IV below.

8. The SI's antipathy to this term and their critique of pro-situs showed an awareness of the problem even if it was not overcome.

The Impotence of the Revolutionary group?

In a still-provocative text published in 1939, Sam Moss, a member of a council communist group in the USA, mercilessly undermined the significance which "revolutionaries" and "revolutionary groups" assign themselves.⁹

Moss starts off from how the problem appears: on the one hand, there is a "we"—that of "revolutionaries"—and on the other, there are the masses or the working class. The former wish to overthrow capitalism but are incapable of doing so, while the latter, the only possible agent of a revolutionary struggle, are concerned with everyday needs and not the revolution. Asking himself about the reason for this apparent difference in objectives between the masses and "revolutionists", he argues that while the masses are socialised by capitalist culture to "play the role of machines", the "revolutionists" are a harmless "byproduct". For Moss the masses are an understandable product of the society while the "revolutionists" are merely "deviations from the working class" representing "isolated cases of workers who, because of unique circumstances in their individual lives, have diverged from the usual course of development".¹⁰

Going further, Moss suggests the ground of the difference is that the "revolutionists" are "unsuccessful careerists"—workers who have acquired an intellectual interest and a higher level of education than their fellows, but whose personal advance has been blocked. He continues that although their efforts to help the rest of the class may appear to come "from the noblest of motives, certainly it doesn't take much to see that one suffers for another only when he has identified that other's sorrow with his own".¹¹

Separated from their fellow workers who don't share their concerns, the "revolutionists" tend to unite outside of the workplace with others like themselves, people who are interested in changing society. Yet these groupings, in wishing to influence the class struggle in non-revolutionary circumstances, are faced with a dilemma: either they can have an effect but only by adapting themselves to the limits of the movement—thus no longer being revolutionary—or they can maintain their revolutionary principles but their intervention will thus be lacking in effect.

9. Sam Moss, 'On the Impotence of Revolutionary Groups', *Living Marxism* vol. 4 no. 7 (1939).

10. *Ibid.*, 216.

11. *Ibid.*

Moss maintains that such groups “have done nothing to affect the course of history either for good or ill”.¹²

The separate existence of “revolutionary groups” is not, then, an expression of their revolutionary nature and function, but a product of this non-revolutionary situation, and “when the revolution does come, their numbers will be submerged within it, not as functioning organizations, but as individual workers”.¹³

A key aspect of Moss’s argument is the way he undercuts the justifications that “non-Leninist” groups and individuals—such as his own avowedly anti-vanguardist council communists—use for their own activity. Noting that council communists and others emphasize their difference from Leninist groups by claiming they do not want to “lead the working class”,¹⁴ he brutally points out that this amounts only to an ideological difference to which corresponds no practical material difference in such groups’ exterior relation to the working class.¹⁵ He also points out that if an “anti-Leninist” revolutionary group against all likelihood succeeded in their stated purpose of escalating the class struggle, it would be playing exactly the “leadership” role they reproach the “Leninists” for wishing to perform.

Having given up on the idea that the revolutionary group can escalate the class struggle, Moss outlines a more realistic conception of how “what we do” might relate to revolution. Rather than delude ourselves with illusory stories about the “role of revolutionaries” and the persuasive power of ideas, we should recognise that our existence and activity emerges from a personal—one might say emotional—need based on the peculiarities of our life histories. Moss notes that while in present circumstances only a small minority feel the need for this activity, and they cannot lead or persuade others who do not share it, their existence suggests that when large masses are induced to feel a similar need—not by peculiar personal circumstances, but by the objective situation—they will act in the same way, namely to come together and use whatever weapons they can find. Moss suggests

12. Ibid., 217. Acknowledging that there is a contrast between today’s groupuscules and the ‘mass revolutionary organisations of the past’ which might have appeared to have more impact, Moss asks pertinently ‘but how revolutionary were they?’

13. Ibid., 219.

14. As a wag put it: ‘not even if they asked us!’

15. ‘Like them, we function outside the spheres of production, where the class struggle is fought; like them, we are isolated from the large mass of workers. We differ only in ideology from all the other groups, but then it is only in ideology on which all the other groups differ. Practically there is no difference between all groups.’ Ibid., 218.

that when they act, it will not be because their ideas have been changed but because of a changed sense of necessity, which when acted upon, will result in a change of their ideas. In the meantime, he suggests that while other groups overemphasise the importance of ideas and thus of themselves as the carriers of those ideas, “we wish to see the truth of each situation”.¹⁶

16. Ibid., 219.

So what are we? — Deviants and freaks.

Why do we do what we do? — Because it serves a personal need.

What can we do then? — We can at least see the truth of the situation, perhaps.

Moss’s scepticism hits a chord. There are hundreds of “revolutionary” groups, often expressing adherence to particular ideologies which are defined by a prominent thinker of the past, often with the terms “marxist”, “communist”, “anarchist”, “socialist” or “workers” in their titles, often claiming to be parties, or seeing themselves as embryonic poles of regroupment for a future (or imaginary) party. An understandable reaction to these groups and much of this activity is scepticism. One may find some of these groups more agreeable than others, and/or find some of their members more agreeable than others, but as a whole, they paint rather a sad picture. There is so much unconsidered and naïve presupposition, so much evasion, illusion, and delusion, brazen mismatches between what people actually do and what they think they do, between the story they tell themselves and the reality of their impact on the world, between the grandiosity of their ambition and the misery of their actuality. The great deal of time and energy these groups expend simply on maintaining themselves is also notable, and from time to time, they suffer crises, often resulting in venomous splits and fallouts.

Many prefer to avoid that world of formalised groups and exist loosely in a scene or milieu, perhaps engaging in more modest projects. However, even those who have never felt attracted to or are personally repelled by participation in groupuscules may remain in a certain sense part of the “communist group”, defined as the set of people oriented to the communist overcoming of capitalism.¹⁷ And it should be

noted that illusions are not restricted to formal groups, but also exist among informal milieus and scenes,¹⁸ and, of course, even within individuals themselves.

The critique of the failings of other people and groups rarely extends to oneself, and indeed such criticisms of others can act as a binding agent for those sharing one's prejudices. We can all experience some of the difficult and even crazy stuff that tends to afflict formalised groups. Think, for example, of the way in which, within informal scenes as much as in organised groups, conflict is often not about what it purports to be about; how others' behaviour, particularly when it is seen to transgress certain norms, can become the subject of scandal and intrigue; how one is pulled to take sides in petty personalised disputes; how emotionally charged arguments can become; how one can feel sucked into certain kinds of behaviours and roles; how painful and personal political fall-outs can be; how nasty people can be to each other. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that both formalised radical groups and looser milieus are prone to forms of madness from time to time.

In relation to the pretensions of political groups, we and others often reach for certain Marx quotations. There are his dense "Theses on Feuerbach", in which Marx criticised those who divide society into two parts, one of which has the role to educate the other, and argues that social and self-change must be understood as a unitary revolutionary practice in which the educator must be educated.¹⁹

There is his insistence, in a letter to Ruge, that "we" do not have principles and doctrines to give to the world and its struggles, but rather that our task is to help the world become conscious of what it is already fighting for.²⁰

Then there is the line from *The German Ideology* about communism not being an ideal that we seek to realise but rather the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.²¹

17. If not, it is unlikely they would be reading this text.

18. See Tiqqun, 'Theses on the Terrible Community' in *Tiqqun 2* (October 2001).

19. 'The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.' Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 1845 (MECW 5), 4.

20. 'We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to.' Marx, 'Letter to Ruge', September 1843 (MECW 3), 144.

While the thrust of all these statements is to put the "role of communists" in perspective, and the "real movement" notion, in particular, seems to be a fundamental part of Marx's (Hegelian) contribution to communist theory, it is not at all obvious what behaviour they actually imply. A notion of the real movement can, it seems, mean (and justify) anything, everything and nothing. Indeed it seems to have a danger of acting as a comfort to justify whatever sort of activity one is already committed to. If there is a movement of the abolition of the existing conditions happening before our eyes it is not at all clear what this is and how we might relate to it or participate in it.

There are three main approaches or threads that have particularly informed our understanding of this question of who we are and what we do. These approaches can be filed under the following headings:

1. Conceptions and *critiques of organisation* that emerged in the second revolutionary wave of the 20th century, primarily among councilists, situationists and left communists.
2. The "open Marxist" understanding of theory as based on a *conversation* involving mutual recognition, practical reflexivity, and immanent critique, as exemplified in some texts by Richard Gunn.
3. Psycho-dynamic conceptions of *groups and thinking*, especially those associated with Wilfred Bion.

These are approaches that we have found useful, which have and continue to inform our activity, so we offer them here. The essential idea is that these threads can inform each other, making up for weaknesses or blind spots of each approach on its own.

We do not think that these approaches exhaust the resources that can be drawn on. Reading Gunn is not necessary to make a critical and open use of Marx, nor is it necessary to know Bion's theory of thinking in order to think. The post '68 debates on organisation and the party that we find significant are not the only ones worth looking at. Moreover, much of what any of these sources tell us can be discovered or rediscovered in other ways. What matters is learning from

21. 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.' Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1846 (MECW 5), 49.

experience, including the experience of trying to think for oneself and with others. The abstraction of this text has to be, ultimately, brought phenomenologically back to one's own experience. This is something we all have to do in our own way, but we expect people to recognise themselves and their experiences in what follows, and we think what we have found useful might be of use to others.

I. COUNCILISM AND ITS CRITIQUE

In the matter of organisation this, then, is the dilemma of the radical. In order to do something of social significance, actions must be organised. Organised actions, however, turn into capitalistic channels. It seems that in order to do something now, one can do only the wrong thing and in order to avoid false steps, one should undertake none at all. The political mind of the radical is destined to be miserable; it is aware of its utopianism and it experiences nothing but failures. In mere self-defence, the radical stresses spontaneity always, unless he is a mystic, with the secretly-held thought that he is talking nonsense.¹

As has been dealt with elsewhere, the conception of revolution as "communisation" with which *Endnotes* has identified itself is a product of the second revolutionary wave of the twentieth century.² Specifically, it develops in France in the years after the most famous event of that wave — May '68. It emerged in response to the struggles of the period and the attempts to make sense of this wave of struggles and how revolution and communism were being posed in a new way. One of the central ways in which revolution seemed to be posed differently was around what had been known as "the question of organisation".

From 1917 to 1968

It seemed, at one time, that "what was to be done" was obvious. In the 19th and early 20th centuries there were large groups within the working class that claimed to be for revolution and communism; there was an international workers' movement with mass organisations — unions and parties — adhering at least nominally to revolutionary ideologies such as the Kautsky / Lenin social democratic idea of revolution, or a syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist one. To be a communist or revolutionary seemed to amount to joining such organisations or at least being part of a movement that these organisations did much to define.

1. Paul Mattick, 'Spontaneity and Organisation' in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Merlin 1978), 120.

2. See for example Endnotes, 'Bring Out Your Dead' in *Endnotes* 1 (2008), and Aufheben, 'Communist Theory: Beyond the Ultra-left' in *Aufheben* 11 (2003).

However, in the revolutionary wave that ended WWI, and in Spain later, these organisations were not merely defeated in their attempt to deliver the socialism or anarchism that was taken to be their goals. Rather, when put to the test, they seemed to actively betray or suppress the “revolution”. The parties of the Second International overwhelmingly supported WWI and the dominant party of that International—the Social Democratic Party of Germany—then employed proto-fascists to drown the German Revolution in blood. The Third International imagined itself as refounding “revolutionary Marxism” but soon showed itself to be subordinated to the internal policies of the Bolsheviks in Russia who became engaged in a “primitive socialist accumulation” whose main difference from the ordinary capitalist variety that it copied was the terror and rapidity with which it turned peasants into proletarians.³ In Spain, the anarchist leadership of the CNT/FAI joined a republican government, and when anarchist workers resisted that government’s Stalinist-led police attack on them, the anarchist leaders told them the barricades must be torn down.⁴ The very groups that distinguished themselves from the rest of the class as its revolutionary component, and which might at times have played a revolutionary part, also took active counter-revolutionary roles.

One reaction in the subsequent period was to cast the issue as one of betrayal. New groups were formed identifying with a view on the earlier history, an understanding of where things went wrong, and of what lessons have been learnt or which leader or tendency was right. In the wave of struggles in the sixties and seventies, such groups grew somewhat in numbers. However, their attempts to replace the main reformist organisations, and to play the heroic role they imagined their preferred ancestors had done in an earlier period, were unsuccessful. While in the previous period “revolutionary” organisations of the working class had displayed a tendency for unity, Trotskyist and Maoist efforts in the latter period generally displayed a tendency towards fragmentation, competition, sect-like existence, and often a disappearance or re-absorption into the social democratic politics they nominally tried to replace. An alternative to the organisational

3. It was perversely this very success in national capitalist terms that led to the continuing attraction of such politics in the colonial and ex-colonial parts of the world where ‘catch-up modernisation’ was the order of the day.

4. See Paul Mattick, ‘The Barricades Must be Torn Down’ in *International Communist Correspondence* vol. 3 no. 7–8 (1937).

and party fetishism of these groups was the perspective of autonomy and council communism.

The re-emergence and re-eclipse of council communism

For many who came together on the streets and in the occupations of ‘68, a dominant perspective was the rejection of “party communism”, whether of the official communist variety or that of the Trotskyists and Maoists, in favour of autonomous action by the workers themselves and the idea of “All Power to the Workers’ Councils!”. The alternative to organisations like the French Communist Party (PCF) and the trade unions, which opposed themselves to the May movement, was seen to be not a new revolutionary organisation but instead working class self-organisation and autonomy, with the revolution seen as the formation of councils and, by means of them, the management of society by the workers themselves.⁵

May ‘68 seemed to vindicate a “council communist” alternative to the failure of the Russian Revolution.⁶ Contrary to the accounts of betrayal offered by Trotskyism, Maoism, and anarchism, and their linked response of forming new organisations, council communism appeared to provide a more theoretically plausible explanation of what had gone wrong with the workers’ movement and “communism” in the twentieth century. Trotskyism held up the advocate of militarisation of labour and suppressor of Kronstadt as a libertarian or democratic alternative to Stalin, “anti-revisionist” Maoism saw through the Russian lie only to replace it with the Chinese lie, and classical anarchism blamed the failure of Spanish anarchism on the betrayal of its beautiful idea by its leaders. The council communist account of the thwarting of workers’ autonomy and self-organisation seemed to reach a deeper level of explanation. It was not one or the other leader that was the problem, but the whole phenomenon of reliance on leadership and bureaucratic organisation which could be contrasted to workers’ self-activity and autonomous organisation. This

5. As a comrade recently observed: the revolutionary wave of which May ‘68 was emblematic was a ‘convergence of two revolts: on the one hand, revolt by the working class against the background of disintegration of the Fordist compromise which had bolstered productivity throughout the period after the last world war. ... on the other hand, revolt by the younger generation against a repressive and ossified society barely able to cope with the postwar population explosion. Taking various forms, this revolt gradually affected young people of all social classes, not only in France but in all Western countries, and even further afield.’ Lola Miesseroff, ‘50 years later in France: From May 68 to the Yellow Vests’, June 2019.

conception suggests a struggle within the class between its own capacities and will to organise its struggles and its tendency to put its trust in something outside itself.

The reappearance of the ideas of council communism in '68 might seem surprising. Council communism as an organised tendency with roots in the German revolution had more or less ceased to exist by the end of WW2.⁷ However, in the post-war period and especially after the re-emergence of councils in Hungary in 1956, there had emerged groups on the edge of the workers' movement — dissident Trotskyists, anarchists, operaismo / autonomists, "anti-authoritarian" and "libertarian" socialists etc. — who, in opposition to the official workers' organisations, took up aspects of council communist critique and especially the perspective of workers' autonomy. In France, the recovery of this perspective had been particularly influential through the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SouB).⁸ Thus by the late sixties, a council communist reading of the failure of the Russian Revolution and the workers' movement generally, and its attempt to articulate an anti-Bolshevik communism, had a widespread influence. There was a fit between the anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian spirit of the revolts of that time and the tenets of council communist critique. In particular, the reactionary role played by the unions and official communist parties — and workers' opposition to it — seemed to support a notion of an autonomous workers' struggle separate from these organisational forms. Additionally, although council communism and many of these new tendencies held essentially workerist perspectives, it was possible to some extent to adapt the problematic of autonomy as a means of understanding some of the new struggles inside and outside of production — in the revolt of youth and the counter-cultural movements of the time, in struggles around race, gender, sexuality, etc. — struggles which the primary workers' organisations

6. Our attempt here is not to give a complete account of the events but to address how certain organisational perspectives played out among people who thought of themselves for revolution. For a good appraisal of the limits of what actually happened among the workers see Bruno Astarian, *The French strikes of May–June 1968* (Libcom 2013).

7. A partial exception was the Netherlands, see Philippe Bourrinet, 'The *Communistenbond Spartacus* and the Council-Communist Current (1942–68)' in *The Dutch and German Communist Left* (Brill 2016).

8. SouB had dissolved in 1965 but its ideas remained influential as did groups that either originated in it or were influenced by it. Indication of the significance of such ideas can be seen in Daniel & Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (Andre Deutsch 1968) and Richard Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism* (Penguin 1975).

were often indifferent or hostile to, but which a new generation was attracted to.⁹ The perspective of autonomy thus spoke to the general libertarian or anti-authoritarian mood of large parts of the movements of the time, in which the revolution was seen not as the management of society by a new power but the achievement of autonomy in all areas of life.

But if there was widespread agreement that the ideas of "workers' self-activity" and "all power to the workers' councils" represented an alternative to the Leninist dreams of the small Maoist and Trotskyist group(uscules), there was disagreement on what this meant in terms of activity. Here it is useful to contrast the proper "councilism" represented in '68 by the group *Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières* (ICO)¹⁰ with the understanding of the more famous Situationist International (SI). The perspectives of both these groups had some influence on the situation. While the former was characterised by a deep scepticism about the importance of "revolutionaries" and incredulity about the narratives they tell about their importance, the latter was known for the significance it attributed to the revolutionary movement and itself as its most advanced component.

The Councilism of ICO

The councilist current represented in '68 by ICO and continued to this day by the group *Echanges et Mouvement* starts from a recognition that the question "what we should do" which would-be revolutionary groups pose themselves, is generally a function of their position "outside" a workplace or other situations of struggle.¹¹ Feeling a need to engage with those directly involved in struggle, especially "the workers", the would-be revolutionary will try to influence with leaflets or papers offering, if not explicitly, "leadership", then at least "advice" and "lessons". Or, perhaps, recognising the failure of such external intervention,

9. As Henri Simon writes, 'the new attitudes of students, women, homosexuals and so on, the attitude of workers towards work, all these reflect the desire of those concerned to manage their struggle for themselves and by themselves'. Henri Simon, *The New Movement* (Solidarity 1975), 3.

10. ICO was a more or less direct continuation of ILO (*Informations Liaisons Ouvrières*) a group that had separated from SouB in 1958 because of the more interventionist way Castoriadis wanted to take the organisation. The change in name — from *liaisons* to *correspondances* — indicates the more councilist direction in which the group was moving.

11. We say 'dominant' position because in the aftermath of '68 ICO was infused with individuals and groups with a variety of perspectives until its dissolution in 1972. →

the most militant may try to insert themselves into the situation by going into the factories or wherever the action is expected to be. The “councilist” refuses the desire for such a “role of revolutionaries”. Beyond any immediate activity in their own place of work, councilists largely circulate information and analyses, seeing themselves as simply trying to understand “what people actually do and the real meaning of these actions”.¹²

This scepticism about the importance of “revolutionaries” and their political “intervention” in these struggles has a strong plausibility when it comes to workplace struggles. It is certainly the case that in such conflicts the distinction between those inside and outside the workplace is usually fundamental. What to do from the “inside” is immediately apparent, the possibilities defined by the workers’ positions, their roles in the enterprise, the enterprise’s place in the economy, their relations with those they work with, etc. By comparison to this, what one can do effectively from “outside” is usually not much, unless it is an activity requested by those directly involved.

The collecting and analysis of information about struggles can be a very involving militant activity,¹³ but to limit one’s activity to this role is unattractive for most politicians and “would-be-revolutionaries”. An oft-repeated claim has been that the councilist position implies being passive spectators of the class struggle and a mere mailbox for the class.¹⁴ Most of those drawn to the idea of revolution tend to assert that there must be something more for “us” to do. The councilist will argue that those who think this “councilist” role is too limited are usually impervious to the poor results of their attempts to “do something more”, to play a revolutionary role. As Henri Simon argues, the form of existence of the “willed group”, its organisation around a shared set of ideas rather than the shared situation from which spontaneous organisation arises, leads to certain determined kinds of action: “more often than not a limited

What we might call the original ICO perspective was then carried on by *Echanges*. We will run together the positions of ILO, ICO and *Echanges* because they have an essential continuity, one represented by the “non-militant” Henri Simon, to whom some of the main texts are attributed.

12. *Echanges et Mouvement*, ‘What is *Echanges et Mouvement* as a Group?’ *Collective Action Notes* 14–15 (1996), 31.

13. Indeed if a defining feature of such councilism is a skepticism towards organisation, a remarkably consistent and determined will to organise can be seen in the ILO/ICO/*Echanges* continuity.

14. In actual fact, the desire to be a mailbox for the class, i.e. for globally billions of people, is a very ambitious and quite unrealisable desire.

collectivity speaks to and acts towards a larger one, in a direction which is inevitably that of people who ‘know’ (or think they know) towards those ‘who do not know’ (or know imperfectly) and who must be persuaded”.¹⁵

By contrast, what is needed for the councilist is to learn from those struggles and to resist temptations to offer advice or direction. The latter is seen “as an elitist concept created by those who seek to use and dominate workers’ struggles”.¹⁶

With the last line we see that a realistic sobriety and justified scepticism about the pretensions of willed groups¹⁷ slips into something else — the view that such groups and their “unwanted interventions” are a major obstacle to the autonomous development of the struggle. From the councilist perspective the mentality of the “willed group”, this sense of a determinant role, is normally of little consequence, but in times of struggle it is seen to have a detrimental effect. Such groups are seen to relate to the spontaneous organisation as an object, at best perhaps going along with the movement while “trying to bend” it “towards its own ideology and objectives”. One senses here an inversion: the revolutionaries whose sense of their necessity and importance is seen as mistaken, are nonetheless granted a powerful role, that of recuperating and fucking up the struggles that would otherwise go further.¹⁸

The SI

This fear of doing something in relation to the class was strongly criticised by another group active in May ‘68, the Situationist International (SI), who wrote:

for these workers, ‘doing something’ has automatically become a shameful inclination to substitute oneself for ‘the worker’ — for a sort

15. Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organisation’, *Collective Action Notes* (1979), 3.

16. *Echanges et Mouvement*, ‘What is *Echanges et Mouvement* as a Group?’

17. ‘Class struggle exists and develops independently of revolutionary groups or movements. The level and size of the so called participation of revolutionary groups in individual struggles never determines or fundamentally influences the level and size of those struggles.’ *Ibid*.

18. *Théorie Communiste* would later argue that councilism’s problematic of autonomy involves critiquing all the mediations that link the class to capital (trade unions, politics etc.) as imperfect expressions of its revolutionary essence. Intervention by revolutionaries is then seen as one more mediation thwarting the expression of the revolutionary essence. But essence and existence can not be opposed in this way. See *Théorie Communiste*, ‘*Théorie Communiste*’, in *Théorie Communiste* 14 (1997).

of pure, being-in-himself worker who, by definition, would exist only in his own factory, where for example the Stalinists would force him to keep silent, and where ICO would have to wait for all the workers to purely liberate themselves *on the spot* (otherwise wouldn't they risk substituting themselves for this still mute real worker?). Such an ideological acceptance of dispersion defies the essential need whose vital urgency was felt by so many workers in May: the need for coordination and communication of struggles and ideas, starting from bases of free encounter outside their union-policed factories.¹⁹

Indeed as the SI's argument continues, there is something self-contradictory and metaphysical in the councilist line of reasoning, for surely even the limited activity of the few dozen members of ICO producing and sharing their analyses with other workers is a form of "substitution" of their ideas for those that the passive workers reading them would otherwise spontaneously have had!

The SI combined a perspective of "all power to the councils" with no small sense of the importance of the revolutionary movement and of themselves as its most advanced part.²⁰ Most commentators on the SI have failed to pick up on how their own understanding of themselves as an organisation was central to the strengths and the limitations of the theory they produced.²¹ As Roland Simon argues, the lack of modesty in the SI's ideas about the importance of the role of revolutionaries and the revolutionary organisation is connected to the novel content that the SI assigned to the workers' councils and thus to a way in which the SI made a fundamental advance on other groups of the time.²²

In notions like the critique of the poverty of everyday life and the rejection of work, the SI were in touch with a different quality of the revolutionary wave they were immersed in compared to those earlier in

19. SI, 'Beginning of an Era', *Internationale Situationniste* 12 (1969), 12.

20. For an account of situationist involvement in the '68 events see Rene Vignet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (Autonomedia 1992).

21. In one of the better books about Debord and the SI, Anselm Jappe states: 'Certain issues, among them the question of revolutionary organization, will be given short shrift here, because, whatever importance they once had, discussion of them now tends to resemble the byzantine debate on the human versus the divine nature of Christ'. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (University of California 1998), 3.

22. Roland Simon, *Fondements Critiques d'une Théorie de la Révolution* (Senonevero 2001).

the century. In keeping with this different character, the SI argued that the councils would have to adopt a new content, based not on the management of work and the existing world but the abolition of work—"in the usual present day sense"²³—and the never-ending radical transformation of the latter.²⁴ The contradiction in the SI between its slogans—"All Power to the Workers' Councils!" and "Never Work!"²⁵—is not an absolute contradiction, but a site of the productive tension in their outlook.

It is thus wrong to see the SI as simply taking over the limits of SouB who had identified socialism with workers' self-management. The SI, as Roland Simon writes: "never conceived of communism as workers managing production, 'the pseudo-control of workers of their alienation', communism is always posited as the construction of the human community through the abolition of exchange, of the commodity, of the division of society into classes, it is posited in its content rather than as a form of management". But, as he continues, "in order to reach this point, the SI remains a prisoner of the theoretical necessity of positing a moment in which the proletariat becomes its own object, a moment in its liberation, which explains the great importance of the form of the Council as being this existence for itself of the proletariat, this existence as subject-object, the proletarian class of consciousness as a form."²⁶

It is in this need for workers, through the councils, to realise this new revolutionary content of the abolition of work, to become the "class of consciousness", that a fundamental role for revolutionaries and revolutionary organisation is implied. This high demand placed on the workers and the organisational form through which they become subject is paralleled with an absolutely high demand on the revolutionary organisation in the period before this is achieved. The SI rejected out of hand the model that most revolutionary organisations adopt: the proselytising and recruitment of naïve members who are then taught the party line. Instead, they demanded from prospective members an autonomous and full integration of the theory and

23. SI, 'Domination de la nature, idéologies et classes' *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (1963).

24. 'Such an organisation... aims not at the masses' self-management of the *existing* world, but at its uninterrupted transformation.' SI, 'Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations', *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

25. Gilles Dauvé, 'Back to the Situationist International', *Aufheben* 9 (2000).

26. Roland Simon, 'From the critique of work to the overcoming of programmatism: a theoretical transition: the Situationist International' in *Fondements Critiques*.

a level of “practical truth”,²⁷ namely a coherence of their practical behaviour with the theory.²⁸

The SI would never claim to have produced this total critique from their own heads. While their advanced position in detecting the nature of the new upsurge can be linked with their roots in the avant-garde (itself a product of the last revolutionary wave), they also derived their theory from the signs they recognised in new struggles against alienation: from Asturian miners to the rioters of Watts and more generally the youth rebellions seen across the western world.²⁹ The task of the revolutionary organisation was to grasp what was going on, what was being prefigured in the revolts that were taking place within a unitary revolutionary theory, and to communicate it to those seeking clarification.

In their *Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations*, while they write of the need for the revolutionary organisation to dissolve itself in its moment of victory, that victory will be the realisation of its total critique by the masses themselves in the councils.³⁰ If there is to be a coming together of the total or integral critique with the forms of spontaneous organisation, then that total critique must itself come into existence, and the vehicle for this is the voluntary willed organisation. In the year before ‘68, Debord, Khayati, and Vienet declared that the present task of the SI is to, “work, on an international level, for the reappearance of certain basic elements of a modern-day revolutionary critique. The activity of the SI is a *moment* which we do not mistake for a *goal*: the workers must organize themselves, they will achieve emancipation through their own efforts, etc.”³¹

There was an important match between the SI’s perspectives and what happened in the ‘68 period, particularly with students and young people. May ‘68 was the high point for the SI, and there was certainly a widespread impact of their analyses in the student

27. ‘The SI should act like an axis which, receiving its movement from the revolutionary impulses of the entire world, precipitates in a unitary manner the radical turn of events.... Group or individual, everyone must live in pace with the radicalization of events in order to radicalize them in turn. Revolutionary coherence is nothing else.’ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Aiming for Practical Truth’, *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

28. ‘[E]ach member must have recognized and appropriated the coherence of its critique. This coherence must be both in the critical theory as such and in the relation between this theory and practical activity.’ SI, ‘Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations’, *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

29. The SI could think that their ideas were in everyone’s heads because sex drugs and rock and roll were doing their work for them. It is not so obvious to us how cultural developments are helping us in this period.

30. ‘Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as understanding of human

and youth side of the movement, with situationist graffiti being one of the most memorable aspects of the revolt. Nevertheless, they were faced with the fact that their theory did not combine with the action of the workers who, contra their fantasy, did not come close to setting up workers’ councils.

The attitude to and later problems that the SI had with their own organisation are related to the role that they saw for theory. As Roland Simon points out, the SI replaced a dialectic of productive forces leading to communism with a dialectic of “theory—organisation—consciousness”. If it is the council that is to provide the practical conditions for this consciousness, the theory that prefigures this consciousness must itself come to be, and it does so through the spreading of revolutionary critique in which voluntary organisation or revolutionary movement (and not just the SI) play a part.

This need for the coming together of totalising revolutionary critique which, on the one hand, would be worked on and spread by groups and individuals within a relatively small milieu and, on the other, by a spontaneous upsurge from the masses themselves, is the task that the SI confronted itself with and on which it ultimately fell down.

Thus, though the SI had predicted and helped prepare the grounds for the events of ‘68 better than any other group, its hopes for the formation of councils that would have a radically different content failed to materialise.³² The internal struggles which the SI fell into in the aftermath of ‘68, and their forlorn hope for a “Strasbourg of the factories”,³³ was an expression of the impasse of their underlying model of theory, organisation and consciousness.

practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires that workers become dialecticians and put their thought into practice. It thus demands of its “people without qualities” more than the bourgeois revolution demanded of the qualified individuals it delegated to carry out its tasks’. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone 1994), §123.

31. From a working document—‘Response aux camarades de Rennes’—signed by Debord, Khayati, and Vienet, quoted in T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, ‘Why art can’t kill the Situationist International’, *October* vol. 79 (1997).

32. SI, ‘The Beginning of an Era’.

33. Vaneigem suggested (‘Notes on the SI’s direction’, 1970) that what the SI needed to get past their impasse was a kind of “coup” at the level of factories and the industrial proletariat that the 1966 Strasbourg scandal had been in relation to the student milieu. However as Miguel Amorós notes:

‘To declare that contact must be made with the workers milieu does not mean that the contact is actually made, but →

The Citroën Action Committee at Censier

The different conceptions of *what to do* held by ICO and SI in '68 can be seen in the Citroën Action Committee at Censier. In the second half of May, as strikes began to spread, worker-student action committees formed throughout France that attempted to support the movement. Those who wanted revolution came together based on their perception of tasks that needed to be done in relation to the movement.³⁴ Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman argue that such worker-student committees were a spontaneous recovery of the kind of creative social activity from below that characterised previous revolutionary upsurges like the Paris Commune. They describe their involvement in the Workers-Students Action Committee of Citroën, one of many such committees based in the occupied Censier centre of the University of Paris. Composed largely of people who had met in the street battles of the previous days, it came together in response to the Citroën factories forming a strike committee and calling for an indefinite strike. Perlman and Gregoire describe the kind of leaflets produced and actions taken: the way they confronted the issue of the division between immigrant and native French workers (from whom the union militants were drawn); the way the factory's union-run strike committee found the action committee useful in bringing about an occupation of the factory but then shut it out; and the connection they made to groups of non-union workers in the factories.³⁵

The committee was autonomous in the sense that it did not recognize the legitimacy of any "higher" body or any external "authority". Anyone was able to participate equally in a daily meeting where projects were thought up and actions planned in response to the ever-changing situation. The direction taken by the committee indicated that whatever the political orientations of participants before May, the orientation which prevailed during the events was more or

rather the discovery of a psychological compensation mechanism: faith in an abstract proletariat, the depository of the radical essence, beyond the reach of discouragement, with regard to whom all that was necessary was to communicate to them their own theory, a task that devolved upon a select group of theoreticians. That is why Vaneigem's formula, "a Strasbourg of the factories", viewed in retrospect, remained in the category of good intentions'. Miguel Amorós, *A Brief History of the Italian Section of the Situationist International* (Not Bored! 2014).

34. Though probably not at the intensity of May '68, many of us will have experience of this kind of ad hoc organisation in relation to movements.

35. Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman, *Worker-student action committees: France May '68* (Black and Red 1970), 12–18.

less a councilist one comprised of workers' assemblies and workers' self-activity.

In terms of Henri Simon's distinction between willed and spontaneous organisation, such committees were a spontaneous group where, to a significant extent, the participants left behind their previous allegiances in an orientation to the changing needs of the situation. However, it also had qualities of a willed group because a main purpose of the Censier committee was to speak and act towards the wider movement, and to the workers in the factories in particular.³⁶

What is striking about Perlman and Gregoire's account — and of particular interest to us — is their self-criticism. In unfavourably comparing the worker-student committees they were involved in to the March 22 Movement,³⁷ Perlman and Gregoire say that for those who gathered at Censier, being revolutionary meant participating in something whose dynamic was elsewhere. Rather than understanding themselves as a concrete group of individuals proceeding by the elimination of concrete obstacles, capable of taking the initiative, they rather trapped themselves in a position of wishing to follow the "spontaneous" activity of an abstractly imagined group: "the workers themselves". As they argue, the concrete group of which they were part (the worker-student committee), while subjectively feeling ready to make a choice for revolution, looked to some other group than themselves to trigger this situation.³⁸ In this they were perhaps like the overwhelming majority of those participating in the '68 movement.

Perlman and Gregoire describe the emblematic moment when a march of ten thousand militants confronted CGT stewards at the entrance to the Renault Billancourt factory,³⁹ which had been occupied the day before by its workers. It would have been easy to climb into the plant, but the marchers allowed themselves to be turned back. A vast crowd, who thought they were for the revolution and who had recently fought the real cops of the CRS, were nonetheless

36. 'I must underline that I am talking about "poles". Between these two extremes we can find all sorts of hybrids whose complexity of nature and interaction are those of social life itself.' Henri Simon, 'Some Thoughts on Organisation'.

37. The March 22 Movement had originally come together in a similar way in relation to the student agitation as the worker student committees did in relation to the later phases of the events.

38. 'Who would bring it about? There was March 22; there were "the workers"; even the Gaullist police were expected to "trip off" a revolution by mistake. But these people were only ready to step into conditions created for them.' Gregoire and Perlman, *Worker-student action committees*, 83.

39. Renault Billancourt was a classic workers' →

turned back by a small number of union cops.⁴⁰ This was due, for Perlman and Gregoire, to a certain way of relating to the “workers”.

If the “Leninist” notion was that workers must be advised on what to do, and Leninists suggested their parties as an alternative leadership to the PCF/CGT, the ultra-left or councilist notion, in contrast, was that they had to wait for the workers to do it by themselves. They failed to see themselves as capable of creating a situation that would force such a choice. What this meant practically is that they left the initiative to the union bureaucrats.

Perlman and Gregoire suggest that the more radical ultra-left or councilist “direction” offered by people at Censier was simply a different discourse in which the Trotskyist and Maoist calls for a “revolutionary party” and “nationalisation” was replaced by calls for “workers’ self-organisation” and “socialisation of production”. They write:

[E]loquent speeches were not accompanied by eloquent actions, because the speaker did not regard himself as deprived; it was “the workers” who were deprived, and consequently “only the workers” could act. The speaker called on workers to have a conviction which the speaker didn’t have; he called on workers to translate words into actions, but his own “action” consisted only of words.⁴¹

41. *Ibid.*, 85.

And, as they say of the Billancourt confrontation:

[T]here were clearly very few “revolutionaries” in the march or inside the factory; there were very few people who felt that whatever was inside that plant was theirs. ... [T]here was apparently no one inside or outside the factory who regarded it as social property. One who knows it’s social property doesn’t accept a bureaucrat blocking the door. People in that march had varied pretexts for doing nothing. “Such action is premature; it’s adventurous! The plant isn’t social property yet”. Of course the

fortress whose occupation was a key moment in the general strike.

40. Gregoire and Perlman, *Worker-student action committees*, 73. The balance of forces between ‘revolutionaries’ and union cops may in general have been different at other times and places — the example that Perlman and Gregoire quote is one where it was in the former’s favour.

CGT bureaucrats agreed with this reasoning, a reasoning which completely undermines any “right” the workers might have to strike. And ten thousand militants, ... blandly accepted the authority of the union toughs who guarded the factory gates.⁴²

42. *Ibid.*, 84.

In taking up Perlman and Gregoire’s self-critique here, the point is not that Billancourt was the great “if only” moment when all could have been different if a different action or consciousness had prevailed. If the crowd outside Billancourt had acted in a different way, this would have had an impact. But what happened, happened for specific reasons, contingent on the overall situation of the crowd, including their sense of themselves and what revolution involved.

The ideology of “the workers themselves” — the notion that only the workers can do something — was one limit to the activity of many participants in ‘68. The idea that revolution is self-organisation, and that the “self” here is not whoever we are but “the workers themselves” was an objective feature of the situation. This conception of the revolution was not a mere idea that could contingently have been replaced with another, but a product of the whole cycle of struggles leading up to it. What Perlman and Gregoire’s text indicates is that some of the more lucid participants were starting to question this conception. While the idea that “workers and students must meet and dialogue” was fairly prevalent, their text poses the issue differently. It suggests: why not take the factory? Not to restart production (it was a car factory after all), but to deny it to the enemy, and yes, at the risk of being called substitutionist, to try to push the situation forward.

The distinction between inside and outside which, in the normal course of events, is a fundamental one — with interventions by “revolutionaries” or “activists” usually failing — must be called into question in situations of intense class and social struggle. Factories, the means of production, reproduction, and communication, do not belong to their workers. Communist revolution requires an overcoming of the division of production by separate enterprises and of the separation between those who are inside and those who are outside of production. If this is now theoretically recognised as the problem that communism must overcome, in situations of intense class struggle, this can begin to be posed as a practical problem.

Was this really posed practically in '68? Clearly not. Would it be in the future? Whether in Argentina in 2001, Greece in 2008, Cairo in 2011, or the yellow vests in France recently, one of the pronounced aspects of more recent struggles has been that they occur on a social terrain where the inside/outside issue is posed differently than it was in '68. The events of May '68, which saw almost no looting despite the withdrawal of the police, belonged to an earlier cycle of struggle. Though more minoritarian than May '68, the recent yellow vest movement shows how different the times are.

What's at stake in this question is the very meaning of revolution and communism. If communist revolution is about workers self-managing production, then surely it is only workers who can do this (and in '68, workers showed very little interest in this). But if revolution and communism is the overcoming of separation, then the very notion of worker and not-worker, my workplace and your workplace, is something to be challenged and overturned. As Perlman and Gregoire argue, those who displayed inactivity while waiting for the spontaneity of the workers appeared to reject the bureaucratic model of socialism but accepted its ontological premises:

Consequently, revolutionaries whose aim is to liberate daily life betray their project when they abdicate to passivity or impose themselves over it: the point is to wake the dead, to force the passive to choose between a conscious acceptance of constraint or a conscious affirmation of life.⁴³

To "force the passive to choose" is, of course, often how a minority of workers inside an enterprise initiate any wildcat strike — what Perlman and Gregoire suggest is that, in the right circumstances, that is what an active "outside" group can do as well.⁴⁴ In most cases, such an attempt would be derisory and would fail — and likely it would have in '68 — but this failure would be its critique, not the fact that something was done by one group in relation to another.

43. *Ibid.*, 87.

44. French society had been forced to choose at this point. As the present day Mouvement Communiste have pointed out, the spontaneous general strike was spread (and controlled) by CP militants. Nevertheless the workers had been forced to choose by the wild actions on the streets in the weeks before. Mouvement Communiste, *May-June 1968: A Situation Lacking in Workers' Autonomy* (Libcom 2006).

Reclaiming the Party?

An important figure in the post '68 debates was Gilles Dauvé. In "Leninism and the Ultra-Left", Dauvé, while making some similar points to Perlman and Gregoire, goes further in trying to explicitly redeem the notion of the party.⁴⁵ Dauvé argued that the "councilist" position on organisation was a critique of "Leninism"⁴⁶ which was tied negatively to its object — a reaction rather than an overcoming. In particular, he argues that councilism, like anarchism, accepts the identification of party with the Leninist party. As a reaction to the historically counter-revolutionary role that the Bolsheviks came to take, the notion of a separate collectivity of revolutionaries or communists doing anything was seen as substitutionist and as threatening to dominate the class. What this misses for Dauvé is that there is a different conception of the party to be found in Marx based on the distinction of the "historic" and "formal" party.

Marx had drawn this distinction in an 1860 letter to the poet Freiligrath, who had been a member of the Communist League with Marx ten years before. Marx had been attempting to enlist Freiligrath's support against slanderous claims being made by Carl Vogt about Marx and the Communist League, but Freiligrath declined to be involved, saying he was no longer a member of the party. Marx replied that he also no longer belongs to such a party because "the party... in this wholly ephemeral sense, ceased to exist for me 8 years ago" when it disbanded at his urging:

Since 1852, then, I have known *nothing* of "party" in the sense implied in your letter. Whereas you are a *poet*, I am a *critic* and for me the experiences of 1849-52 were quite enough. The "League", like the *société des saisons* in Paris and a hundred other societies, was simply an episode in the history of a party that is everywhere

45. Jean Barrot [Gilles Dauvé], 'Leninism and the Ultra-Left' in *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement* (Black and Red 1974). The text was produced as an intervention at a conference of ICO, which had swelled in size in the aftermath of the May events. It was then published in the journal *Mouvement Communiste* and translated in various versions slightly modified down to today, it is one of the best known products of the theoretical ferment of the time.

46. Whether the idea of 'Leninism' held among both its proponents and opponents actually understood what the Bolsheviks had been and done in Russia was itself questionable. See Denis Authier, 'The Beginnings of the Workers Movement in Russia' (Spartacus 1970) and Gilles Dauvé, 'The "Renegade" Kautsky and his Disciple Lenin' (Wildcat 1987).

springing up naturally out of the soil of modern society. [...] I have tried to dispel the misunderstanding arising out of the impression that by “party” I meant a “League” that expired eight years ago, or an editorial board that was disbanded twelve years ago. By party, I meant the party in the broad historical sense.⁴⁷

It is likely that Dauvé had become aware of this distinction made by Marx through the text “Origin and Function of the Party Form”.⁴⁸ In that work, Jacques Camatte and Roger Dangeville trace the evolution of “the party” and how it has been understood by Marx and those influenced by him. Starting with the sect phase of the Communist League of the 1840s, Camatte and Dangeville follow the changing meaning of the party through the First International and the Paris Commune, and then show how these notions were first developed and then betrayed in the Second and Third Internationals, and finally how the Italian Left stood in relation to this history.

The text argues that the party is not fundamentally about forms of organisation or bureaucratic rules, but is defined instead by its “programme, the prefiguration of communist society, of the liberated and conscious human species”.⁴⁹ The communist programme, in turn, was not a product of Marx or any other individual, but something born of the struggle of the proletariat against capital in which it tries to form a community to replace the atomisation of capitalist society, and it is only given expression, often rather imperfectly, by individuals and groups.⁵⁰ Marx and Engels had an intuition of the future society based on this struggle and their work was an attempt to describe its emergence and to defend it against bourgeois society.⁵¹ Thus, the text argues that, in its historic sense, the party is an “impersonal force above generations, it represents the human species, the human existence which has finally been found. It is the consciousness of the species”.⁵² Organisations which claim to be the party, whether in the present or the past, are at

47. Marx, ‘Letter to Freiligrath 29 February 1860’ (MECW 41), 82.

48. Jacques Camatte and Roger Dangeville, ‘Origine et fonction de la forme parti’, *Invariance* Année VII, Serie II, Numero Special (1974). This text was originally written in 1961 and, at Bordiga’s request, published in Italian in *Il programma comunista*.

49. Ibid.

50. ‘That coincides with what we have often said, that the revolution will be anonymous or will not be.’ Ibid.

51. ‘All Marx’s and Engels’s work was to be the description of this society and its defence against bourgeois society.’ Ibid.

52. Ibid.

best formal groups that temporarily express this historic force, but which just as often fail to do so, or represent it for some time or degree before passing over to the side of the counter-revolution.

Dauvé argued that the historic/formal distinction turns the opposition of need for the party versus fear of the party into a false dilemma. Shorn of its Leninist associations, the party no longer posed a problem: the party was not something created and built by a process of recruitment and indoctrination—as in the practice of the bureaucratic sects—but rather a spontaneous product of capitalist society that could only really be seen to emerge in revolutionary periods. Capitalism produced people who tried in one way or another to understand and combat the situation they found themselves in. Dauvé felt we can call some such people revolutionaries⁵³

or communists, and suggested that, contra the councilist fears, they should not be worried about seeking theoretical coherence and acting collectively to propagate their understandings. He contends that “the revolutionary movement is an organic structure of which theory is an inseparable and indispensable element”. Those trying to articulate such theory, those trying to “express the whole meaning of what is going on” and make practical proposals, may in normal times have little effect. But in revolutionary periods, “[i]f the expression is right and the proposal appropriate, they are parts of the struggle of the proletariat and contribute to build the ‘party’ of the communist revolution”.⁵⁴

The councilist opposition between willed and spontaneous organisation is undermined by this kind of argument. If capitalist society gives rise spontaneously to forms of organised resistance, such as strikes and social movements, then the production of communists as a willed group is in its own way a spontaneous product. There are always minorities being produced who seek out others like themselves both during struggles and in periods when less is going on. Thus, for Dauvé, the councilist valorisation of the pole of spontaneity and their denigration of the willed alternative is unjustified. That the revolution in a fundamental sense comes from one pole does not mean that minorities at the other pole don’t play a role. Individuals drawn to ideas of revolution and communism who then form “willed groups” or relate to

53. Talking of ‘revolutionaries’ undoubtedly felt more reasonable in 1969. At the time of the ‘Hot Autumn’ or ‘Rampant May’ in Italy, it made sense to speak of a ‘radical minority of revolutionary workers in the factories’ in a way it clearly does not today.

54. Dauvé, ‘Leninism and the Ultra Left’.

each other in some less formal way are as much a natural product of capitalist society as the “spontaneous” struggles and movements that arise from time to time. Such groups will be imperfect because they, too, are part of bourgeois society. Many will, like most of the sects in ‘68, play a poor role, but if they do manage to express something “communist” they are ephemeral expressions of a movement that emerges in and against capitalist society. Produced in revolutionary periods such as the one which Dauvé thought he was living through, the party was not built by an act of will, it was just the organisation of an emergent movement. As a member of the informal group Dauvé was part of puts it:

When the proletariat is not revolutionary, it does not exist, and revolutionaries can produce nothing with it; isn't they, who by playing the people's educators can create the historic situation in which the proletariat *becomes what it is*, but the very development of modern society. When such a situation appears, revolutionaries of non-working class origin, those who for many reasons, find themselves “confined” within bourgeois society, unite themselves in the proletarian party, which spontaneously forms in order to solve the revolutionary tasks.⁵⁵

55. Authier, ‘The Beginnings of the Workers’ Movement in Russia’.

However, if this 1969 critique of councilism, which draws on the historic/formal party distinction, is indebted to “Origin and Function...”, by that time Camatte’s own position had moved on. Camatte was impressed by and open to the character of the new revolt in a way the formal “Bordigist” group he had been part of was not. In the same year as Dauvé’s intervention in ICO, Camatte with Collu produced a letter later published as *On Organisation*, which is, if anything, more critical of the “willed group” than the councilists. Their letter denounces the attempts by political groups to recruit from the revolutionaries that were produced by the period, and rejects the suggestion by some that the journal *Invariance*, in which they were both involved, should constitute itself as such a group.

On Organisation goes beyond the rejection of Leninism common to anarchists and councilists by identifying a tendency for any organisation, whatever ideology it may espouse, whether it uses the term

party or not, to become a gang or racket. This tendency is a result of the rivalrous, competitive existence that the capitalist mode of production imposes on individual and collective subjectivities. Consider the way political groups relate to each other as they compete for members and try to keep the ones they have. If in earlier capitalism it had been possible for working class organisations to represent some sort of community against capital, in its period of real domination, capital shapes both individual and collective subjectivities.⁵⁶

In Camatte’s view, even the group he had been part of – which, by practicing anonymity and refusing democratic voting, had opposed bourgeois individualism, or the “sterile and pathological solitude of the Ego” – evolved into a gang, a collective form of that pathological ego in relation to the world.⁵⁷

Linking back to the arguments of *Origin and Function*, Camatte and Collu write:

Today the party can only be the historic party. Any formal movement is the reproduction of this society, and the proletariat is essentially *outside of it*. A group can in no way pretend to realize community without taking the place of the proletariat, which alone can do it. Such an attempt introduces a distortion that engenders theoretical ambiguity and practical hypocrisy. It is not enough to develop the critique of capital, nor even to affirm that there are no organizational links; it’s necessary to avoid reproducing the gang structure, since it is the spontaneous product of the society.⁵⁸

So if the idea of the party as a spontaneous product had seemed to Dauvé to cut through the fear of the party of the German/Dutch Left, Camatte warned that the gang structure and its mentality is also spontaneously produced by capitalist society.⁵⁹

In 1969, when *On Organisation* was written, Camatte and Collu argue for adopting the attitude

56. On Camatte’s concept of domination/subsumption see ‘The Passion of Communism: Italian Invariance in the 1970s’ in this issue and ‘The History of Subsumption’ in *Endnotes 2* (2013).

57. For this reason, he would break the rule of anonymity and print Bordiga texts under Bordiga’s name.

58. Jacques Camatte, ‘On Organisation’ in *This World We Must Leave* (Autonomedia 1995).

59. Henri Simon is making a similar point when he argues that the willed group is led by its attempt to exist outside such a movement to ‘in one way or another, conform to the imperatives of capitalist society in which it lives and operates. This is accepted by some, fully assumed by others, but rejected by yet others who think they can escape it or simply not think about it’ *Some Thoughts on Organisation*, 8–9.

they see Marx taking in his letter to Freiligrath. One should refuse to constitute any kind of group, and instead simply maintain a network of contacts with those who have appropriated or are in the process of appropriating theoretical knowledge. This appropriation would have to be an independent process without followerism and pedagogy because, “the party in its historical sense is not a school”. Thus rather than identifying with a group, the revolutionary can orientate to a theory: “a work that is in process and needs to be developed”.⁶⁰ Such theory is not dependent on a group or journal but is the expression of the class struggle.

However, in a note written in 1972, Camatte identifies weaknesses in and possible misinterpretations of *On Organisation*. He noted that he and Collu had been incorrect to take as a model a moment of Marx’s activity from a very different period of capitalism.⁶¹ He observed that their focus on theory risked being seen as an elitist conception of the development of the revolutionary movement bringing consciousness to the masses from outside. He suggested that the critique of organisation could become an anti-organisational position, a unique selling property with which to seduce and attract in a new process of racketization.⁶² It could be seen as a return to Stirner with each individual cultivating his or her own revolutionary subjectivity. As Camatte writes:

All political representation is a screen and therefore an obstacle to a fusion of forces. Since representation can occur on the individual as well as the group level, recourse to the former level would be, for us, a repetition of the past.⁶³

So many false paths!

Starting from an Italian Left position on the party, seemingly the opposite of the councilists, we see Camatte ending in a similar place with a rejection of the pretensions of the small organised group. There is an underlying continuity in that Camatte’s notion of

60. Camatte, ‘On Organisation’.

61. It should be recognised that after Marx’s letter to Freiligrath (see above) he went on to be involved in the First International and to support the formation of mass parties.

62. This paradox whereby criticising a revolutionary identity can become a new identity, points to the trouble with the formation of an identity around the notion of ‘communisation’ something which *Théorie Communiste* (after a period where they could be said to have encouraged this) acknowledged: ‘The theme of “communization” and the name of “communist” may become fashionable simply as a sign for recognition, a fear of emptiness inside emptiness. To be “communist” may have become a way to oppose to the other identities in the milieu a kind of counter-posture: “we do not think we are revolutionaries” (implicitly

the group becoming a gang or racket overlaps with the councilist view that the willed group will tend inevitably to be oriented to survival in capitalism.⁶⁴ Both put their faith in the spontaneous organisation that the class (or species for the later Camatte) is led to. In spontaneous organisation there is much room for a learning dynamic in which the identity and self-understanding of those involved is transformed. In the willed group there will be more of an investment in an identity (around a set of ideas) that leads to forms of behaviour to defend that identity. The willed group — even if such group emerges spontaneously in response to a revolutionary wave — has a tendency to stick around longer than it has a purpose, becoming dominated by the gang mentality or of being “pushed towards reformist or capitalist areas and forced to have a practice which is increasingly in contradiction with their avowed principles”.⁶⁵

To Camatte, this is a reason to avoid the group form entirely. A different way of responding to the tendencies he describes is to recognise that any “willed” collective undertaking, especially outside the excitement of a revolutionary moment, will have its identitarian gang dimension — the point is to be alert to it, name it when it shows itself, and try collectively to avoid or restrain it. Indeed, one might note that the longer such groups last, the more they risk falling into this structure, which suggests that groups should form for specific purposes and only continue as long as they think they are contributing to that purpose, and if that purpose is theory, then only so long as they feel they are contributing something useful.

A purpose that we have found takes our interest indeed to which we have found ourselves driven is communist theory, the thinking about capitalism and its overcoming. Our next section addresses how we think to do this.

meaning : AND this makes *true* revolutionaries of us), but once this is said, the question is what we can do and what we really are.’ TC, ‘Fin de parti(e)’ (2013).

63. Camatte, ‘On Organisation’.

64. ‘From the moment that it exists as an organization, its only choice is death or capitalist survival. ... The forgetting of, or hiding of this situation or the refusal to look it in the face creates violent internal conflicts. These are often hidden behind conflicts of personality or ideology. For a time they can also be dissimulated behind a facade of “unity”, which one can always hear being offered, for reasons of propaganda, to non-members (from here springs the rule that inside such organizations internal conflicts are always settled inside the organization and never in public).’ Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organisation’, 8–9.

65. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

II. OPEN MARXISM?

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.¹

If we are interested in thinking about capitalism and its overcoming, Marx's work, and especially his description and critique of the capitalist mode of production, would seem an essential theoretical reference point—a foundation. Yet if we look at the record of Marxism in power, from social democracy, through the USSR, China, and other nations, we see that Marxism has by and large been a force for the development of capitalism rather than one for its overcoming. How might one separate Marx and Marxism from this history?

Starting in the late 1980s in journals such as *Common Sense* and in a series of books,² Richard Gunn, Werner Bonefeld, John Holloway, and others took up the term “open Marxism”. They adopted this expression from Johannes Agnoli, who in a debate with Ernest Mandel³ suggested the term for a Marxism open to the “heresy of reality”. Gunn, Bonefeld, and others took this up in a similar sense, not to specify a particular school or kind of Marxism, but rather as a useful label to capture the living (and revolutionary) thread that various heterodox Marxisms—council communism, the Frankfurt School, the German New Marx Reading, Operaismo, and Autonomist Marxism—had in common against the more dogmatic varieties.

At a time of a perceived crisis of Marxism, in the face of a capitalist restructuring and “bosses’ offensive”,⁴ their move was an intervention in the name of Marxism’s critical, revolutionary, and destructive purpose—not just against the then retreating forms of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, but also against the sociological and positivist forms of Marxism that had become dominant in academia. Instead of responding to the perceived crisis with a fundamentalist assertion of orthodoxy,

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota 1984), 110.

2. See Werner Bonefeld, ‘Open Marxism’, *Common Sense* 1 (1987), 34–38, and the introductions by Gunn, Bonefeld, Psychopedis, Holloway, et al. to *Open Marxism* vols 1, 2, and 3.

3. Johannes Agnoli, *Offener Marxismus: Ein Gespräch über Dogmen, Orthodoxie und die Häresie der Realität* (Campus 1980).

4. Amadeo Bordiga, ‘Class Struggle and “Bosses’ Offensive”’ *Battaglia Comunista* 39 (1949).

they argued that the principle of doubt and the dissolution of false certainty was essential to an open Marxism:

Despite Marxism’s allegedly final exhaustion... Marxism is not in crisis as long as it provokes and produces crises of historically developed ‘schools’ or of Marxists themselves. Metaphorically, Marxism is the theoretical concept of practice and the practical concept of theory which provokes crises of itself as a matter of its inherent strength and validity.⁵

Of course, it might be asked whether one needs to defend something like “Marxism” at all? One might, as the SI did, reject all “isms” as ideologically fixed forms of thought.⁶ One might reserve the term “Marxism” for the ideology based on Marx’s ideas, which is to be distinguished from their revolutionary or communist use.⁷ Yet even if one was to take this route, there would remain the question of how to distinguish, other than by fiat, one’s own “authentic” communist use of Marx from an ideological Marxist one. The impulse behind identifying an open Marxism or, like the SI, being “(not a) Marxist... in the same way as Marx”,⁸ are the same. The point is not whether one adopts or resists the label Marxist, but how to develop thinking that is adequate to the raw material of reality.

How do we avoid filtering existence to fit our preconceived ideas, simply asserting our limited perspective as the truth? More specifically, how can one grasp one’s experience through Marx’s categories without dogmatically reading reality through their prism? Do we have or need a philosophy or a method? Do we have principles of some sort that we apply? How do we deal with arguments from people who do not share the categories that we use? How do we conceive of the unity of theory and practice? If the point is “to change it” does this mean we pick up and discard theory based on how useful it is in struggles?

5. Bonefeld, ‘Open Marxism’, 37.

6. ‘The world of *isms*, whether it envelops the whole of humanity or a single person, is never anything but a world drained of reality, a terribly real seduction by falsehood.’ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (PM 2012), 9.

7. As Dauvé does when he writes that if ‘one can and must use Marx’s works’, one does so to reassert ‘communism against an ideology named “Marxism” — official, academic, or leftist’. Dauvé, *Eclipse and Reemergence*, 21.

8. ‘Are you Marxists? Just as much as Marx was when he said, “I am not a Marxist!”’ SI, ‘Questionnaire’, *Situationist International* 9 (1964). On Marx’s statement (reported by Engels) see Michael Heinrich, ‘Je ne suis pas marxiste’, *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 2015.

Can theory be seen as a kind of weapon used in the fight, or as Moss suggested, is its first purpose to “seek the truth of the situation”?

One idea from open Marxism that has consistently informed how we see ourselves and what we are doing is the notion articulated by Richard Gunn of the “good conversation”. This notion is key to our self-understanding of how thinking occurs and how theory is developed.

The idea of the conversation grasps in a very concrete way the sociality of human thinking. As Bakhtin and Volishinov have persuasively made clear, even that thinking which we do “inside our heads” is part of a conversational chain. We are always taking up thoughts started by others, agreeing or disagreeing, responding to critics and interlocutors, and anticipating what may be said in response.⁹ Thought is social through and through. However, such sociality applies as much to ideology as to theory, as much to the way we reproduce ideas that conform to the existing social order as to developing a thinking which points beyond it. If we are interested in the latter, we need a more nuanced conception of the conversation. Just as not all of what people consider as thinking is really thinking,¹⁰ not all conversation, on our own or with others, is good conversation. We are also aware of the way that appeals to dialogue and conversation—and to “free speech”—are commonplace calls that can perform very ideological functions, including that of diverting us from necessary action.¹¹ Even within milieus that see themselves as antagonistic to this society, there are forms of bad conversation, such as preaching to the converted, dialogues of the deaf, endless discussions with no consequences. It is thus necessary to specify what we mean by good conversation. What kind of conversation is to be aimed at?¹²

For Gunn, as we shall see, good conversation is defined by mutual recognition, practical reflexivity,

9. Much of what Marx wrote is entitled ‘critique’ and involves a full engagement with thinkers from the famous ‘sources’ of German philosophy, French socialism, and English political economy. Indeed that critique may partly be understood as a putting of these different ‘systems’ into conversation with one another. See Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (MIT 2003).

10. As we shall see in section IV below.

11. Debord spoke of the spectacle’s ‘pseudo-dialogue’, to which he contrasted ‘real communication’ and ultimately a dialogue which ‘has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world’. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, §221.

12. Gunn’s idea of the conversation and the consensus theory of truth has a certain debt to the Habermas of the early seventies—in various places, he makes clear the limits of this debt and what separates his view of mutual recognition and the conversation from Habermas, Honneth etc. See, e.g., Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘A Note on Habermas’ *Heathwood Institute* (2014).

and immanent critique.¹³ In more recent texts, Gunn and Adrian Wilding argue that notions of mutual recognition and the conversation are nothing less than a key to revolutionary action and to communism itself.¹⁴ The idea that the small “willed group” aiming to understand capitalism and its overcoming, and the spontaneous revolutionary crowd and mass action that will actually produce that overcoming, have an underlying coherence through the notion of mutual recognition is an idea that is fascinating for us, and we will try to unpack it in detail.

Marxism and Philosophy

The initial reason for Gunn’s essay “Marxism and Philosophy”¹⁵ was to respond to Roy Bhaskar’s offer of Critical Realism as a philosophy for Marxism and “the Left”. In his response, Gunn notes that before one decides whether or not Marxism needs a Critical Realist philosophy, one needs to ask whether it needs a philosophy at all. We are not interested in Gunn’s text for what it says about Bhaskar but in its attempt to “sketch *in contrast* to Critical Realism an alternative understanding of the conceptual status of Marxist thought”.¹⁶

Gunn argues that in offering a philosophy for the Left, Bhaskar accepted the bourgeois separation of second-order metatheory—theory about categories—from first-order theory about the world. Gunn argues that this separation is a product of bourgeois enlightenment, which reached its apogee in the 20th century when philosophy reduced itself to the handmaiden of science.¹⁷ He argues that Marx, and Hegel before him, rejected this separation.¹⁸ This is not, however, because Marxism is a positivist or scientific discourse “uninterested in categorical questions”,¹⁹ nor because it returns to the old cosmological unity that prevailed before the rise of capitalism, but rather because

13. Richard Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy: A critique of critical realism’ *Capital and Class* vol. 13 no. 1 (1989).

14. Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’ *Heathwood Institute* (2014).

15. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’. Critical realism was first developed in Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Harvester 1975).

16. *Ibid.*, 88.

17. ‘The consequences of this separation are (a) the *positivism* of a first-order theory which disallows reflection on categories and (b) the *tedium* of a philosophising which, as purely metatheoretical, treats engagement with worldly issues as infection of a non-philosophical kind. Anyone who has studied either the social sciences or philosophy knows what this positivism and this tedium mean.’ *Ibid.*, 91.

18. ‘Marx saw Hegel as the paradigmatic “philosopher” but, I would urge, he was never more Hegelian than when the critique of philosophy is present as a figure of his thought.’ *Ibid.*, 98.

19. *Ibid.*, 89.

it has integrated what are seen as philosophical questions in a unitary form of self-reflexive theorising about the world.

Gunn argues that Marxism doesn't need a philosophy or meta-theory to back up its theory of the social world because Marxian discourse such as *Capital*, like Hegel's *Phenomenology* before it, moves between first-order theory about the world, and second-order theory about the categories with which it grasps the world, in a single movement of totalisation.²⁰ If such totalisation is at once "practically reflexive", "immanently critical", and based on mutual recognition, then it constitutes "good conversation".

Though Gunn writes at a fairly high level of sophistication and abstraction, the thrust of his argument is to locate:

a capacity to address issues of categorial validity (a capacity, in other words, for 'critical theory') within the first-order experience and self-awareness of, so to say, everyman rather than in the privileged meta-awareness of a philosophical elite.²¹

Gunn argues that theory or truth is produced in a good (not necessarily polite) conversation in which all participants put their views of the world, the categories with which they grasp the world, and indeed all aspects of themselves at stake.²²

Such conversation is based on or moves in the direction of mutual recognition. Gunn suggests that, outside of conditions of social revolution and struggle, mutual recognition only exists in a contradictory form, and thus, moments of such conversation are relatively rare and perhaps only to be approximated imperfectly.

It is sometimes said that a defining aspect of the kind of conversation we want is a particular orientation to practice. In his famous "Theses on Feuerbach" Marx suggested an orientation to changing the world. But it is important that this not be understood in the rather facile and normative

20. 'to read Marx's *Capital* either as sheerly first-order and empirical (the reading attempted by bourgeois sociology) or as sheerly second-order and philosophical (the reading attempted by Althusser) is to miss its challenge. *Capital* is both first- and second-order. It is both because it is neither on its own; it is neither because it is both.' Ibid., 92.

21. Richard Gunn, 'Practical Reflexivity In Marx' *Common Sense* 1 (1987), 13.

22. "Good" conversation is good rather than "disappointing" — it does not merely chew over factual disputes or retreat into a play of disembodied concepts — because it, and it alone, allows conversational partners to challenge one another and to learn from one another in a fashion which brings all things about each partner into play.' Gunn, 'Marxism and Philosophy', 88.

way in which theory and practice are imagined as separate realms that need to be brought together in an activist way.²³

The bringing together of theory and practice suggests an external relation between the two.²⁴ Rather, as Gunn suggests, we can conceive of the unity of theory and practice in terms of practical reflexivity.

Gunn argues that the relation of theory and practice is internal, not external: they mutually constitute each other. Practical reflexivity is a theorising that recognises itself and its categories as part of the contradictory social practice that it tries to make sense of. The categories it uses are not guaranteed by a separate philosophy or methodology. Rather, in a process of immanent critique, theorising that is practically reflexive takes up and critically interrogates the meaning of the categories found in its social world. Such categories are part of the way capitalist society spontaneously presents itself to all its participants; they occur in everyday common sense as much as in systematic theorisations by philosophers and ideologists.

An example that Gunn takes up from Marx is the moment in *Capital* where Marx determines that the key prerequisite for capital, "M-C-M", is the buying and selling of labour power and what this involves. When Marx says that the sphere of exchange within which labour power is bought and sold is a realm of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham",²⁵ he points to the fact that everyday social practice includes theoretical categories as part of its reproduction, that the very notion we have of the individual — the kind of subjects we are, how we understand ourselves, how we think and act — is constituted by such social practice.²⁶ For example, the categories of individuality and rational self interest that Bentham reflects in his utilitarianism appear self-evident and self-explanatory to agents in bourgeois society. However, such obviousness is socially and historically constituted through a process of alienation, atomisation, and separation. Practically reflexive theorising refuses the "obviousness" of those categories by asking

23. For critiques of activism see Amadeo Bordiga, 'Activism', *Battaglia Comunista* 7 (1952) and Andrew X, 'Give Up Activism', *Do or Die* 9 (2001).

24. The views that theory comes first and then finds an adequate activity, or activism comes first and then looks for theory to justify it, are perhaps two sides of the same undialectical coin.

25. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), 186.

26. "[I]deological categories are not merely added to social reality like icing on a cake: they are rooted in social existence. Patterns of thinking are not, for Marx, merely bound up with social relations but form an essential part of what, in a given instance, "society" is.' Gunn, 'Practical Reflexivity in Marx', 3.

how such obviousness is socially constructed. Practical reflexivity—recognition of the social constitution of oneself and one’s categories—is required if one is to grasp the mystificatory, partial, and thus false nature of these appearances/ideologies, that is to say the way they are a necessary, functional mediation of other processes (exploitation, alienation, domination) which they at the same time systematically conceal.²⁷ Thus the critique of capitalist social relations involves at the same time a critique of ourselves and the categories with which we understand ourselves and vice versa—to question ourselves and our categories is tantamount to the critique of capitalist social relations.

Another example of the simultaneity of first- and second-order theorising is Marx’s statement in *Capital* that individuals are treated only in terms of their “character-masks”, as “the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests”.²⁸ This is generally taken as a methodological (second-order) point. But as Gunn and Wilding suggest, this point is at the same moment a very first-order critique of the reductivism, experiential impoverishment, discomfort, and oversimplification of the life-world which he is describing.²⁹

What makes for good conversation?

To critically examine one’s own experience and categories, one must be open to the other experiences and theories found in one’s social world. This means not simply criticising other experiences and theories from one’s own position, but being open to their criticism, “since a critique that is merely external and third-person would omit the moment of “in-the-course-of” self-risk”.³⁰ Thus Gunn suggests that practical reflexivity and immanent critique are essentially a conversation. A practically reflexive, immanent critique of capitalist society and the everyday ideas and theories which justify it is not a critique from a superior worldview or from an already assumed political position of opposition. It is rather an open encounter with other viewpoints and experiences.

27. As Marx points out in the *Grundrisse*, ‘exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom, [the realization of which proves] to be inequality and unfreedom.’ Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), 180.

28. Marx, *Capital* vol 1 (MECW 35), 34.

29. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’, 18.

30. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 101.

This suggests an answer to the crucial question of how it is possible for a conversation between those who don’t share the same categories to nonetheless come to compelling conclusions.³¹ Because we share the same social and practical world—in a way we did not before the dominance of the capitalist mode of production—the fundamental question we pose one another within conversation is: “It’s like this, isn’t it?”. Each statement of how things are always invites response from others along the lines of “no, it’s like this” or “yes, but also”. In a dynamic relation with others we constantly describe and redescribe the world. The phenomenological³² aspect of this—the appeal to experience—means for Gunn that no prior agreement on method or categories is necessary for the conversation. The object itself can “play a (partial) role in determining how, validly, it may be categorically known”.³³ In such a conversation, every aspect of each participant’s view must be able to be brought into play: “theoretical and metatheoretical dimensions” as well as considerations of where, practically, each participant is coming from. But this does not mean one can simply dismiss, monologically, the other as, say, a bourgeois apologist, an academic, a militant or of the wrong identity category. One must draw out the limitations of the other’s argument with regards to its own contradictions and inadequacy to the world which it claims to explain. It is only reasonable to question the other’s viewpoint along the lines of “you would think that because you...” if one is open to both hear how the other responds to this claim, and to have similar questions directed toward oneself.

The idea of a rigorous open conversation in which each participant challenges the other on the basis that they too are open to such challenge can be a regulative idea. Gunn merely makes explicit something that people already try to do—through discussions, reading, meetings, critiques, publications—and offers a prophylactic against the way notions of philosophy or method can detract from such openness.

31. ‘Only that which goes through the dialogic process is rational. Those who refuse dialogue, no matter how deep the truth they may grasp, are irrational. Whether or not the world or the self contains reason in and of itself ultimately counts for nothing; only those who are subjected to dialogue are rational’. Karatani, *Transcritique*, 71.

32. As Gunn argues, unlike the phenomenology of Husserl who starts with the individual in his splendid isolation, a Hegelian phenomenology is dialogical and intersubjective right from the start. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 88.

33. Richard Gunn, ‘In Defence of a Consensus Theory of Truth’, *Common Sense* 7 (1989), 76.

Conversation, of course, happens all the time, and this cannot in itself play the role Gunn suggests. Crucial here is the difference between “good” conversation and disappointing conversation. Gunn does not valorise “conversation” per se, but “good conversation”, which he says is relatively rare. The difference between “good” and “disappointing” conversation is an experience we all have and to which we can refer to make sense of what Gunn is getting at.

If this focus on talk or ideas seems too “idealist”, let us note that a reference to experience and practice constantly feeds into this conversation, and if it sounds too polite or democratic, Gunn notes: “nothing is less polite than rigorous conversation pursued to its end. [...] no-one can say in advance where (into what issues of life-and-death struggle) good conversation may lead”.³⁴

As Gunn’s comments about the tedium of philosophy and the positivism of the sciences indicate,³⁵ in the area of bourgeois society apparently reserved for free and disinterested truth-oriented conversation, the specialities of academia work against the totalisation that good conversation needs. His fundamental point, though, is that inside or outside of academia, good conversation cannot occur where the theory/metatheory distinction is respected (whether as academic specialty or as an unreflected limitation on thinking) nor where people relate through social roles including those of lecturer and student, leader and led, represented and representative, or as property owners. These latter considerations lead him to the position that the true site of good conversation in capitalism is the revolutionary crowd.

So far, we have addressed Gunn’s ideas in terms of their relevance for the kind of interactions between and within individuals and small groups oriented to theory production — that is to say, in Henri Simon’s terms, more on the willed pole than the spontaneous pole. It is notable, though, that Gunn, along with Adrian Wilding, in a recent series of texts, has returned to such ideas in the context of the large-scale social movements and struggles since the 2008 crisis. In these more recent texts they argue that the idea of mutual recognition and the conversation is central not just to small-scale interaction with texts and other people in the social production of truth and theory, but also that it is at the heart of recent struggles, of the revolutionary process in general, and of communism itself.

34. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 105

35. *Ibid.*, 91.

The Unbearable Openness of Communism

Gunn and Wilding argue that mutual recognition as it was identified and described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* is at the core of Marx’s critique of capitalism and conception of communism.³⁶ The heart of mutual recognition is that individuals “enjoy freedom through interaction with one another”.³⁷ Mutual recognition involves the recognition of the other’s freedom. Recognition only counts as recognition when it is freely given, and freedom is only freedom when it is recognised. Their argument is that capitalism undermines mutual recognition. It does so not in the way that the relations of direct domination of pre-capitalism did, but through the structuring of social interaction by social institutions and definitional roles, such as those of private property, politics, educational institutions, the mass media, etc., a kind of structuring that stands over individuals.

It might be objected that capitalism is precisely defined by the mutual recognition of commodity owners, where each recognises the other as the owner of either commodity or money and obtains what the other has only by a freely entered exchange. This aspect of capitalism is affirmed by Hegel as Abstract Right. It was an essential contribution of Marx to grasp how, when one moves from the sphere of exchange to that of production, this system of equality and freedom turns out to be a system of inequality and unfreedom.³⁸ The formal recognition of freedom and equality continually reproduces relations of capital and labour, that is, of inequality, exploitation, and domination. This is accepted by Gunn and Wilding, but their argument is that what this means is that in capitalism we are dealing with a contradictory form of mutual recognition, contradicted by the existence of these role definitions and social institutions, most pronouncedly the social institution of property.³⁹ The relation between wage workers and their bosses is a free contract where each is recognised, but behind this is the fact

36. Importantly, this does not mean another attempt to put the famous master slave dialectic at the heart of the critique of capitalism.

37. Gunn and Wilding ‘Marx and Recognition’, 4.

38. See e.g. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), ch. 6 and Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), ch II.

39. ‘[F]or Marx, property and commodity exchange are rooted in ... a bewitched or diabolically “inverted” conception of mutual recognition itself — [which] is present in property relations. ... the recognition presupposed by property is, throughout, recognition of a contradictory (or, better, a contradicted) kind. Not until property relations are ended may uncontradicted recognition — mutual recognition in, so to say, a non-diabolical form — obtain.’ Gunn and Wilding ‘Marx and Recognition’, 16.

that employers represent a world of absolute property and workers a world of propertylessness, a relation that is constantly reproduced. As such, “reciprocity falls short of unconstrained interaction and freedom is limited to what the role definitions concerned permit”.⁴⁰ Property in its various forms — commodities, markets, and the power of money — stands *over and against* the individuals who, in order to survive, must relate to each other as proprietors. As Gunn and Wilding argue:

When property (not just this or that species of property, but property *per se*) is dispensed with, individuality ceases to be monological and possessive; freedom ceases to exist *in spite of* other individuals. Once property is transcended, freedom exists in and through interaction with others and individuals risk their identity in mutual recognition’s flow.⁴¹

For Gunn and Wilding, Marx’s view of proletarian revolution is nothing less than a break from one-sided and/or role-definitional recognition, into uncontradicted mutual recognition which respects no pre-given structures but on the basis of an unrestricted and thus free interaction, following only those goals which it has set for itself.⁴²

Here we can see the radical difference between the revolutionary recognition appealed to by Gunn and Wilding and that evoked by left liberal theorists of recognition such as Taylor and Honneth. Those figures draw on the “reconciled” Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* and thus accept the separate spheres and institutions of capitalist society, which means a recognition of social roles, and relating through role definitions. Gunn and Wilding draw on the *Phenomenology*, which is inspired by the “wild” recognition of the French Revolution where social institutions — what Hegel calls spiritual masses — are dissolved.⁴³ Only in such a revolutionary situation is an uncontradicted mutual recognition possible, one where there is an “I” that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’⁴⁴ and in which “each, undivided by the whole, always

40. *Ibid.*, 6.

41. *Ibid.*, 42.

42. In *Transcritique* Karatani appropriates the Kantian kingdom of ends to play a quite similar role.

43. See Richard Gunn, ‘Recognition Contradicted’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 113 no. 2 (2014), and Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘Revolutionary or Less-Than-Revolutionary Recognition?’, *Heathwood Institute* (2013).

44. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford 1977), 177.

does everything, and what appears to be done by the whole is the direct and conscious deed of each”.⁴⁵ For the late Hegel of *The Philosophy of Right* this possibility is confined to the religious community. This expresses the shift of the historical moment from the immediate, post-revolutionary one of the *Phenomenology* to the conservative post-restoration climate of the 1820s. Gunn and Wilding’s argument is that the kind of thinking suggested by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, while now appearing esoteric and requiring deep effort to grasp, would have been in everyone’s grasp in the revolutionary situation — the sunlight of the French revolution — that produced it.⁴⁶ At that time this science would have met a mutually recognitive audience “ripe to receive ‘truth’”⁴⁷ that is one that could have “learned and appropriated in a *questioning* and *evaluative* (rather than a merely passive and accepting) way”.⁴⁸

Thus the principle of conversation that communist theory invokes is very different from that which is sometimes called up in capitalist politics and civil society. We can say that where uncontradicted (i.e., revolutionary) interaction is denied, good conversation is rare and under pressure at all times. Much of the “difficulty” and “complexity” of communist theory is related to this situation. Communist conversation in a revolution or situation of intense struggle erupts everywhere,⁴⁹ at other times it is not easy.

There is an objection, that Gunn and Wilding are aware of, that their suggestion of the centrality of conversation and mutual recognition to the revolutionary process makes such a process sound “too genteel”. Here the links they make between such conversation and the revolutionary crowd and its form of violence are important. In a situation of role definitions and separation of spheres, violence can be a necessary part of establishing the conversation — a form of communication that tends toward mutual recognition. The pre-established channels, social roles, and institutions that distort or contradict mutual recognition are cleared away in the revolutionary situation which allows

45. *Ibid.*, 584.

46. Camatte makes a similar point: “[W]hen there is no longer any action, only reflexive and intensive thought can reencounter that which the activity of the masses had been able to discover after its generous impulse.” *Bordiga and the Passion for Communism* (Spartacus 1974).

47. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 71.

48. Richard Gunn, ‘Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: Theory and Practice’, *Heathwood Institute* (2013), 14.

49. The coming together of individuals from varied political histories in the worker student committees that Perlman and Gregoire describe is an example (see section I above).

an “unconstrained interaction... interaction which is open to all comers and where any issue whatever may be raised”.⁵⁰

A revolutionary process with society polarising into a party of anarchy and party of order advances by drawing more and more people into the conversation. Mutual recognition is arrived at in and through conflict with those who would deny it, and indeed, when confronted with the active enemies of mutual recognition — for example the police — violence and force is the way the party of order enters into the conversation. In the example of the French Revolution, it was the perceived threat of the army that created the “fused group” which stormed the Bastille.⁵¹ Writing in the aftermath of the 1990 poll tax riots, Gunn turns around the normal distinction between “violence” and “force” — it is not the instrumental violence of the state that is acceptable but the communicative violence of the crowd.⁵² Gunn argues that a consistent and genuine pacifist position may “have to celebrate the (participatory or communicative) violence which liberals count horrendous, and deplore the (instrumental and statist) violence which liberals reluctantly defend”.⁵³

In a strikingly spiky passage, Gunn suggests that the violence of revolution involves:

a rise and fall of factions so swift that none can claim legitimacy and so contingent that we can never declare an allegiance to one or other of them — opens a space for political conversation of the best sort. Over our last glass of wine, at the end of the evening, our conversation is likely to be sharpened if neither of us knows which of us may be unlocking the guillotine blade tomorrow.⁵⁴

Humanism?

The unashamed embrace of Hegel in this kind of argumentation may be uncomfortable to those steeled in the anti-humanism of recent French thought. Gunn and Wilding address this issue directly. Noting that

50. Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘Occupy as Mutual Recognition’, *Heathwood Institute* (2013). Their reference here is to Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 357.

51. Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (New Left Books 1976), 345–63.

52. Richard Gunn, ‘Politics and Violence’ in Richard Bellamy, ed., *Theories and Concepts of Politics* (Manchester UP 1993).

53. *Ibid.*, 288–289.

54. *Ibid.*, 286.

“humanism” can mean several things, only some of which are objectionable, they argue that Marx and Hegel reject a humanism based on a scenario of history involving a pre-existing human essence waiting to be realised. Thus they state: “If the notion of humanism turns on the idea of self-realisation, Marx is (we may agree with Althusser) a theoretical anti-humanist.”⁵⁵ But so they would contend was Hegel. Their claim is that neither Marx “nor the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*” has a teleological view of history in which “‘humanity’ is seen as a grand totaliser or global subject, and history as that subject’s expression or self-realisation”.⁵⁶

They acknowledge that they have placed the idea of “uncontradicted recognition” in a similar conceptual place to the idea of such a subject. However, they point out that uncontradicted recognition is not a fixed and determinate entity, self, or subject that can realize itself. It is rather “an endless process”, because while such recognition is a situation “where freedom (understood as self-determination) and an unfolding of human capacities obtains”, it is at the same time “the polar opposite of fixity and determination”. Thus Gunn and Wilding assert “the ghost of ‘humanism’ is laid”.⁵⁷

However, Gunn and Wilding recognise that laying to rest the ghost of humanism, and ending the mystification it entails, involves a cost. Compared to the comforting humanist vision of self-realisation of the historic subject, Gunn and Wilding emphasise that revolution conceived as mutual recognition has dark or less-than-comforting aspects. The world of social institutions that Hegel called “spiritual masses” [*geistige Massen*] implies something quasi-natural that stands over individuals. Revolutionary recognition overthrows these institutions.⁵⁸ At the same moment, this quasi-natural aspect of social institutions provides — for most people, most of the time — a certain reliability and security. Human society reproduces itself behind people’s backs; it appears to follow natural laws. This is at the same time alienating and reassuring. One knows where one is with money; it can reliably command the labour of others, and relatedly one can rely on people acting out of role definitions because their private attitude is essentially irrelevant.

55. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’, 44.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 45.

58. ‘The reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves.’ Marx, *The German Ideology* (MECW 5), 81.

By contrast, relations of mutual recognition make more demands upon us. They are based at all times on personal relations, and one has to assess if the speech or action is made in good faith. Mutual recognition involves a relinquishment of the “beguiling and bewitching” security afforded by institutions and social roles. A condition based on mutual recognition is, as Gunn and Wilding put it, more “artificial” and less “natural” — or, strictly speaking, less “quasi-natural” — than a condition of alienation.⁵⁹ Freedom is exposed or, as Gunn and Wilding say, “excoriated”. They write:

Communism knows no natural or quasi-natural inertia: although it is humane, there is no question of man’s (or humanity’s) realising its “true essence” — or “true nature”. Lacking quasi-natural security, communism lacks the stability that inertia brings. At each stage in a communist society’s existence, a relapse into what Hegel terms history and what Marx terms “hitherto existing society” remains a possibility. No guarantees against a relapse are conceivable. More than this: what may be termed ontological insecurity and communism are inseparable. In the margins of a text describing communist existence, hints of existential horror appear.⁶⁰

The idea that communism involves the achievement of good conversation is similar to the way some groups, like *Théorie Communiste* and the Invisible Committee, have taken up the traditional African idea of the *palabre*.⁶¹ Speculating about communism, Bernard Lyon states:

The central element of praxis is the *palabre*, which is at the same time antecedent, concomitant and subsequent to all action. The *palabre*

59. For a similar argument see ‘Life Against Nature’ in this issue.

60. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marxism and Recognition’, 46. The authors here reference a 1918 Bloch essay: ‘The course of liberation ... is ... not aimed at facilitating somnolence or generalising the pleasurable, comfortable leisure of the contemporary upper classes. We do not propose to end up with the world of Dickens, or to warm ourselves at the fireplaces of Victorian England, at best. The goal, the eminently practical goal, and the basic motive of socialist ideology is this: to give to every man not just a job but his own distress, wretchedness, misery and darkness, his own buried, summoning light; to give to everyone’s life a Dostoevskyan touch...’ Ernst Bloch, ‘Karl Marx, Death and Apocalypse’ in *Spirit and Utopia* (Stanford 2000), 268.

61. Comité Invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient* (La Fabrique 2007), 111. *Palabre* — ‘word, speech, talk’ — refers to a custom in parts of Africa of creating and maintaining a social bond through a meeting, often under a tree, in which all or part of the community of a village participates.

is the mode of decision, of control and rectification of all acts; it has no end. It includes all activities, and for all activities we take the time to go right to the (provisional) end of the *palabre*. The *palabre* is knowledge of the real, conscious action. Conscious history means that we come to an agreement! The quest for the best possible decision, for the maximum possible points of view, for an action that can be changed, or even canceled, not weighing down the future, is the constant concern of the *palabre* in and between the networks. Conflicts are never conflicts of interest because there is no situation to reproduce in which the conflicts are insoluble.⁶²

Communism will be the achievement and maintenance of “good conversation” through the overthrow of existing social institutions. In the absence of such an overthrow, the achievement of mutual recognition in good conversation can only be approximated and is always at risk. It is possible for two people or a small group to maintain a good conversation, but it is difficult. The maintenance of good conversation in a group oriented to communist revolution is thus a challenging endeavour, which can only be approximated. The cases with which we started this text provide examples of the kind of tensions that may interfere or destroy mutual recognition in a group and cause the conversation to fail. How can we make sense of such occurrences?

62. Bernard Lyon, ‘17 Theses on Communism’, *Sic* (2012).

III. CASE STUDIES ANALYSED

The cases of the Praxis Group and the Theory Group with which we began this text concerned examples where the conversation in small groups broke down. In trying to make sense of them, the theory of the conversation offered by Gunn (which both these groups were aware of and referred to) seemed insufficient to deal with the crises the groups faced or to understand how they were resolved. To make sense of experiences like those cited in the case studies, we have turned to psychoanalysis — “group relations” — and in particular to the work of Wilfred Bion.¹ Here we found some texts that seemed to speak uncannily to us and to the experiences related in our case studies.

In “The Internal Establishment”, Paul Hoggett, using a case study of a community project he was asked to consult with, gives an account of certain dynamics of group life that are similar to the case of the Praxis Group and the experiences that many people have when they start to question aspects of political groups with which they are involved.²

Hoggett draws on psychoanalytic ideas from a number of sources,³ but especially Wilfred Bion’s idea of an “establishment” within the group, through which to understand what he identifies as a deep structure in collectivities that allows certain forms of thinking and life to exist, but which ruthlessly acts against others.

Borrowing Christopher Bollas’s term the “unthought known”,⁴ Hoggett suggests that groups, like individuals, have aspects which, while known in some sense, cannot really be thought about, for to do so would threaten the group’s illusions about itself. For Hoggett, the fact that groups tell partially illusory stories about themselves is not a problem in itself — it is part of “the creative quality of all social life”.⁵ “Groups” as Hoggett puts it, “occupy that potential space where nothing is simply ‘real’ nor simply ‘hallucinated’”.⁶ Their creative capacity exists in a space

1. It is indeed part of the openness that we intend that it is open to much more than simply various traditions of Marxism, communist or revolutionary theory, but also to psychoanalysis and other forms of ‘scientific’ thought in the broadest sense, of discourses oriented to truth about ourselves and the universe.

2. Paul Hoggett, ‘The Internal Establishment’ in Parthenope Bion Talamo, et al., eds., *Bion’s Legacy to Groups* (Karnac 1998), 9–24.

3. Significant references other than Bion are Christopher Bollas, Herbert Rosenfeld, Donald Meltzer and John Steiner.

4. Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (Free Association 1987).

5. Hoggett, ‘Internal Establishment’, 20.

they make for themselves through their self narrative. But, as he warns, “the step between illusion and delusion is short indeed”.⁷ The “imaginative fiction” has the propensity to become a “consolatory myth... constantly reinforced by propaganda”.⁸ The story the group presents to others is as much about misleading itself as misleading others. Questioning this story is often experienced as persecutory and shaming, and produces a reaction from what he calls the group’s “establishment”: a “pathological organisation” within the group which guards its “unthought known” against examination and critique, and responds by patching over gaps in its illusions.

Summing up the idea, Hoggett suggests the establishment is “a reactionary and secretive force”, a hidden deep structure, which operates “more like a network than an institution”; that, while capable of acting with violence and terror, it normally relies on “guile, propaganda and patronage”, adeptly drawing upon individuals’ worst qualities, “their desire not to think too much, not to ask too many questions”.⁹

Hoggett suggests that the split between a restrictive establishment and the rebel within a group pushing new thinking is not one of good and bad individuals, but something that exists within individuals themselves.¹⁰ The conflict of which Hoggett speaks is between two universal tendencies in groups and individuals: one towards development or learning from experience, the other towards resisting such learning. As he puts it, in a group every “member, in differing proportions, is both a victim, a tyrant, a rebel and a collaborator — that is, part of the establishment and part of the opposition. The function of the establishment is to police this racket.”¹¹

Hoggett’s typology suggests that “individuals” criticising groups from “outside” can be as much a victim of restricted thinking, and as conformist to a “group in the mind”, as the members of more obvious groups in the world that they subject to criticism. Moreover, Hoggett’s interpretation can be easily extended from formal groups and

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. He thus describes the establishment as ‘an area of silence in the life of the mind or the group where the body of the group is sensitive and should only be touched with the utmost care’. Ibid, 23.

10. While Bion’s idea of the establishment was developed especially in relation to the group (specifically his experience of the psychoanalytic group), he suggests it applies to the individual as well. The other psychoanalytical theorists on whom Hoggett draws — Rosenfeld, Meltzer, and Steiner — developed their ideas of ‘pathological organisation’, ‘rackets’ and ‘gangs’ to understand individual personality structures. Hoggett then reapplies those notions to the group.

11. Ibid., 23.

institutions to the informal milieus and networks that people now tend to operate in, and even loose identifications like “the left”, “anarchism”, “marxism”, “the ultra-left”, or “the movement”, which may have their own “unthought knowns”, their own establishment, their own injunctions against thinking certain thoughts, and their own pathological ways of dealing with dissent.

Drawing on Hoggett, we might say that what happened in the Praxis Group was a failure of the group and its establishment to deal with the change and development that the new ideas represented. The new ideas challenged the group’s “unthought known” regarding the relation of theory and practice and the role of radicals and revolutionary theory. The focus on the new ideas was seen to get in the way of the group’s practical orientation, its existing conception of its purpose. The new ideas were seen as a threat, and action was taken to eliminate their disruptive presence.

The Theory Group formed with an explicit aim of being open to new ideas, and ultimately to reality itself. It was influenced by the same ideas that tore apart the Praxis Group. One danger it faced was that the new ideas that were so explosive to the framework of the Praxis Group would become their own restrictive framework that functions as an establishment. However, the tensions that almost tore the new group apart in its early years were of a different character, related as a shadow to the very positive feelings its open creativity generated.

Interestingly, just as we found in Hoggett’s “Inner Establishment” a description that uncannily matches aspects of the Praxis Group, in his *Partisans in an Uncertain World* Hoggett offers a way of thinking about what he calls the creative or “Revolutionary Work Group” that resonates strongly with the case of the Theory Group. Hoggett recounts an experience of forming a group with politically like-minded academic colleagues. He describes the excitement, free-flowing creativity, and sense of possibility of the group. Spontaneously bound together by the shared desire and imagination of its members, the group does not require any formal discipline. Noting Bion’s concept of co-operation applied to the work group, Hoggett suggests that, as apt as it may be, it “hardly does justice to the electric-like nature” of the group he is describing, which can be better thought of as a “free association... in which the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all”.¹²

Similar to Gunn’s account of the conversation, Hoggett finds a model for this peculiar kind of willed group in the accounts given of crowds and other collectivities that form in relation to revolutionary events. He draws on a description of such collectives by Polan (who in turn is drawing on Sartre) who states that they can draw “on an almost electric field of common assumptions and shared norms”, allowing them to carry out their tasks and pursue their goals “with a speed, efficiency, willingness and comradeship that makes formal structures and procedures practically redundant”.¹³ People who have seen barricades thrown up, whether in Paris in 1968 or Gezi Park in 2013, or participated in lower key events of social contestation, will recognise what is being talked about here. Yet Hoggett claims that such a process can also apply to a more willed small group.

Hoggett’s description of the character of his small group and its mutual supportive common purpose as “exciting” and “electric-like” resonates with many people’s experiences of the initial period of a political group or project, whether it be a reading group, publishing venture, or a more immediately struggle-oriented collectivity. What he describes as the problems that such groups encounter also, unfortunately, resonate. He noted that, almost immediately,

...we were each aware of the possibility of betrayal. This was not about defection, of joining “the other side”, for at that moment there were no sides to be drawn; rather it was a fear of one’s fellows not giving of themselves. The creative [or revolutionary] group demands one thing: the generosity of its members ... What is feared, then, is not defection but the failure to give generously; for the group this is the one form of dissent which is difficult to tolerate.¹⁴

12. Paul Hoggett, *Partisans in an Uncertain World: The Psychoanalysis of Engagement* (Free Association 1992), 156.

13. *Ibid.*, 157.

14. *Ibid.*, 157.

In the Theory Group, the tension that Hoggett describes seemed to be at work in the conflict around the member who wished to go abroad. It came up at other times around fears that someone might use ideas developed in a collective context to advance a personal academic career. For Hoggett, “This possibility, that one’s comrades may differ

in their commitment arouses both psychotic and depressive anxieties, both the phantasy of the disintegration of the group and the phantasy of its disfigurement".¹⁵ One might add that what one sees and finds unbearable in the other may also represent a part of oneself that one disavows. The anger and hatred directed at the comrade who is seen to betray or sell-out is a way of expelling a part of oneself that might like to act in this way, and it is the way that the other stands in for such parts of oneself that accounts for the passion of the hatred.

As Hoggett suggests, such anxieties — “potentially unbearable feelings of mistrust, betrayal, disappointment and disillusionment”¹⁶ — are unavoidable; the best that can be achieved is their containment. This means that the creation of some sort of establishment (whose function in part is such containment) is inevitable, and the task becomes to create an establishment “which has more the quality of being benign and less the quality of being destructive”.¹⁷ He suggests that the way to minimize the need for this establishment — and to make the one that inevitably is created more benign — is to create a culture or “a way of being” in the group which is generous and tolerant, that which in everyday language, “is referred to through phrases such as ‘it takes all sorts’ and ‘live and let live’”. This is difficult because “the greater the intensity of one’s own commitment the more it cries out to be requited”. However, as he argues, if “the group demands the generosity of its members, then it must adopt a generous attitude in return”.¹⁸

The power of such analyses as Hoggett offers seem self-evident to us. Their illuminating power derives from a combination of Marxian and psychoanalytic perspectives.¹⁹ These insights have also led us to turn to psychoanalysis and in particular the work of Wilfred Bion which underpins Hoggett’s work.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 158.

17. Ibid., 157–158.

18. Ibid., 158.

19. Hoggett was a socialist activist in the 1970s and maintains such a sensibility today, with a particular concern for climate change.

IV. A THEORY OF GROUPS AND A THEORY OF THINKING

[T]he difference between a true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for the lie but not for the true thought. Nobody need think the true thought: it awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought. The lie and the thinker are inseparable. The thinker is of no consequence to the truth, but the truth is logically necessary to the thinker. His significance depends on whether or not he will entertain the thought, but the thought remains unaltered. In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior existence of the liar. The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies. Descartes’s tacit assumption that thoughts presuppose a thinker is valid only for the lie.¹

1. Wilfred Bion, *Attention and Interpretation* (Karnac Books 1995), 102–103.

Wilfred Bion, possibly the most cited author in psychoanalytic literature after Freud, is a somewhat extraordinary figure in the history of psychoanalysis. He revolutionised the understanding of groups through a psychoanalytically informed theory, and then transformed psychoanalysis itself through his theory of thinking. We find both these theories of relevance to what we are and what we do. Before exploring these theories it is worth saying something about the social context and individual that produced them.

Bion was born in 1897 in India into an upper middle-class Anglo-Indian family. His father was a civil engineer directing the construction of railways and irrigation canals. The nature of his father’s work meant that the young Bion absorbed more Indian culture than most colonialist children. A key figure in his upbringing was his Indian nanny or *ayah*² who may have been the source of a certain Eastern philosophical feel to some of his later ideas. In a form of abuse the English upper classes do to their children, he was sent to boarding school in England at the age of 8. He never saw India or his beloved *ayah* again. He was then further traumatised by his experience as a tank commander in WW1. While

2. This woman, who was of the ‘untouchable’ caste, is the first adult mentioned in Bion’s autobiography, Wilfred Bion, *The Long Week-End 1897–1919: Part of a Life* (Fleetwood Press 1982), 9.

others saw him as behaving heroically, with both France and Britain awarding him medals, he described himself as having died on the road to Amiens.³ After the war he studied history before becoming a doctor, psychiatrist, and then a psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic. In this capacity he was a therapist to Samuel Beckett for two years, prompting much later speculation on their influence on each other. Dissatisfied with the eclectic form of therapy he had received and been taught, in 1938 he started a training analysis with John Rickman. With the start of WW2, they broke this off to work together as army psychiatrists.⁴

Bion and Rickman became part of the Tavistock “Invisible College” in the army. This was a time of widespread sympathies with “socialism” among the British intelligentsia and the Tavistock group was no exception.⁵ Experimentation with the possibilities of groups was the order of the day. They were strongly influenced by Kurt Lewin’s field theory.⁶ Rickman was also an important conduit for the idea of “leaderless groups”. During WW1, while Bion had joined the army and played the role of war hero, Rickman — a Quaker — had been a conscientious objector and gone to Russia as an ambulance driver and relief worker. In 1918, he witnessed the revolution in the countryside. Observing the peasant village council, or “Mir”, at work, Rickman noted: “the village formed a leaderless group, and the bond which held the members together was that they shared a common ideal”.⁷

Bion was instrumental in developing a new way of selecting officers. The method he pioneered involved putting candidates together in a “leaderless group” and observing how leadership spontaneously emerged when a group was set tasks. Later in the war Bion and Rickman created what is recognised as one of the first therapeutic communities at the Northfield military psychiatric hospital. This involved giving the patients autonomy to form their own groups to aid

3. ‘Oh yes, I died — on August 8th, 1918’. Bion, *The Long Week-End*, 265.

4. Rickman had been analysed by Freud and Ferencsi. During the war he became Bion’s friend, mentor and collaborator. After the war, the friendship they had developed precluded a continuation of their analysis together, and Rickman recommended Bion start a training analysis with Melanie Klein.

5. A collaborator writes, that during the war, ‘much talk centred on the Gestalt quasi-Marxist approach of Kurt Lewin... In fact the Russians at that time were much favoured by many of us including Rickman and Bion, and Stalin was referred to as Uncle Joe’. Patrick de Mare, ‘Major Bion’ in Malcolm Pines, ed., *Bion and Group Psychotherapy* (Routledge 1992), 112.

6. Kurt Lewin, the ‘father of social psychology’, was a refugee from Germany where he had been an associate of the Frankfurt School. He is attributed the saying, ‘If you want truly to understand something try to change it’. Charles W. Tolman, et al., eds., *Problems of Theoretical Psychology* (Captus 1996), 31.

their rehabilitation. The army High Command were disturbed by the experiment and closed it down after six weeks but it blazed a trail for others to continue such work. After the war, and on the basis of his war-time reputation, the Tavistock Clinic asked Bion to pioneer the use of groups for therapeutic purposes. The patients and staff composing the groups expected him to lead as an expert. To their frustration Bion’s approach was instead to encourage the participants to examine the tensions within the group, including the wish for him to take charge. Bion theorised his experiences in a series of papers later collected as *Experiences in Groups*.⁸ While Bion himself did not pursue this work these ideas became foundational for a method of research and experiential training and development in groups known as the Tavistock or Group Relations approach.⁹

A theory of groups

Bion’s key idea was that all groups operate simultaneously in two ways, displaying two different mentalities. On the one hand, every group is what Bion calls a “work group”. This is what the group consciously thinks it is about. It also refers to the mentality, attitude, and actions that reflect this purpose.¹⁰ The connection of the members in a work group is one of cooperation, where members draw on and develop their skills, capacities, and maturity out of a shared sense of purpose. For Bion, the work group is “in however embryonic a form, scientific”¹¹ because in pursuing their activity, whatever it is, its members probe reality, seek knowledge, learn from experience, and thus change and develop.

However, groups do not always operate in such a transparent, rational, and straightforward way. Groups often also display a mentality and activity that operates on a less conscious level that pulls in a

7. Quoted in Sebastian Kraemer, “The dangers of this atmosphere”: a Quaker connection in the Tavistock Clinic’s development’, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 24 no. 2, 2011. 85.

8. Wilfred Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (Tavistock Publications 1961).

9. ‘In the final analysis, however, whatever group relations education has become is based on Bion’s thought, which provides the heuristic perspective for unravelling the unconscious functioning of groups’. Lawrence et al., ‘The Fifth Basic Assumption’ *Free Associations* no. 24 (1996).

10. The oddness of a Bionian group is that it makes the understanding of itself its work task.

11. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 143. As Grotstein suggests, for Bion ‘scientific’ is about ‘a respect for the undeniable’, an orientation towards truth in the sense of ‘emotional truth both about oneself and about one’s relationships with one’s objects’. James Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis* (Karnac Books 2007).

different direction. Puzzling and often obstructive to the group's conscious aim, Bion found that this mentality and activity coheres and makes sense once we start to see the group as assuming it meets for something more primitive or "basic" than its consciously imagined purpose. He termed this aspect the "basic assumption group".

Bion identified three such basic assumptions, which he linked with primitive emotional drives: *dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing*. These group-states each give rise to a different kind of leadership, which may or may not correspond with any acknowledged or unacknowledged leadership of the work group activity.¹²

Under the "dependency" basic assumption, the group acts as if it meets to receive everything it needs — wisdom, knowledge, guidance, etc. — from one member. Under the "fight-flight" basic assumption, the group acts as if its purpose is to fight or escape from a perceived enemy. The threat may be external or internal, clearly or poorly defined. Close to panic, the group is particularly hostile to thinking, but will follow anyone who seems to offer an immediate way of dealing with the threat, whether this is by attacking or running away from the enemy. In the "pairing" basic assumption, the group orients itself patiently to the interaction of two people (or perhaps two sub-groups). There is a mood of hopeful anticipation, a sense that the group will be saved, with the underlying assumption being that through the pair the group is going to give birth to something great, perhaps a new idea or new way to do things.¹³

An essential point for Bion is that the work group and basic assumption group do not apply to separate groups, but to forms of activity present in every group and every participant simultaneously, with sometimes one and sometimes the other aspect dominating. If the work group aspect is dominant, the group gets on with its task; if the basic assumption aspect is dominant, the group behaves defensively. Groups can be seen to be influenced by a certain basic assumption for a long time, at other times a rapid oscillation between the different basic assumptions can be observed. Basic assumptions may at times have a negligible effect on, or even be compatible with work group

12. The focus on the issue of 'leadership' may disturb the sensibilities of those who for good reasons like to think 'we don't have leaders', but to refuse to think about something doesn't abolish it. Bion offers a way of understanding how leadership functions often in quite spontaneous ways.

13. The messiah, of course, never actually comes.

activity,¹⁴ but at other times the basic assumption group interferes with or substitutes itself for the work activity. At times when stress circulates through the group, this mentality may come for extended periods to dominate the group in ways that can be compared to psychosis.¹⁵

How might such ideas apply to the "political" or "revolutionary" group? As was alluded to in the introduction, one of the problems with the idea of a "work group" orientated to revolution or communism is that this is clearly not a practical object for willed groups in the present. Thus the idea suggested in Bion's group theory of "keeping on task" is particularly difficult for a willed group when the tasks it orientates to — communism or revolution — will actually not be its product but rather a product of spontaneous (i.e. *determined*¹⁶) group processes at a class and societal level.

Bion suggested that the idea that a group acts consistently in the manner of the work group is "an idealised construct" or even a "group phantasy". This seems particularly true of groups nominally committed to the idea of revolution or communism. We all know that other stuff goes on in such groups. Whether it is routinised activity that no one really believes in, competition with other groups, or internal dramas and intrigues, there is much that goes on that has little to do with making progress in terms of what participants imagine to be their work group function. Observing basic assumption behaviour in such groups is not hard: there is the common enough dependency phenomenon of a group having an — often unacknowledged — leading member or guru who the others consistently look to for guidance (even if at the same time this may involve regularly being disappointed by what is delivered). Fight/flight behaviour can be seen in the hostile and competitive relations such groups often have with each other, and in the internal splits they are prone to. One might also see an affinity with the

14. In certain circumstances, for example, fight-flight might be very useful if a group does have a real and distinct enemy to contend with.

15. As we shall see below, Kleinian psychoanalysis normalises what it is to be 'psychotic' through its idea of the paranoid schizoid position as a primitive form of mental functioning we all fall into at times.

16. '[M]ovements of the proletariat are completely determined, both by the situation which this class occupies within the totality of the social relations that are fundamental to modern society, and also by a specific conjuncture which, during a given period, provides it with the opportunity to intervene on the historical stage.... So "spontaneous", in the sense in which Marx and Luxemburg employ the term, means nothing more than absolutely determined by the whole of social relations. [It is not revolutionaries] who by playing the people's educators can create the historic situation in which the proletariat becomes what it is, but the very development of modern society. When such a situation appears, revolutionaries of non-working class origin... "confined" within bourgeois society, unite →

pairing basic assumption when a group is dominated by a messianic hope.

The notion of a fundamental assumption that the group must be preserved also seems apparent and glossed as the necessity for political organisation (or for “the party”). Political groups also seem particularly prone to times when strange, often disturbing and unpleasant things happen “between individuals, in factions and sometimes throughout the group” persisting “sometimes to the point of the demise of the project, more often to the point of a split or expulsion”.¹⁷ But we should not limit our recognition of these behaviours to formalized political groups — all kinds of networks, scenes and milieus that people operate in can display such behaviors as well.

Analysing what is going on in a group is not just a matter of applying basic assumptions. It is possible, for example, to see basic assumptions at play in the two case studies with which we began; however, the analysis we borrowed from Hoggett in the previous section indicates that any specific group difficulty will require not just identifying basic assumptions but imaginative exploration of what precisely is going on in any given case.

A seemingly simple lesson from Bion’s work is that when operating in groups we can attempt to bring into focus both the work aspect of the group, its aim or purpose, and the less conscious aspects of what is happening that interfere with this. Alongside its work group activity, the group may make, to use Bion’s phrase, the study of its tensions a group task. Are the energies of the group focused on its agreed task or are they being dissipated in something else? This may involve not suppressing the processes that are interfering but exploring them. At times — and such times are inevitable — when the work group is no longer dominant, collective awareness can be brought to it. This may, however, be difficult and require courage from its participants. Those who ask the group to examine itself often become the target of group hostility. Bion argued that when strange things are happening in a group, everyone is affected, and the best one can do is retain a capacity to “think under fire”.

Bion is often taken as having a largely negative view on groups. This is because the approach he took to leading groups brought out the

themselves in the proletarian party, which spontaneously forms in order to solve the revolutionary tasks.’ Authier, *The Beginnings of the Workers’ Movement in Russia*, 1.

17. Robert M. Young, ‘Group Relations: An Introduction’ (Process Press 1997).

strange and disturbing things that can occur within them. By producing stress and anxiety in participants, Bionian groups bring into prominence the unconscious and defensive basic-assumption aspects of group functioning. Bion’s point was that we all carry these capacities with us. Groups, just as they allow us to achieve possibilities we can’t attain on our own, can also bring out some of our less appealing, even psychotic, qualities. He thought, however, that in the long run “despite the influence of the basic assumptions”¹⁸ the work group was triumphant.¹⁹

Indeed far from upholding the individual against the irrationality of the group, there is in Bion an insistence that group-ness is fundamental to the individual, as he puts it:

The individual is, and always has been, a member of a group, even if his membership consists in behaving in such a way that reality is given to an idea that he does not belong to a group at all. The individual is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his “groupishness”.²⁰

Drawing on this, Wolfenstein argues powerfully that the whole idea of the individual as “a self conceived outside of society and essentially constituted from the inside out” is a group phantasy.²¹ Difficult experiences with groups may encourage taking refuge in this defensive phantasy, but it is a delusion.

The “scientific character” that Bion attributes generically to the work group aspect of any group takes on particular significance for a group oriented to theorizing the communist overcoming of capitalism. In this case, thinking — developing “insight and understanding” — is fundamental to what “we” are about; at least it is what we like to think we are about. Though not entirely separate from any engagement we may have in struggles, it is thinking, understanding, and theorising experience that offers itself to us as a task worth pursuing. At the same time, such a task is not a straightforward one. The object of enquiry —

18. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 135.

19. ‘[O]ne can see both the strength of the emotions associated with the basic assumption and the vigour and vitality which can be mobilized by the work group’. *Ibid.*, 100.

20. *Ibid.*, 168.

21. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, ‘Group phantasies and the individual: A critical analysis of psychoanalytic group psychology’ *Free Associations* no. 20 (1990), 154. Marx makes a similar point in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*.

capitalist society – is not something that stands over and against the enquirer but is rather a dynamic process of the composition and decomposition of social relations through crisis and struggle that includes the enquirer within it. Capitalism is not out there, it traverses us, it *is* us. As Wolfenstein puts it, in both psychoanalysis and the theory of social revolution: “We are the problem we are trying to solve”.²² To be aware of what is going on is painful. Outside of struggles there are no easy benchmarks to judge if one’s work group activity is having results, nor does such enquiry make one’s life easy. Indeed it is perhaps the difficulties of this task, which involves going against all the obviousness of bourgeois society, that give rise to some of the pseudo-answers and pathologies that particularly afflict such groups.

It is relatively easy to identify how basic assumptions may interfere with the group orientated to revolutionary change, but what, in the absence of revolution, might its work consist in? If we are going to say that we have a task of *trying to think*, then it is worth examining the second period of Bion’s work which has informed our understanding: his theory of thinking.

Towards a Theory of Thinking: the Kleinian Development

While others enthusiastically took up the ideas on groups that Bion had developed, he was not particularly satisfied with them.²³ Finishing a training analysis with Melanie Klein, he went on from the early 1950s to practice individual psychoanalysis and in particular to work with psychotic patients. It was out of this work that his most significant contribution to psychoanalysis would emerge – the theory of thinking.²⁴

Bion’s theory of thinking only makes sense in relation to the Kleinian development in psychoanalysis, and its key concepts of projective identification and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. For this reason, and because we find such concepts are independently of value to understanding ourselves and the world, it is worth outlining them here.

22. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Psycho-analytic-Marxism: Groundwork* (Free Association Books 1993), 208.

23. In a letter to one of his children, he says of *Experiences in Groups* that ‘the one book I couldn’t be bothered with even when pressure was put on me 10 years later has been a continuous success’. Wilfred Bion, *All My Sins Remembered (Another Part of a Life) & The Other Side of Genius: Family Letters* (Fleetwood Press 1985), 213.

Drawing on an earlier discussion of mania and depression by Karl Abraham and Freud, and her own pioneering work with children, Klein postulated an affinity between early infantile states of mind and those encountered in psychosis. She described two fundamental ways of relating to the world, which she termed the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and the movement between them as the key task of development. Klein thus displaced the Freudian focus on the oedipal drama, around the fifth year, by a concern for more primitive levels of mental functioning, which emerge sequentially in the infant’s first year, but which she thought continue to play a role throughout life.

Klein contended that the infant, in its first few months, has a dominating anxiety of being annihilated, and defends itself against this by a process of projective identification. Projective identification is an unconscious phantasy of taking things in and spitting things out which feels real and has real effects on the developing ego. This involves a splitting of its experience into that of either wholly good and or wholly bad objects. The infant coheres its first sense of self through identification with and love for its introjected good object, which it needs to keep separate from its “bad” feelings of hatred and destructiveness which it puts into the bad object. The prototypical good object is the gratifying mother or good breast, the bad is the non-gratifying mother or bad breast. Klein thought the absence of the object, of the real breast, was “too much” for the youngest infant, and that in its phantasy it instead experiences the non-breast as a concrete “bad breast”, which it tries to get rid of or evacuate through what she called projective identification. In a recurrent struggle to lessen its dominant anxiety, a cycle of splitting, projection, and introjection ensues. The projective identification of the paranoid-schizoid position is thus what one does to one’s difficult experience when one is unable to think about it. If not excessive, this projective identification fulfils a developmental function, allowing an eventual shift to the depressive position.

The depressive position involves a more realistic and integrated picture of the world, in which the ambivalence of one’s objects and one’s feelings towards them begins to be tolerable. The infant recognises that the good and bad perceptions of the maternal object, which

24. Wilfred Bion, ‘A Theory of Thinking’ *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* vol. 43 (1962); Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (William Heinemann 1962); Wilfred Bion, *Elements of Psycho-Analysis* (William Heinemann 1963); Wilfred Bion, *Transformations* (William Heinemann 1965).

it has previously kept rigidly apart, refer to a whole object, an *other* person. It thus recognises that the bad (absent) breast which it has intensely hated is actually the same object as the good breast which it has loved. As a result, the main form of anxiety shifts from fear of one's own imminent annihilation to concern for this object: the person upon which the individual depends and which it is not able to control through mechanisms of projective identification, as it previously phantasised it could. The dawning awareness of the reality of self and others, and of the impact of one's actions on those others, is painful and subject to retreat back towards the paranoid schizoid position.

Importantly for Klein, transition between these positions, though occurring for the first time around the middle of the first year, is not to be understood as a once-and-for-all achievement, but as a continuously active process. The paranoid schizoid position is not so much a stage that is left behind, but more a distinct way of apprehending reality and organising experience which continues to play a role throughout a person's life. The attainment of the depressive position then, is neither smooth nor certain; it continues throughout childhood and indeed can be considered a lifelong developmental task.

The understanding of the positions as two fundamental modes of organizing and processing experience, different ways of relating to the world, each generating its own quality of being, means that whether or not one is persuaded by the Kleinian speculation about the psychic world of the infant, it is possible to accept the positions on other grounds: namely one's own observation of one-self and others.²⁵

Splitting of good and bad, an idealisation of the good object(s) and denigration of (the) bad object(s), in which thoughts and oneself seem to be un-integrated or dis-integrating — this is the paranoid-schizoid position. Recognition of the ambivalence of self, of others, and of the situation, in which one's thoughts and perceptions are more integrated, expresses the realism of the depressive position. If the depressive position is hopefully where we more normally operate from, we all will have encountered the paranoid-schizoid state in ourselves, in others, and especially in collective life. We are all capable of moving into

25. Thus while it might seem to us that a lot of psychoanalytic language such as that of an external and internal world, with projective identification as a form of sender/receiver communication, is metaphorical rather than a description of actual processes, it has provided a way of understanding and exploring human subjectivity—its phantasy and emotion, distress and suffering, destructiveness

the paranoid-schizoid state of mind, especially if put under enough stress. The psychotic part of our personality exists alongside the non-psychotic part, and thus the shift into the paranoid-schizoid position is more a sideways than a backwards movement. If Freud showed us we are all neurotic, Klein showed us we are all psychotic. and pathology — in a way few other languages have.

From Working with Psychosis to the Theory of Thinking

Freud famously thought psychotics were unanalyzable. Bion was one of a small group of analysts who, fortified by the exploration of their own primitive mental functioning in their analyses with Klein, felt able to work with such patients.²⁶ Puzzling over why such patients were so hard to understand, Bion identified what he called “attacks on linking” — attacks on the awareness of reality and the linking of objects necessary to thinking itself.²⁷ Such attacks defend psychotics against the unbearable emotional truths in their lives. Working with such disordered forms of thinking (or what the psychotic did *instead* of thinking) led Bion into theorising what the normal person does when they think. As he stated later:

It would be easy to say that the obvious thing to do with thoughts is to think them; it is more difficult to decide what such a statement means in fact. In practice the statement becomes more meaningful when it is possible to contrast what a psychotic personality does with thoughts *instead* of thinking them, and how much discipline and difficulty a measure of coherent thinking involves for anyone.²⁸

Thinking is hard and can be painful — most of the time people do not really think, they reproduce ideas that are already circulating without any development of them. What we have found is that Bion's theory of thinking offers us a way of helping make sense of what some of the obstacles are to such development. In this section we are asking readers to immerse themselves in rather difficult

26. The others were Hannah Segal and Herbert Rosenfeld.

27. In psychoanalysis 'object', while sometimes a physical thing or a concept, more often refers to another person or to part of a person (e.g. the breast).

28. Bion, *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, 30.

material whose importance and relevance may be hard to ascertain. We find it is worth it.

Getting a handle on Bion's theory of thinking poses certain problems. One difficulty is that it is not really one theory, but a series of models of mental growth and development, and there are questions how each model relates to the others. Another difficulty is that, in Bion's writings, in addition to introducing a series of new concepts, he often chooses to represent them with symbols and algebraic notation. The reader is faced with "K" and "-K" ("minus K") for knowing and its opposite; "beta elements" (β), "alpha function" (Ψ), and "alpha elements" (α) for the most basic mental functions;²⁹ "pre-conceptions", "realizations", and "conceptions" for steadily more complex forms of proto-thoughts; "K>O" for a shift from knowing to becoming; "Ps \leftrightarrow D" for an oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Even the concrete-sounding metaphor of container and contained is sometimes represented by "♀" for container and "♂" for contained.³⁰ Bion's stated purpose in using such symbols was to avoid words already saturated with existing meanings and associations, so that readers are forced to themselves look for realizations of the ideas in their own thinking. The reader is then asked not to passively absorb the theory but to actually *think* themselves.

For our purposes we will not explain all of Bion's terms and symbols in any depth, but just touch on ones which have come to have a particular significance for us:

K and -K
Container and Contained
Ps \leftrightarrow D
Mystic and Establishment

K and -K

Bion sees that in the individual and the group, there is both a drive towards thinking, learning, and development—which he terms "K"—and forces that are antithetical to thought and change, which he calls "minus K" or "-K".³¹

Bion distinguishes between possessing bits of knowledge and knowing as the function of a relationship. The former is a kind of "knowing about" that lends itself to controlling the object, the latter K involves "getting to know" an on-going link between subject and object, and links between one's objects. In the Kleinian and "object relations" version of psychoanalysis before Bion, the main relations between self and objects were love and hate. With the notion of the K link, Bion elevated the drive to knowledge (K) to a level with love (L) and hate (H) as a fundamental affective emotional link between the subject and its objects. Just as "x L y" (or "x H y") indicate a relation of love (or hate) between x and y, the phrase "x K y" indicates a relation or process in which "x is in a state of getting to know y and y is in a state of getting to be known by x".³²

For Bion, attempting to be in a relation of knowing (the K link or K) makes emotional demands. K involves a process of exploration which entails openness and risk; a process that is never completed and has a transformative effect on the knower as well. It requires tolerance of the pain and frustration of not-knowing, in the faith that if one has patience and perseveres, then sense will emerge, and transformation or mental growth will occur. However, Bion was quick to note that there exists an opposite process: the mind actively seeking not to know: minus K (-K). -K is not the same as not knowing, it is a state of avoidance of awareness of not knowing. In -K, instead of the pain and frustration of not knowing being tolerated, allowing it to be modified towards mental growth, it is evaded. To evade frustration is to evade knowing the object. Thus x -K y indicates that x is in an active (if unconscious) way attempting not to know y. Bion offered that -K can express itself in extreme ways,

31. '[T]he theories in which I have used the signs K and -K can be seen to represent realization in groups. In K the group increases by the introduction of new ideas or people. In -K the new idea (or person) is stripped of its value, and the group in turn feels devalued by the new idea. In K the climate is conducive to mental health. In -K neither group nor idea can survive partly because of the destruction incident to the stripping and partly because of the product of the stripping system.' Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 99.

32. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. Beta-elements are something like the 'things in themselves', raw sensation from inside or outside that cannot be thought. Alpha function (something close to dreaming, but a dreaming that happens also when one is awake) turns these into something that can be thought: alpha elements.

30. Discussing his use of the symbols ♀ and ♂ for container and contained, Bion says 'this leaves ♀ and ♂ as unknowns whose value is to be determined.' Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 127.

as he found in his psychotic patients, but also in much less obvious ways, as something we all engage in.

In terms of the earlier theory of groups, we can see the work group as oriented to K and the basic assumption group as expressing minus K. Minus K can take numerous forms, simply rejecting the new experience, asserting that one's existing categories are adequate, substituting an assertion of right and wrong for determining what is actually the case or jumping to action without reflection. Such forms as these are all means to avoid recognising the need for new thinking and the benefit of learning from experience.

One of the most effective obstacles to knowing is the idea that one already knows. It is possible to use the mind to acquire more and more pieces of knowledge, but at the same time avoid any significant change. This is common in academia but is also present in the political sphere in the form of the hack who has read some books. The idea that one knows already, that existing categories and schemas make sense of experience, can be one of the most effective ways of evading the transformative relation of getting to know.

Morality as substitution for K

When there is an attempt to understand a subject, it is possible to short-circuit the process by shifting the issue to whether something is good or bad: morality substitutes for K.

One notices such a move—where a moral attitude gets in the way of understanding—occurs fairly regularly in political discussion and controversies. To take two current examples: the white middle class character of Extinction Rebellion and its civil disobedience tactics are not just taken as a feature of the movement, limits to be explored, but as a reason to dismiss it.³³ Or the right-wing views of many participants in the yellow vests movement is used to deny its proletarian nature. These are things that must be engaged with theoretically if one wants to understand, and practically if one wants to participate, but morality can be used to obviate the difficulty in properly understanding and engaging a phenomenon. To assert that something is bad is typically to claim to know it and to

33. We can understand the feeling that there is something unbearably pious, moralistic and middle class about this movement, but we would suggest approaching it similarly to how *Midnight Notes* analysed the anti-nuclear movement in 'Strange Victories'

be separate from its badness.³⁴ One doesn't have to make the effort to understand its complexity, tensions and contradictions. It seems fairly clear that much of what gets seen as "identity politics" and "political correctness" is bound up with forms of moralism—the establishing of good and bad, with good residing here and bad residing there—without trying to go deeper into the real sources and nature of domination. At the same time, the way some dismiss identity politics without trying to understand the stakes in any particular case of what gets ranged under this term can express an omniscience-claiming moral superiority and splitting of its own.

Bion developed the notation xKy and $x-Ky$ in a psychoanalytic context where the object, y , that x is attempting to know or avoid knowing is another person. At first glance the attempt to understand the social world would appear to be a very different task, and thus not involve the same difficulties. However, in both cases the object is not something inanimate to be known like a thing, it involves an emotionally charged experience, one in which the subject is totally implicated. Understanding capitalism is about understanding oneself, and understanding oneself requires understanding the socio-political world of which one is part.

There are good reasons to avoid knowing this world. With the idea of $-K$, the use of thinking against itself, Bion provides a fresh way of looking at what has often been seen through the idea of a pejorative conception of ideology. Indeed we might say that capitalist society is pervaded by $-K$ in the sense of an attack on the linking between self and other in its fullest sense. In a world dominated by the capitalist mode of production, to properly understand ourselves requires grasping our relation to everyone and everything else. Yet capitalism necessarily produces a sense of ourselves as atomistic individuals, separate from the matrix out of which we emerge.³⁵ To a significant extent, taking that illusion for granted ($-K$) is functional to survival within those social relations, even if that survival is existentially impoverished and in the long term places the survival of this and other species in question.

Midnight Notes vol 1. no. 1 (1979).

34. 'Omniscience substitutes for the discrimination between true and false a dictatorial affirmation that one thing is morally right and the other wrong.' Bion, 'Theory of Thinking' in *Second Thoughts*, 114.

35. "The individual" (a self-constituted outside society and essentially from the inside out; the self of psychological individualism) is an element in a group phantasy,' Wolfenstein, 'Group Phantasies and the Individual', 174.

Not looking at what is going on in this world, not thinking about the unfolding catastrophe, is a major form of -K, and just as with the psychotic's attacks on linking, it defends against an unbearable emotional truth. However, having an understanding of capitalism is no guarantee of an absence of -K. In the field in which we operate, we have certainly witnessed groups and individuals who seem to be engaged in resisting knowing things which threaten their identity and what they think they know. The challenge of course is to recognise such states in ourselves.

In the political world we encounter -K again and again. At the same time, struggles continue to show their capacity to surprise us. It is a common observation that in a situation of struggle and of new experience it is often the "politicos" with the rigidity of their existing expectations — their saturated pre-conceptions³⁶ —

who prove much less able to learn from the new experience than the fresher participants in a movement. At the same time, as a struggle recedes so does the rapid learning many participants showed during the movement. They seem to return to their older ways of thinking (ways that are more appropriate to the return to normality) and it is the politicians who are left with the task of attempting to explicitly assimilate the experience — something they may do well or not.

The most important period of struggles have of course been revolutions and revolutionary waves. The importance we have attributed to the German-Dutch council communist Left and the Italian "Bordigist" Left, and their influence on the French and Italian ultra lefts of the 1970s, has been that they represent some of the keenest attempts to assimilate respectively the experiences of the revolutionary waves at the end of WW1 and at the end of the 1960s.

The challenge is to relate to such ideas in an open and not dogmatic way, to not turn a way of making sense of experience into an overly restrictive framework.

36. If a pre-conception—e.g. one's conception of how change can happen—is saturated it cannot meet with a new realization and become a conception that can then be a pre-conception for future experience.

Container and Contained

The relationship of container [♀] and contained [♂] is for Bion a flexible model or metaphor to describe how thinking occurs both within individuals and between them — in groups. Other theories of knowledge tend to assume that thoughts are the product of a prior process of thinking. Bion argues that rather than conceiving of thoughts as the product of a prior apparatus for thinking, the thinking apparatus is something that is developed to deal with thoughts. This container is built up gradually, largely from previous thoughts and in relation to other people's thinking, which at first can do the job of containing for us.³⁷

The container/contained model of thinking emerged from Bion's engagement with the phenomena of "projective identification" as theorised by Klein. Drawing on work with his highly disturbed patients, Bion sensed that they were communicating with him through projective identification. Bion's leap was thus to see projective identification as sometimes having a healthy function. It was not necessarily just a way of getting rid of or evacuating a bad feeling by projecting it into another person, it could also be a form of primitive or embryonic communication. When the infant has an experience of bad feelings (pain of hunger or worse: an inchoate sense that it is dying), it acts in such a way as to make its carer feel the kind of feelings that the infant wants to be rid of.³⁸ If this goes well, the mother takes on board the feeling, identifies what is wrong, and responds not only physically, with say, milk, but soothingly. At a mental level of mutual recognition shared by her and the infant, she has observed, processed, and given meaning, so as to transform³⁹ the feeling that the infant is unable to deal with into something named and manageable. The infant deals with its fears — a part of itself — in phantasy by projecting them into the container of the

37. 'The pattern ♂♀ represents an emotional realization associated with learning that becomes progressively more complex as it constantly recurs throughout mental development'. Bion, *Learning From Experience*, 93.

38. 'As a realistic activity it [projective identification] shows itself as behaviour reasonably calculated to arouse in the mother feelings of which the infant wishes to be rid. If the infant feels that it is dying it can arouse fears that it is dying in the mother. A well-balanced mother can accept these and respond therapeutically ... If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore re-introjects, not a fear of dying, but a nameless dread'. Bion, *Theory of Thinking*, 182-183.

39. This is the mother's alpha function turning something physical (beta elements) in the infant into something that can be thought. Experience like this will eventually allow the infant to incorporate its own alpha function.

mother's breast, then again in phantasy by feeling it has re-introjected them in a modified, more tolerable form. The mother can be seen as a container — represented by ♀ — in which another object (the feelings) — represented by ♂ — is placed.⁴⁰ The mother is thus in a real sense thinking for the infant. Development occurs for Bion when the ♂♀ activity occurring between the infant and mother gradually builds up the infant's capacity to tolerate frustration, allowing the child to "introject" its own ♂♀ apparatus. The infant gradually develops a capacity to contain more feelings and thoughts, that is, its thinking of thoughts becomes less dependent on others carrying this out in its stead.⁴¹ This apparatus for thinking is thus at the same time a containing of emotional experience and a transmuting of it into cognitive activity. For Bion, thinking is thus an internal apparatus (♀) for dealing with emotionally invested thoughts (♂) that we gradually build up, becoming capable of containing more experience and thoughts of increasing levels of abstraction while at first relying on an other's apparatus (♀) to contain us.

While each person has, in a sense, their own thinking apparatus, an individual's way of thinking is largely assimilated, adopted, and borrowed through engagement with others. We need to maintain relations with the apparatuses of others — we need first the maternal object, then a wider group — in order to grow and develop. That group does not have to be an actual group, but can include the thinking of others, living and dead, that we access in whatever way. Though we develop our own capacity to contain ourselves and our thinking, this is only relative. Ultimately, we constantly rely on others to contain ourselves and our thoughts. This other expands from the mother to the wider circles in which we are involved, including texts we read, discussions we have, and so on.

At a certain level, the communist group, in whatever way it exists, whether as an actual group or as the theory we adopt from reading or engaging with others, is an example of ♀ — a container or apparatus for thinking. Being able to "think for oneself" means that one has incorporated such an apparatus, but even then one constantly engages with

40. We follow Bion here who, from an original situation of an infant's experience being contained by a maternal object, derives symbols ♂♀ which are then used in very diverse situations. ♀ and ♂ can refer to container and contained of any gender.

41. We can see an example of this in the way an infant's own 'baby talk' starts to fill the role played by the soothing and designating talk of the mother.

"groups in the mind", our thinking is always responding to and anticipating others' utterances. Thinking happens through the linking or interpenetration of one element with another to produce a third, and these connections have an emotional aspect.

Bion contended that the more abstract and complex forms of thinking and theorising involving "concepts" that we become capable of as adults are built up from, and grounded in, linking operations carried out by the infant with more primitive kinds of thoughts he labelled "pre-conceptions" and "conceptions". In the familiar and basic example, the infant's inborn disposition to seek the breast is seen as a "pre-conception", a state of expectation,⁴² which "mates" with an awareness of its realization (the presence of the breast) to form a "conception" of the breast. Once established, this conception can then act as a more developed pre-conception for further realizations of increasing complexity. Alternatively the pre-conception meets not with a realization but with the frustration of this expectation — its non-realization — and, if the infant is able to tolerate its frustration, the perception of the no-breast can transform into a thought of the breast. Thus from a process that started with some simple preconceptions around feeding, breathing, and excretion, the meeting of pre-conception with a realization (or negatively the failure of a pre-conception to meet a realization) produces conceptions that are then pre-conceptions for further realisations and conceptions in a hierarchical way that becomes increasingly abstract and generates, ultimately, the most sophisticated thinking, and finally even complex scientific hypotheses and theories.

This is what we are doing when we try to make sense of new developments and struggles. Is the new event a realization of an existing pre-conception, thus not challenging us to develop our theory, or is it something different, a non-realization of existing ideas requiring us to tolerate the frustration of not-knowing in hopes that a new thought will arrive?

Thinking, even in its most complex, rational, and abstract forms — "theories" — is rooted in experience, which in the first place is not cognitive but emotional. At each step, the functions of satisfaction and

42. '[T]he counterpart of a variable in mathematical logic or an unknown in mathematics. It has the quality that Kant ascribes to an empty thought in that it can be thought but it cannot be known! Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 91.

frustration play their part in furthering the developing apparatus for thinking. Tolerance of frustration, which at the adult level involves tolerance of doubt—tolerance of not knowing—is the emotional connective tissue in which mental growth occurs and such growth still has the emotional flavour of the original process.

From this perspective communist theory may be conceived of as an apparatus for thinking that has been built up through an ongoing relationship between the experience of capitalism and previous attempts to think about and make sense of it. Marx is a key figure here in taking some of the most sophisticated theories developed within the bourgeois frame—political economy and Hegelian idealism—and, by connecting them to the meaning of the proletarian class struggle, transforming them into a theoretical container for thinking the real movement towards communism. It was an extraordinary contribution, but key to such theory is the ability to use it to learn from and think about new experience, the ability to be surprised by the class struggle.

The acquiring of knowledge of history, theories, critique, etc. can be part of this process of K, but equally the acquiring of theoretical frameworks and facts can be about the production of an illusion of knowing that helps one avoid learning something new from experience. The idea that “I” or my “group” knows or has the answer undermines uncertainty and the questioning attitude from which alone new ideas can come.⁴³ We can acquire knowledge to avoid learning from experience, as ideas can be used to evade the experience or to rationalize why the experience should not impinge on one’s existing paradigm.

In discussing the relation between Ricardo and the Ricardian school, Marx seemed to anticipate the difference between open (K) and dogmatic (-K) forms of thinking that he himself would inspire:

With the master what is new and significant develops vigorously amid the “manure” of contradictions out of the contradictory phenomena. The underlying contradictions themselves testify to the richness of the living foundation from which the theory itself developed. It is different with the disciple. His raw material is no longer

43. Bion was fond of Maurice Blanchot’s line ‘La réponse est le malheur de la question’ (The answer is the disease or misfortune of the question).

reality, but the new theoretical form in which the master had sublimated it. It is in part the *theoretical disagreement of opponents of the new theory* and in part the *often paradoxical relationship of this theory to reality* which drive him to seek to *refute* his opponents and *explain away* reality. In doing so, he entangles himself in contradictions and with his attempt to solve these he demonstrates the beginning *disintegration of the theory* which he dogmatically espouses.⁴⁴

44. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (MECW 32), 274–275.

This rejection of dogma in favour of being receptive to the living foundation from which theory emerges connects to what we have derived both from the idea of open Marxism and in terms of Bion’s theory of thinking. The “raw material” of reality is of course capitalist society and the struggles it engenders.

“Marxism”, in the sense of the theoretical approach that Marx with Engels can be seen to have arrived at in the mid 1840s, is unthinkable without the struggles of the proletariat of that time. Marx famously changed his views on the state in relation to the Paris Commune of 1871. Correspondence with Russian revolutionaries led him to immerse himself in trying to understand social conditions in their area and to question the linearity and determinism of his own earlier conception of capitalist development.⁴⁵ The proletariat’s mass strikes and creation of soviets in the early 20th century produced the basis for the currents that theorised and tried to act on these developments and who formed a nucleus of opposition to WW1. The revolutionary wave that ended that war produced the intertwined revolution and counter revolution in Russia and the attempt to make sense of it and their own experiences by the German/Dutch and Italian Lefts. The revolutionary wave around ’68, with its struggles against and beyond work, questioning all forms of identity, produced the idea of revolution as communisation.

45. See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (Monthly Review 1983) and Jacques Camatte, ‘Community and Communism in Russia’ *Invariance* II (1974).

Part of the difficulty in this is that learning from experience—being in a state of getting to know—involves the necessity of changing the apparatus with which one makes sense of the world—that is, changing oneself—and this can be perceived as a threat of catastrophic

change. To make sense of this, Bion returned to the central Kleinian notion of the positions. As we have seen, with Klein, the depressive position involves a movement of integration from the non-integrated state of the paranoid-schizoid position. Bion posited oscillation between a kind of healthy version of the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position as an essential condition of thinking new thoughts, an oscillation he symbolized with the expression: "Ps↔D".

Ps↔D

Bion argues that "the capacity for learning depends throughout life" on the "ability to tolerate the paranoid-schizoid position, the depressive position, and the dynamic and continuing interaction between the two",⁴⁶ an interaction he represented as Ps↔D.

As we have seen, for Bion growth in K—learning from experience—is not a merely cognitive or intellectual matter, but depends on an emotional climate composed of tolerance of frustration and uncertainty. While accumulating new pieces of knowledge within one's existing framework is relatively easy, further growth or development, being open to new ideas to make sense of new experiences which do not fit into existing pre-conceptions requires that one allows one's frame, what one thinks one knows, to be questioned.⁴⁷ This questioning of one's framework is a destruction or de-structuring of the existing thoughts and theories of which the thinking apparatus (♀) is composed. Growth in ♂ requires growth in ♀—an alteration in the container. This series of recombinations can be represented ♂ⁿ♀ⁿ. Growth in the apparatus (♀ⁿ) whether that of the individual or of the group requires that it is able to lose rigidity and even some integration. There is a process of breaking up of the integration—the D position—previously achieved. It is thus a limited return to a less stable and more fragmented paranoid-schizoid position (Ps) in the hope that a subsequent restructuring can allow the Depressive position to be regained at a higher level.⁴⁸

46. Wilfred Bion, *Cogitations* (Karnac Books 1992), 199.

47. 'Any attempt to cling to what he knows must be resisted for the sake of achieving a state of mind analogous to the paranoid-schizoid position.' Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 124.

48. Bion suggested this healthy form of Ps and D might be called patience and security to distinguish them from more pathological forms of Ps and D but this wording has not caught on.

Ps↔D is then a process of integration, disintegration, and reintegration. There is no finality in this process, there is always an ongoing process of making sense of, or giving meaning to, experience, being open to further discoveries, and modifying what one thinks one knows through engagement with what Marx called the raw material of reality. Following Ronald Britton we can represent it like this:⁴⁹

$$Ps(1) \rightarrow D(1) \rightarrow Ps(2) \rightarrow D(2) \rightarrow Ps(3) \rightarrow D(3) \dots$$

or

$$Ps(n) \rightarrow D(n) \rightarrow \dots Ps(n+1) \rightarrow D(n+1) \dots$$

The arrows indicate a process of forward development and the Ps(n+1) is a normal, controlled or healthy form of the paranoid schizoid position that comes after the depressive position has been achieved. Ps(n+1) represents a state of taking on board new material—new experience, new ideas—that doesn't fit into the state of integration one has previously reached in the hope that a higher state of integration D(n+1) is possible. But this is not guaranteed. When one enters the state of Ps(n+1) the D(n+1) that one is aiming for is not present, there is only a hope not an assurance that coherence and meaning will arrive. One is also relinquishing an achieved position (D), a state with a certain moral and cognitive confidence, for the incoherence and uncertainty of a less stable and more fragmented state. There is something persecuting in this. It involves accepting emotional discomfort and narcissistic loss. The individual or group is threatened with the prospect of a catastrophe. Thus the response to the Ps(n+1) state of having to deal with new material may be not to advance to some higher D position, but to retreat or regress to earlier forms of D which are no longer adequate.⁵⁰

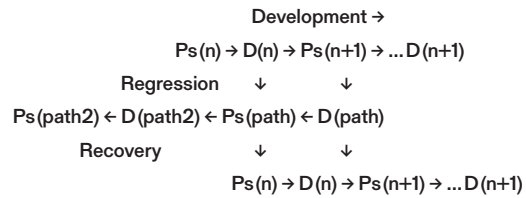
Instead of a forward (→), there is a backwards movement (←), a regression to an earlier and now inadequate state of D.⁵¹ The controlled Ps is lost and one regresses into

49. Ronald Britton, 'Before and After the Depressive Position Ps(n)→D(n)→Ps(n+1)' in *Belief and Imagination: Explorations in Psychoanalysis* (Routledge 1998), 69–81. Britton suggests that Bion's formula may give the impression of a movement between two unchanging substances while his re-formulations suggest development from one state of D to a new one at a higher level D(n+1).

50. We have certainly met situations where someone appears to recognise something in conversation but then later reverts to their old position.

51. We can see the forward movement is a form of K, the backward a case of -K.

pathological states of Ps and D which Britton represents as Ps(path) and D(path):⁵²



When an individual or a group encounters ideas or an experience that question their framework they have to tolerate the dispersal and threatened loss of meaning in the hope that a D(n+1) will emerge. A concrete example was the case of the Praxis Group. The group had developed a framework together over a period through reading together and engaging in struggles and movements. The battle over the new ideas resulted in a division of the group into those representing an Establishment and those inclined to engage with and partially accept the new ideas. This process, including the conflict, was potentially part of a forward development. However at a certain time the pain and discomfort of the loss of cohesive functioning became too much. The Ps(n+1) became a Ps(path) state where action instead of thinking was used to deal with the problem, by getting rid of the disruptive elements. The D state that was returned to can be seen as D(path) because it was not a new achievement involving loss of the old but a retreat to an earlier position which was now a defensive organisation excluding rather than incorporating the new material that was being grappled with in Ps(n+1). The frustration had been evaded rather than tolerated.⁵³

Holding on to a state of integration and meaning that may be coherent but is no longer adequate is a feature of most political groups. Most of what presents itself as revolutionary or communist theory has been held on to “past its time”.

52. This diagram reproduced from Britton, ‘Before and After the Depressive Position’ in *Belief and Imagination*, 76.

53. However as Britton’s diagram indicates there is a possibility of recovery that is a return to a developmental path. We might observe that this recovery may be harder for a group than an individual.

Political Ps

In the model we have been describing, the sense of controlled Ps moving towards the achievement of a new D involves a kind of wait-and-see attitude. Bion adopts Keats’s notion of “negative capability” to describe the necessary posture.⁵⁴ It means being open to new experiences and new ideas, accepting that one doesn’t know and that opposing views might be correct. Ps(n+1) involves refraining from decision until one is able, perhaps through the emergence of a “selected fact”,⁵⁵ to bring together and make order out of the chaos in a new whole.

A difference between the post depressive position Ps(n+1) and the original infantile Ps or the regressed Ps(path) is that in Ps(n+1) one as much as possible does not engage in splitting. This is appropriate for the analyst who is calm and almost disinterested in his drive to understand but not to judge or even change the patient. Hoggett, drawing on Meltzer, suggests that there is a different and still healthy way that the paranoid schizoid mechanisms (including splitting) must be mobilised. When engaged in struggle reality is not a “given” which must be understood dispassionately but a process of becoming which must be engaged with. Acting on and in the world is sustained by a passion—“anger, grief, hope”—which is, as he notes, “based on a certain degree of splitting”.⁵⁶ We cannot just be “in doubt and uncertainty”, which implies movement towards the maturity of the depressive position, for at times we must risk acting, at which point we abandon the openness to a new depressive position and commit ourselves to one course of action that excludes others. As Donald Meltzer suggests, at times the “irritable reaching after fact and reason” that Keats abjures is in fact required because:

splitting processes are necessary for the kind of decisions that make action in the outside world possible. Every decision involves the setting in motion of a single plan from

54. ‘Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Houghton, Mifflin & Company 1899), 277.

55. Bion borrowed the idea of the ‘selected fact’ from Henri Poincaré who had used it to describe the mathematician’s intuitive discovery of an element that gives coherence to a collection of scattered data.

56. Paul Hoggett, ‘Climate change and the apocalyptic imagination’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* no. 16 (2011), 262.

among its alternatives; it is experimental involves risk, a certain ruthlessness towards oneself and others.⁵⁷

This is another way of thinking about Ps and D. Those involved in politics even “radical (anti-)politics” have a propensity for the splitting into good and bad, friend and enemy, of the paranoid-schizoid position. Much of the unpleasant group stuff, the understanding of which in part motivates this text, reflects the proneness to the paranoid schizoid position within this space. The observation of this can be part of “pathologising the political”, but while it can certainly be pathological, the paranoid-schizoid mode may also perform a necessary and valuable role in the development of both individuals and groups.⁵⁸

Hoggett points to a creative and experimental use of the paranoid-schizoid position, which can figure as more than a mere stage before a new depressive position takes hold. He points to the fact that a decision to act involves a suspension of doubt and openness towards other courses of action and perspectives. Indeed, while a claimed need for action is often used against thinking, it is also possible when one needs to act to instead “retreat into thought”. In action there is a risk, potential costs to oneself and others, and thus as Metzler suggests a certain ruthlessness towards both is required. The uncertainty and tolerance of doubt in one’s position is no longer functional. In periods of struggle this kind of creative use of the paranoid-schizoid position, this kind of certainty and commitment to one point of view, is necessary;⁵⁹ but it needs to be tempered by moments of reflection and openness and a possibility of reviewing one’s course of action in relation to its results or lack thereof. When the dust clears, the point is to be ruthless with oneself about what the success or failure of any initiative one took could tell us about the nature of the struggle in which one was involved and the stance one has taken in relation to it. This is to move from a necessary period of active Ps back into controlled Ps and D.

57. Donald Meltzer et al., *Explorations in Autism: A Psycho-Analytical Study* (Karnac Books 1975), 241.

58. ‘The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man’. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (Brentano’s 1903).

59. It is perhaps worth observing that ‘critique’ can be a form of action.

Mystic and Establishment

One of the key concepts that we found in Hoggett which seemed to illuminate our two cases was the idea of the Establishment within the group. In the Praxis Group we described a conflict between an established orthodoxy within the group and new ideas. In the Theory Group we described a group functioning creatively without much of an Establishment but that this was unstable, leading to crises which eventually necessitated the creation of a sort of establishment.

This use of the term “Establishment” derives from Bion. In a book published in 1970 he notes the way that the term Establishment has become used to describe that “body of persons within the State” who exercise power and responsibility and adopts the:

term to denote everything from the penumbra of associations generally evoked, to the predominating and ruling characteristics of an individual, and the characteristics of a ruling caste in a group (such as a psychoanalytical institute, or a nation or group of nations).⁶⁰

60. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 73.

Bion pairs this notion with another concept, that of the “mystic” a figure he says could interchangeably be termed the “genius” (or even “messiah”). There is, Bion writes,

an emotional pattern that repeats itself in history and in a variety of forms [...] of an explosive force within a restraining framework: For example the mystic in conflict with the Establishment; the new idea constrained within a formulation not intended to express it; the art form outmoded by new forces requiring representation.⁶¹

61. *Ibid.*, 74 & 79.

This pattern, like that of container and contained (which it is an example of), is a somewhat abstract one that can unsurprisingly be seen in all sorts of places. Bion was prompted to think about the mystic/Establishment pattern by his experience of the institutionalisation process of psychoanalysis.⁶² It seems useful to think about it in relation to the communist group.

62. Bion was appointed to leadership roles within it and described the fate of an individual placed in ‘a position in the Establishment where his energies are deflected from his creative-destructive role →

The Establishment describes a conservative structure in the group (or the individual mind) composed of the containing force of old ideas. By “mystic” Bion has in mind the creative/disruptive force of new ideas (and those who express them). The ideas in question could be scientific, artistic, religious, political, psychoanalytic—whatever represents a profound break from existing dominant ideas and paradigms and opens a new way of thinking in any field. For Bion the mystic/genius can take the form of a specific individual or individuals, but it can also be seen as something less personal—the “flash of genius”, the moment of creative insight that any individual “should be ready to produce” at some time.⁶³

Bion includes in the mystic/genius category such figures as Galileo, Newton, Freud, Shakespeare, and Marx, but also actual mystics: Jesus, Meister Eckhart, Isaac Luria. The common pattern is the way new ideas and those who represent them challenge the established conventions of the group in which they emerge. New ideas are perceived as disruptive (and even destructive) of the group; they can be perceived to threaten a catastrophe, but they are also necessary if the group is to develop. Bion thinks it is a proper function of the Establishment to create an environment in which genius, whether it be the particularly gifted individual or the “flash of genius” that any of us can have from time to time, is able to emerge.

However, this function comes into tension with the Establishment’s other purpose which is “to find and provide a substitute for genius”.⁶⁴ Because mystics or mystic flashes are in short supply, the Establishment makes up for their absence by promulgating “rules”, “dogmas”, and (scientific) “laws”, that allow knowledge to be had and to be conveyed without group members having to create it themselves. In creating and enforcing such rules the Establishment allows group members “a sense of participation in an experience from which they would otherwise feel forever excluded”. However, as Bion notes, the problem is that these rules (or dogmas) must at the same time maintain a continued supply of “genius”:

and absorbed in administrative functions. His epitaph might be: “He was loaded up with honors and sank without a trace”. Ibid., 79. His response was to leave the group and move to Los Angeles.

63. Ibid., 74. Sam Moss’s text, ‘The Impotence of the Revolutionary Group’, was an example of one such flash of genius. No other theoretical texts are attributed to its author.

64. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 73.

This cannot be ordered; but if it comes the Establishment must be able to stand the shock. Failing genius, and clearly it may not materialize for a very long period, the group must have its rules and a structure to preserve them.⁶⁵

65. Ibid, 74

Bion suggests that relations between the mystic and the group can take three forms: parasitic, commensal, or symbiotic. The difficult relation of the three actual mystics Bion has mentioned to their religious Establishments shows these three forms in a clear light. In the parasitic relation, the relation is destructive: the creative new ideas are either crushed by the rigidity of the container or the container is blown apart by the power of the new ideas (Jesus crucified by the Establishment). In the commensal relation, the old and new ideas manage to exist alongside each other, but without really affecting growth in either (the Christian Establishment tolerates mystics like Eckhart without the church being changed by them). In the third relation—the symbiotic—Bion writes that “there is a confrontation and the result is growth-producing, though that growth may not be discerned without difficulty”⁶⁶ (the Hasidic movement in relation to Rabbinical Judaism). He suggests that, as well as within the group, these shapes exist within the individual and can also be played out in the encounter between different individuals and groups. Just as a group may reject a new idea and the person who expresses it as something they are unable to contain, an individual may reject a new idea as something he or she is not able to bear. As with the development of thinking in general, we are dealing with something that can be intra-individual, inter-individual, intra-group and inter-group.

66. Ibid, 78.

Though it might be tempting, it would make little sense, in relation to the communist groups (or even groups more generally) to simply take the side of the mystic/genius. The Establishment’s resistance to mystics and their dangerous ideas is necessary. One reason is that most new ideas are not better than the old, and some are destructive, which Bion evokes in the figure of the nihilist mystic. Even when there is something important in the new ideas, they need to be tested. It is the creative tension between new ideas and the old, the mystic and the Establishment, that may produce something worthwhile,

while if the new impulse meets no resistance, it may dissipate itself in formless splurge.

Bion's term "genius" may meet with scepticism in communist circles, as it appears to be a rather bourgeois individualist notion.⁶⁷ However, the apparent tension between Bion's concern for the fate of the individual thinker⁶⁸ and a Marxian idea that ideas are produced by the class struggle is perhaps not so insurmountable. An important part of Bion's understanding is that creative individuals do not produce their challenging ideas from their own minds, but instead create links that make sense of experience, giving expression to new ideas that have a social or transindividual source.

Moreover, Bion's seemingly individualist concept of genius or mystic needs to be placed in the context of his profoundly non-individualist notion that true thoughts are not the product of the individual thinker but that, instead, the individual gains his significance by being able to entertain them. The genius for Bion is not someone who invents things from his own brain, but one who opens up to the ideas that are there to be expressed.

Yet breakthroughs to a revolutionary new way of approaching reality, opening a new field or problematic, are often linked to an individual.⁶⁹ Bion's reflections on these questions are prompted by Freud and the psychoanalytic establishment(s) created on the basis of his work. Marx would seem to be clearly, in Bion's terms, another such genius/mystic, upon whose legacy a new Establishment or establishments have been produced. Interestingly, however, one of the few recorded remarks that Bion made on Marxism was that (at least as a theory) it had "approximately achieved"⁷⁰ (along with Sufism!) doing without an Establishment.

The idea of Marxism doing without an Establishment might seem odd. Hasn't Marxism often been compared with religion in a negative sense? Wasn't

67. Bordiga, who we will treat as a mystic/genius below, insisted that Marx's formulation of communist 'doctrine' should be seen 'not as the invention of a genius, but as the discovery of a result of human evolution'. Amadeo Bordiga, 'Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable' *Il Programma Comunista* no. 2 (1965).

68. He has his own tense relationship to the London Kleinian Establishment in mind.

69. Similarly the anti-individualist Bordiga states, 'knowledge is conquered by the brains of living men who gradually accumulate the results of the work of their thinking; and, from time to time, a personality of greater importance and power takes the common heritage of science a step forward'. Amadeo Bordiga, 'On the Thread of Time' *Il Programma Comunista* no. 1 (1954).

70. 'The Establishment cannot be dispensed with (though this may appear to be approximately

Kautsky referred to as the "pope of Marxism"? Didn't the parties of the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals operate by way of an established orthodoxy with the same conformist modes of thinking and exclusion of heresies? Hasn't doctrinal dispute often been settled by appeal to quotes from infallible scriptural authority? Marxism certainly seems to have had its own Establishment(s), both in the sense of institutional authorities like parties and even states, but also in the less obvious sense of the rigidities of thought that even those who see themselves as independent Marxists often fall foul of.⁷¹

Yet as we suggested in part II, Bion's suggestion that the theory of Marxism has "approximately achieved" the avoidance of the Establishment also captures something. The critical impulse of the communist theory expressed by Marx—a thinking open to the "raw material of reality"—has never been entirely contained and stripped of meaning by the various worldviews, parties, schools, traditions, and orthodoxies that have been established in his name. Within, outside, and against these currents there have always been critical, heterodox forms of thinking that have clashed with the conformist use of Marx. Indeed communist theory has not been without its own supply of new genius, though the critical impulse of thinkers like Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Bordiga, Korsch, Lukacs, Pashukanis, Rubin, Bloch, Adorno, Debord and Camatte, and the fresh take on reality they provide, has often, in turn, been a basis for new establishments.⁷² Such thinkers are a product of their times (notably the two revolutionary waves that characterised the 20th century) and often they themselves fall back from their more interesting and revolutionary positions in the period of retreat.

To place Amadeo Bordiga in this line of mystics/geniuses might seem odd. After all, Bordiga himself insisted that he had not created anything new. He rejected "the banal idea that Marxism is a theory

achieved in Sufism and in the theory of Marxism) because the institutionalised group, the work group, is as essential to the development of the individual as he is to it'. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 75.

71. In these days when the establishments of organised Marxism have largely fallen away and the place it has found for itself is increasingly in the academy, it is worth noting Bion's warning of the 'dangers of the invitation to a group or individual to become respectable, to be medically qualified, to be a university department, to be a therapeutic group, to be anything in short, but not explosive'. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 79.

72. The list, though not a sign of agreement with all of the ideas of such thinkers, (we prefer Pannekoek to Luxemburg etc.) obviously reveals our preferences. There are other figures like Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, etc. that were not without moments of genius but who are too implicated in the counter revolution for a place on our list.

'undergoing a process of continuous historical elaboration' that changes with the changing course of events and the lessons subsequently learned", and instead asserted what he called the "Invariance of Marxism".⁷³ In the period after the defeat of the post WW1 revolutionary wave and the failure of WW2 to end in a similar wave, Bordiga saw his task and that of the group who gathered round him as essentially one of defending this doctrine until better times.⁷⁴

While we have emphasised the need to be willing to change one's framework, Bordiga railed against those who would change the Marxist framework too easily. Writing in the fifties, he divided the opponents of the "Marxist doctrine" into three broad groups: the deniers—the bourgeoisie for whom the market and commodity production are eternal; the falsifiers—the Stalinists and others who claim to be Marxist but practice a social democratic reformism; and the modernizers—those who still claim to be revolutionary but think the doctrine needs to be modified. He reserved some of his heaviest critique for the latter group with Cardan (Castoriadis) of Socialism or Barbarism being a frequent target. Thus just as he rejected those who would moderate Marxism by emphasising peaceful and democratic methods, he scorned those who claimed to still be revolutionary but saw a need to modernise the conception of capitalism by defining it, or at least its Eastern bloc variant, in terms of bureaucracy.⁷⁵

Bordiga would thus appear to reject our emphasis on doubt, receptivity to the new, negative capability and theory as open or good conversation.⁷⁶ Bordiga indeed seems not so much a mystic as the promoter of an Establishment, a rigid doctrine. What figures like Luxemburg, Pannekoek or Debord see as the creative discoveries of class struggle—the Paris Commune, the Soviets, modern forms of revolt etc.—are for Bordiga ways in which a renewal of the

73. Amadeo Bordiga, 'The Historical "Invariance" of Marxism' *Sul Filo del Tempo* no 1 (1953).

74. 'This is a moment of the deepest low point of the curve of revolutionary potential; we are therefore decades away from the right moment when original theories can be born. At this moment, which is without the perspectives associated with a great social upheaval, not only is the political disintegration of the world proletarian class a logical datum of the situation, but it is also logical that there should be small groups that know how to maintain the red thread of history of the great revolutionary process, stretching in a great curve between two social revolutions, on the condition that such groups show that they do not want to disseminate anything original and that they continue to adhere strictly to the traditional formulations of Marxism.' *Ibid.*, thesis 23.

75. We can note that Bordiga's assertion that in Russia and China we were seeing a transition to the capitalist mode of production and his prediction that the post war boom would give way to a return to classic capitalist crisis in the mid 1970s

class struggle allows the theory to return "with affirmations reminiscent of its origins and its first integral expression".⁷⁷

But we know that claiming to fulfill the law and not abolish it is a venerable role for the mystic.

In Bordiga's writings, along with statements of rigid tactical doctrine that seem on the surface not so different from (other) versions of Leninism,⁷⁸ we find an extraordinary communist vision, including the rejection of self-management and a prescient grasp of capitalism as an ecological crisis. Bordiga's thought expressed the high points of the post WW1 revolutionary wave and held it when most other Marxists capitulated one way or the other. He knew the difference between capitalism and communism, something that, with few exceptions, isn't understood by social democrats, Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, democratic and libertarian socialists.⁷⁹

Bordiga and his group kept something communist alive in a period of the defeat of the revolution, and they did so through a certain doctrinal rigidity. This rigidity served a protective function. However, while Bordiga himself was able to develop theory within this shell, most of his followers were not. Their rigidity meant that they were largely unable to connect to the new revolutionary wave that rose in the 1960s.⁸⁰ It was through the work of the quintessential communist mystic Jacques Camatte that the insights of Bordiga spread to the new movements which arose especially in France and in Italy.⁸¹ Yet by that time Camatte had been marked as a heretic among "Bordigists".⁸²

Camatte's relationship to the Italian Left has similarities with Bion's relationship to Kleinian psychoanalysis. The latter has been known, like Bordiga's Marxism, for a certain rigidity or dogmatism. However, it was through and with this rigid Kleinian apparatus, which he made his own, that Bion developed his

proved more reliable than some of the up to date theories he rejected. His prediction that the return of economic crisis would be a revolutionary crisis on the old model proved less accurate.

76. In 'The Historical "Invariance" of Marxism' he rejected 'all chattering and know-it-all discussions' and the idea that theoretical development can 'be assumed by tiny groups with hardly any members' or even worse through 'a free discussion that constitutes a parody on a Lilliputian scale of bourgeois parliamentarism and the famous clash of individual opinions, which is not a new breakthrough but rather old nonsense'. *Ibid.*, Theses 22 & 26. One might say that such discussions within the milieu are not 'good conversations'.

77. *Ibid.*, Thesis 16.

78. Which itself is not a simple and unified historical and theoretical object. Bordiga's 'Leninism' is an adherence to initial positions of the Third International, and he becomes critical of the direction the Bolsheviks took it from its third congress in 1921.

79. A key example here is the way Trotsky saw →

creative breakthroughs. Similarly it was through absorbing the intransigent Marxism of Bordiga that Camatte made his own leaps. The relationship between Bion and the Kleinian group was at least for a number of years probably a symbiotic one, but he found it necessary to escape the group in which he had at first been able to develop. Beyond the constraints of the groups that had produced them, both Camatte and Bion were able to produce more freely (with some wondering if their production became a bit too free).⁸³

Despite Bion's intriguing idea that communist theory (like Sufism) can approximately do without an Establishment, we can see in these examples that groups and individuals — who are always part of groups if only the many groups we connect with in our minds — necessarily produce establishments as part of the limits and containment of their thinking. Often, such a container is adequate to get on with things. The point is, without seeking out novelty for itself, to be open to the expression of new things, which requires breaking or modifying such limits of our thinking.

AN ENDING NOT A CONCLUSION

By its nature this is a work in progress. As there must be for now an ending, if not a conclusion, let us attempt to tie our threads together.

Our starting point was that communism is and will be “the intense and unpredictable struggle for life on the part of the species”. If the communist group at one level is all those — millions even billions — who *have been, are, or will be* involved in that struggle, then that also includes us, right here, right now, feeling moved to be part of this struggle and to do what we can. This involves us connecting with small numbers of others to think about capitalism and its possible overcoming.

something socialist in Stalinist industrialisation, while Bordiga correctly saw it as the development of the capitalist mode of production in Russia.

80. As Camatte suggests, it was Bordiga's very refusal of innovation that both protected the theory from the kind of opportunist degeneration of most other varieties of Marxism in the period of counter revolution, and also led to his limitations: ‘the impossibility of irrevocably cutting his ties with the past (the Third International and its sequels), the inability to correctly delimit the process of becoming of the new revolutionary movement, not recognizing its first manifestations in May 1968’. Camatte, *Bordiga and the Passion for Communism*.

81. See ‘The Passion of Communism’ in this issue.

82. In a postface to *Origin and Function of the Party Form* Camatte stated that despite its nods to Lenin, one of the intentions of that text was to clarify the ‘anti-immediatism and anti-activism’ of the Italian Left and to present it, ‘in its originality, to divide it from Leninism and Trotskyism, to make a real break with the Third International’, a break that

We are admittedly a bit unusual (“deviations” as Moss put it). For accidents of our personal history, we have, like Marx, found that the ideas of communism “which have conquered our intellect and taken possession of our minds, ideas to which reason has fettered our conscience, are chains from which one cannot free oneself without a broken heart: they are demons which human beings can vanquish only by submitting to them”.⁸⁴

These ideas are not personal possessions but something impersonal, transmitted through the generations. Communist theory is an apparatus for thinking the experience of life dominated by capital and the movement beyond it. Some take up this apparatus, making it theirs for as long as they are able.⁸⁵ They may, in the process, succeed in adding some new true thoughts, which increase the capacity of the apparatus in relation to the evolving experience that it attempts to contain. At its best this process is international and self-correcting. We have suggested Gunn's model of the “good conversation” for the way that it develops. In Gunn and Wilding's more recent work we also identified a tantalising suggestion of what might link the conversations of the willed small groups we participate in and those that occur in the spontaneous group processes of revolution.

At a certain level, the communist group, in whatever way it exists, whether as an actual group or as the theory we adopt from reading or engaging with others, is an example of a container or apparatus for thinking. We always need others to talk to. At the same time, with our case studies of small group life we pointed at some of the problems that arise in this small world we inhabit. We expect that others have their own stories. Such tales reveal that attempts at good conversation often meet obstacles and tensions within the group. Dealing with such tensions can make severe emotional demands. While coming together with

Bordiga was not prepared to make. As a result Camatte found himself in increasing conflict with the rest of the Bordigist milieu and left. Bordiga chose his epigones over his more gifted follower, describing Camatte's course as the ‘the poor doctrine: I turn my back on the formal party, as I go towards the historical one’ (Bordiga, ‘Considerations on the party's organic activity’). Yet Bordiga's ‘formal party’ irrevocably splintered following his death in 1970.

83. Bion poses a question of relevance to both himself and Camatte when he talks of the need to get ‘a sufficient shell to be protected and then having to rebel against a shell, because it not only protects you but can also shut you up. The shell that protects also kills. Let me put it this way: individuals can be so rigid that they don't seem to have any ideas or they can be so free and so profuse in their outpourings of ideas that it really amounts to a pathological condition [...] How permeable are you to make this envelope of self, this shell? To get back to the Freudian phrase, how permeable is the ego to be?’ Bion, *The Tavistock Seminars* (Routledge 1976), 97–114.

others is necessary and rewarding, the groups that we form often seem to involve swapping the pathological solitude of the Ego for the pathologies of small group life.⁸⁶ This is understandable, because the group or collective in capitalist society is no less a part and product of capitalist society than the individuals of which it is composed.⁸⁷ Reflection here can benefit from drawing on the theory of the unconscious, which can be understood not as something personal and individual but a social and transpersonal phenomenon. Groups bring out the unconscious and make it visible. A psychoanalytic take on groups and on thinking offered by Bion and others helps make sense of this process.

The recurrent tension is between the universality of what we want and the particularity and limits of who we are as individuals and small groups. The stakes seem so different but at some level we sense that they are the same. The healthy impulse is to focus not on who we are as a group but simply on the tasks we set ourselves.⁸⁸ However, the pathologies of communist groups can at times be more interesting than what such groups produce, because it tells us something about capitalist life itself.

We do not produce struggle or revolution, we are produced by it. This is why the periods of the most creative leaps in thinking have occurred at the time of revolutionary moments and waves (1848, 1871, 1917–21, 1968–71).

What Marx calls the “party of anarchy” makes its reappearance from time to time.⁸⁹ Though those who produce *Endnotes* did not actively participate in the struggles of those years listed above, we, and the world we live in, were shaped by them, their measure of success and their defeat. These events and cycles of struggle have tended to be followed by much longer periods of more stable capitalist development and more limited struggles. The capitalism we face today

84. Marx, ‘Communism and the Augsburg *Allgemeine Zeitung*’ (MECW 1), 221.

85. ‘[T]he revolution gives birth to or causes the death of groups, compels works to be taken up or interrupted, conquers militants and rejects them continuously (like the process of *apoptosis*, the death of cells which occurs as a normal and controlled part of an organism’s growth or development). In the end: revolution does its own work, as it always has’. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’ n + 1 no. 18 (2005).

86. Which then, as Camatte noted, tends to operate in relation to the outside like a collective Ego or ‘gang’.

87. Individual and group life will not be without their problems beyond capitalism; they will just be very different.

88. We thus find affinity with the point made by n + 1 that ‘We are not a “group”, we are a work’. However, as they note ‘It is obvious that, somehow, we are also a “group”’. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’.

89. Marx. ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ (MECW 11), 111.

learnt the lessons of those struggles and restructured itself accordingly. Thus, we do not need to pass on to the working class lessons from those years, for the relation with capital they live today contains all the lessons of history that they need.

We, however, find something useful in looking back. A large part of the communist theory we have inherited was a product of the encounter of a container — councilist, situationist, and “Bordigist” thought — with the “contained”, the new experience of the struggles of the last revolutionary wave and their defeat. Such theory was tested, and while some concluded that reality was guilty of not measuring up — the working class did not produce councils or join the(ir) party — others were able to transform the theory to better express what this wave and its defeat was telling us. The burst of theoretical development had largely concluded by the end of the 70s. However, just as with the small groups of “Bordigists” and council communists after the previous revolutionary wave, some of those who were turned communist by the revolutionary period did not go over to the counter revolution but rather theorised it and the restructuring that accompanied it.

We have been drawn to this theory, and we attempt to contribute to it. Our lives too have not been without their moments and cycles of struggle, such as the anti-globalisation movement at the turn of this century, the movement of the squares in 2011–13 and what may be a new global wave unfolding at the time of writing. The instability of our times assures us that there will be plenty more.

We can imagine that some readers of *Endnotes* may at times have asked themselves: “Well that’s all well and good, but what do you propose we actually do?” The perceived alternative seems to be of “revolutionary intervention” or “attentism”,⁹⁰ there is either a revolutionary communist way of relating to struggles or one should not be involved at all. Theorie Communiste provide us with a helpful way of cutting through this false alternative:

In the meantime, neither orphans of the labour movement, nor prophets of the communism to come, we participate in the class struggle as it is on a daily basis and as it produces theory.⁹¹

90. Wait-and-see-ism

This idea that it is not *we* but the class struggle that produces theory reminds one of Bion. Of course this leaves a lot open — for example, *what* class struggle is participated in, and *how* is the theory being produced by the class struggle recognised.⁹²

There is no revolutionary way of engaging in struggles unless of course those struggles are revolutionary. This does not mean one should not be involved in “non-revolutionary” struggles. However, one can only relate to struggles according to their limits. Being involved may help you to find those limits, allowing one to make sense of them in ways that non-participants cannot. However, involvement may also lead one to deny those limits, and to be only interested in ideas that support one’s own illusions. Illusions or myths are a necessary part of group life, allowing a creative escape from the given into the realm of the possible, of the “not yet”, but at times dis-illusionment is also necessary for moving forward.

Openness is not just about being open to the ideas of self-identified communists and revolutionaries. We wish to be open to moments of genius wherever they may be found, in all forms of “scientific” thinking (in a broad and not reductive sense as a search for truth). Marx’s motto was “nothing human is alien to me” and it would be absurd for communists to limit their interests and concerns as if they “were workers specialised in a particular art instead of aiming at devoting themselves to the whole universe”.⁹³

Communist theory has a universal significance. It expresses a will to life on the part of humanity against capital, a force it has created and continues to create which threatens its destruction. At the same time those trying consciously to think it are just individuals and small groups doing what we can. A guiding thought for those engaged in such a task:

The group must be capable of maintaining the dominance of its own depressive attitude. This means, despite its sense of vision and grandiosity, retaining the capacity to keep a sense of perspective and, hence, knowing that what might be created will not be perfect but could be good enough.⁹⁴

91. *Théorie Communiste*, ‘Who are we?’ *Théorie Communiste* no. 14 (1997).

92. TC themselves suggest that it is a ‘matter of analysis and intuition’. R.S., ‘Que faisons-nous?’ *Meeting* no. 4 (2008).

93. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’.

94. Hoggett, *Partisans in an Uncertain World*, 158.

ERROR

Let's take all the crud of the world; all the material forms of all the stuff that bears the imprint of this society. Not, for a moment, the social forms themselves — the historically peculiar configurations of relations between people — but rather, all the muck of the world, the turf turned over and mangled by the relentless tread of those definite people, in their definite relations; stuff whose material form is the negative image of those people and their relations. We're not speaking specifically about use value, since what we're looking at is not reducible to the commodity; nor is it an abstract, contemplative natural form, like scenery or the environment. What we're concerned with, rather, is material form as the correlate of definite social relations, and their attendant behavioural patterns, projects, accidents. Neither simply nature nor second nature, here our "objective spirit" leaves its mark in the placement of hedgerows, the specific hue of an agricultural horizon, the percentage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, just as much as in the interlacing lines of tarmac and light that straddle urban condensations and their dissipations into the countryside. Flows of water on the approach to cities channel off into decrepit canals, reservoirs, labyrinthine sewerage systems, treatment stations, and onwards to estuaries and seas, their chemical composition and temperature bearing traces of their prior path.

What do we have to say about the infinite concreteness of all this shit? Not as the conceptually recalcitrant, metaphysical matter of a vulgar materialism, but as definite form and pattern, nature-given but socially formed, and thus negatively evidencing a social content. The forms in question are part product of behavioural patterns, and part prerequisite. As experienced, for the most part, they lay down basic parameters — capacities and directionality — of activity. As such, they supply form to it, both enabling it such as it is, and lending limits. But a disused path is quickly overgrown, the particular form lost without the social processes that sustain it, and new paths must at some point be first trodden. And as such, these forms must be thought of in part as reifications of deliberate activity. Infrastructure occupies this ontological field, but there are also plenty of forms here which would not normally be thought of as infrastructural, since what we're looking at is the

entire negative image of the totality of human relations and activity as it occurs in the stuff of the world — not just a specific set of networks and structures that play a clear functional role for “the economy”.

In a world given its predominant social forms by the imperatives of capital, it is of course to capital that we might look for explanation of the material imprints and patterns left by those forms — not just in the material-technological dimension of the production process itself, but also in all the material implications of this process as it unfolds across the surface of the globe. If capital moulds social relations to its ends and means, those relations in turn mould the stuff of the world. And if the affordances of that stuff both enable and limit the patterns of our activity, our own practical-technical capacities and limits must thus be seen as in large part defined by capital.

From this there follows a conundrum in the communist imaginary: In the absence of the specific social forms that are constitutive of capitalist society, what will people do about all the stuff of the capitalist world and the parameters it gives to their action and behaviour? How will they be able to work with these things to reproduce themselves from one year to the next, without being compelled to “reverse engineer” the specific social relations that have inscribed themselves in them? Assuming people will still need electrical power, for example, to do the things that must be done, won’t they need to keep the grid up, the power stations running, the fuel supply coming, and thus to reproduce vast swathes of the global capitalist economy?

This intractable question seems to lead to a choice between two troublesome answers. Either:

1. given the depth of penetration of the effects of capital into the very material structure of the world, it will be necessary to break directly with the entire structure of things as given, since anything less than this will amount to a perpetuation or return of capitalist social relations. Or,

2. given the general human dependence on capitalist infrastructure, it will be necessary to take a pragmatic approach, keeping this infrastructure running while we grapple with the herculean political problem of managing and coordinating some global transitional phase.

From the standpoint of the first answer it will be said in response to the second: keeping such infrastructure running would be tantamount to keeping capitalism in general running, since such things cannot be extricated from the global capitalist system. Keeping such things would thus be in contradiction with the stated aim of making a transition, and this answer is thus no real answer at all. And from the standpoint of the second answer it will be said in response: to advocate some immediate break with the material structure of the capitalist world in general is to advocate a gigantic global humanitarian disaster, since there is no other ready means for dealing with the needs of 7.5 billion people. Such a break could thus never really be pursued as a serious course of action since, given the choice, for everyone other than the nuttiest of wingnuts, the perpetuation of capitalism will always be an option preferable to mass death.

These contrary standpoints, for all the difference between a homely common sense and a rigourist zealotry, share a common framing — perhaps a necessary one — and in at least one sense have similar implications: insofar as the future is foreseeable on the basis of things as currently given, it is capitalism, or else. The affordances of the world open up a vast horizon of possibilities for action, but shaped as these affordances are by the imprint of social forms which are themselves formed by capital, it would seem that ultimately it remains the latter that gives and forecloses that horizon. Thus, at the limit of Hercules’ labours there’s still an inscription that says *nec plus ultra*: nothing else beyond but an ineffable negativity. And whether they like it or not, our intransigent, for their part, will quickly come face to face with all the pragmatic problems of carving some transition through all this crud. If the capital-constrained vectors written into the stuff of the world lead indefinitely towards the horizon, communism can only be projected as an indeterminate, far-off break in these vectors. And as to the exact placement or character of that break: infinitesimals of sectarian fun await those who try to take up a strict position — or to consign some opponent to one — on such matters.

ANTINOMIES

Origin

If we squint our eyes a little, this problematic resembles another, with which Marx grapples in the part of *Capital* on “so-called primitive accumulation”. Given that capital is a self-reproducing totality, a systematic inter-relation of moments for which the preconditions themselves are posited as the primary result, this confronts us with a question: how could such a thing originate in the first place? This is an instance of the general problem of bridging the aporetic gulf between any synchronic theory and any diachronic account of the same theoretical object, between a form and its etiology — or, more broadly, of the ancient and intractable philosophical problem of how to think *becoming*. Considered in synchronic terms, given that all moments of the totality are simultaneously and mutually necessary, in all of their systematic relations with one another, the problem of origin appears absolute. Since the whole totality is needed at once, capital can logically only have sprung fully-formed into the world, and a mere instant prior to this origin, it can’t have existed at all. But considered in historical terms such a claim to absolute origin appears absurd: though little moments of genesis are a regular part of the overall continuity of things, historical development doesn’t produce miracles.

Faced with such metaphysical absurdities we might choose to constrain ourselves to this merely diachronic, historicising mode. History, not philosophy, will be our “queen of sciences”. We now avoid metaphysical conundrums by focusing on the changing patterns of relations between ultimately unsystematised — only externally-related — aggregates of entities. If we wanted to characterise what we’ve just done in philosophical terms, we could proudly affirm our anti-essentialism and wait for the canned applause. If the explanation for the thing lies entirely outside it, deferred onto an open field of historical contingencies, it was surely a mistake to direct our attention to the thing itself when attempting to think about its origin. But what is this thing that we are historicising? Not only are we already thinking about something discrete, with its own particular identity which had somehow to be produced; it also does very well at taking care of its own reproduction, consistently producing and operating upon its

own preconditions over long expanses of historical time. This self-relatedness suggests that explanation cannot after all be an entirely external, contingent affair. And the set of moments through which capital does reproduce itself occur simultaneous to each other. Viewed in purely diachronic perspective then, these moments will collapse into the undifferentiated facticity of capital’s mere existence. And when this occurs it becomes difficult to even say with any clarity what capital *is*, and thus what we are historicising. Or, to put it another way: the simultaneous cannot be narrated.

Marx essentially avoids the problem of capital’s origin by reducing the question to that of the historical separation of producers from means of production — something for which a clear history can be told, and which his synchronic analysis has demonstrated to be a fundamental prerequisite for generalised capitalist production. In strict theoretical terms however, this move is not quite adequate, since it actually only sidesteps the fundamental question of origin of the *system* of all the forms of value that mediate this separated relation. This separation is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the capitalist mode of production. Thus we might reasonably ask whether a different — non-capitalist — mode of production might not have been possible on the basis of this same simple separation if, for example, capital’s self-valorisation had been absent as motive force. In a mode of production lacking generalised monetary exchange or a functional separation of the economic and the political, it is conceivable that a capitalist-like separation of direct producers from the production process could be maintained, for example, through physical coercion and the rationing of products (perhaps this mode of production is less fictional than it at first seems).

The problem is that the sufficient conditions for the capitalist mode of production, as we know them, do not exist in separation from it. These conditions in their totality are the primary systemic outcome of this mode of production in its daily operation. But, if we delete the mode of production from our picture, it is hard to imagine these conditions emerging in their fullness through some external cause, purely contingent to that which would be their outcome — an epic accident of history. Chicken and egg arguments ensue, and quite reasonably so. What came first: generalised exchange relations; a wage-earning class; technical improvements to the labour process; the separation

of producers from the land...? One of the major debates of Marxist historiography—that over transition—springs up on this spot. Controversies unfold, arguments are honed, real progress is made in the understanding of history. But the impertinence of the theoretician cannot be definitively dispelled: Yes, but *exactly* when and how did it *really* begin? Such questioning may, on the face of it, involve a certain stupidity. Perhaps so, but such “stupidity” underlies the empirical enquiry itself, for it is precisely the uncertainty here that drives the struggle for empirical answers. Yet in its bald abstraction, this question threatens to persist dunderheadedly through every answer given it, for it is stuck in a circle: an historical explanation is demanded for something that can only be thought theoretically as a pure event, and which as such resists historical explanation, but yet also *as such* demands it.

Given our reasonably firm grasp of the capitalist mode of production and its history, to push further on this problem of origin might well be a case of philosophical onanism—and, of course, it’s better to attend to the “actual world”. But let’s venture that this stupid question has a transcendental character, in the Kantian sense: it occurs necessarily, an aspect of the structuring of our thought, and there is no ready way of avoiding it entirely. Indeed, without constitutive uncertainty over key questions like this there might be little impetus to science. But if it is identified like this as an aspect of transcendental structure—an unavoidable *theoretical artefact* of the nonetheless necessary distinction between synchronic and diachronic modes for understanding capital—the effects of such stupidity may at least be managed, bracketed. If there is no clear way out of the bind of thinking with regard to origins then we can at least sketch the lines of this bind, in order to gain a more objective purchase and save ourselves from sophistical games. Historicisation and systematic theory are mutually necessary here, each running into absurdities when pursued entirely to the exclusion of the other, yet the two don’t so far appear capable of unification into a single, ultimately coherent mode of analysis.

Recognising this bind as we now do, we might opt for a pragmatic basis for the decision as to which mode of analysis is appropriate: systematic theory where consideration of capital as a self-same, self-reproducing totality looks most useful; historicisation where it seems more illuminating for the contingent to pour into and disrupt the identity of this thing. Some basic scientific criteria like Ockham’s razor

and a general weighing of explanatory power will do. This pragmatic distinction cannot revert to an absolute one, or we will be back where we started: historicisation will devolve into a meaningless “one damn thing after another”, unable even to properly identify its objects; theorisation will free itself from temporal difference and thus from historical process in general. Whichever mode is emphasised, this must be grasped as only a provisional bracketing, where what is left out of the analysis is not thereby negated; and the other mode must ultimately be allowed to complicate and structure it.

End

But if, on the pure basis of a synchronic grasp of capital as totality, origin necessarily presents itself as a problem, or as a sort of “miracle”, something similar is true of capital’s demise. Thus what is at play here is not merely a scholarly (or scholastic) matter, but the central strategic stake of revolutionary theory. If our theory of the capitalist mode of production hinges upon its self-same theoretical object, neither origin nor demise will be graspable internally to this theory in more complex terms than the mere being/non-being of that object, and such non-being would amount to the “falsification” of the theory itself.¹ On the strict theoretical basis of capital’s systemic integrity, its demise is by definition *unthinkable*, and thus, when postulated, can take the abstract, mystical form of a pure, indeterminate rupture. From this absurdity there results a strong, quite reasonable, temptation to recoil from this thought into assuming instead the concrete impossibility of anything so absolute, anything so mystical: of course, some intermediate, transitional phase must be postulated and the purity of such rupture diminished; more pragmatic steps must be taken... Yet it has been known since at least ancient Greece that

1. The outlines of this absurdity stand out if we ascend to a more emphatically philosophical level. Let’s take ‘theory’ to by definition involve the drawing-out of the ‘essence’ of some thing. Change to the thing could be superficial, not affecting this essence; it would thus fall outside the ken of the theory. Or it could be fundamental, altering the essence, in which case the thing is no longer the same self-identical object we started with, and the theory must—if it had really grasped the essence—have now become false. There is either an essence that the theory successfully grasps, or there isn’t; there appears to be no basis here for thinking about fundamental change. Such problems may be hazards of pure theory when its objects are posited as entities that demand some degree of *internal* explanation, yet this seems unavoidable in some cases. While here we confront a problematic of such generality that it could be traced back to ancient Greece, we got to this point by following the logic of frustrations with the thought-forms of so-called ‘revolutionary’ milieux. At a high enough level of abstraction we always return to the same problems.

paradoxes and absurdities given by the logic of concepts cannot always be so easily dispelled: no amount of common-sense transitioning can bridge from what is to what is not without still implicitly posing the problem of *when specifically* the fundamental break takes place — the problem, if framed in this way, does not go away. The theoretical effects of the synchronic / diachronic distinction appear again, and what we're looking at now resembles one of Zeno's paradoxes.

One might attempt to ward off the impossible negativity latent in thinking these twin transitions by folding them into the persistence of the totality itself: capital does its own becoming and its own dissolving, and somewhere in between it is properly itself. We might invoke some notion of the actualisation and loss of an essence; the drawing out of something already there *in nuce*, and its final withering. Origin and supersession of the totality are something internal to it, something it itself *does*, organically yanking itself into existence, leading a good innings, then shuffling off: the three necessary phases in the arc of any abstract periodisation, and any good story.²

It's more intellectually compelling than a miracle followed, after a very long wait, by a rapture, and a more plausible abstract representation of a pattern of historical development. But, of course, our new theory is all the more question-begging: isn't it paradoxical to allot to something responsibility for its own origin? And — while less immediately counter-intuitive, given the reality of suicides and the self-dissolutions of organisations — perhaps it's equally paradoxical to hold something responsible for its own demise?³ What's more, that "when specifically?" question hasn't really gone away, as quickly becomes apparent when we start trying to map the points of our arc directly onto the course of the "actual world". We then discover that what we've produced is not really a historical periodisation of our totality, but an abstracted theoretical schema of its generic *temporality*, or a philosophy of history.⁴

So, again, it may be best if we provisionally bracket such matters as *theoretical artefacts*, and as not necessarily referring to any literal historical truth,

2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b:20–30.

3. Ray Brassier seems to think so. See 'Wandering Abstraction' *Mute*, 13 February 2014.

4. It might be said that traditional historical materialism, with its dialectic of the forces and relations of production, escapes such problems. Since a trans-historical 'engine of history' is posited as the force driving the succession of modes of production, these do not appear as the kind of totality that begs such questions. The origin problem has here been displaced to the beginning of class society in general. Thus with this operation comes a loss of specificity:

much as the axiomatic projection of a single infinite flat plane — spatial extension in its most abstract sense — can occur as an artefact of euclidean geometry without rendering useless that geometry in the face of the actual non-flatness of the world. These theoretical artefacts have a tendency to get literalistically pictorialised in the fantasies of the revolutionary imaginary: single, universal process of all humanity deciding its way out of capitalism, or universal, instantaneous, determinationless destruction of the entirety of capitalist being. Both are facile, merely mirroring the necessary abstractness of the concept they depict. Against the more apocalyptic pole of the latter sort of imaginings, the common sense recoil to faith in "transition" is understandable. Yet this will tend ultimately to issue in the equally empty counter-fantasy. And in the final analysis, it will always be susceptible to the impermanent prodding of a theoretical absolutism which correctly perceives that, in itself, no amount of transition can add up to a rupture.⁵ If "rupture" as theoretical artefact should not be mapped literalistically onto historical development, nor can a registering of the generic necessity of historical transitivity solve the theoretical-political problem of revolutionary break. Process and event here are, we might say, complementary abstractions; but they are also in seemingly insoluble contradiction.

IMAGINARY

These antinomies are not matters of explicitly formalised theory alone: such problematics occur within the latent "theory" of everyday social reality, its struggles and identities. The elaboration of such things as a kind of transcendental structure may thus help us to explain the recurrence of such abstraction in the "pre-theoretical" revolutionary imaginary as something more than a matter of mere superstition. Abstract appeals both to pure, total rupture and to

the distinctive internal coherence of the capitalist mode of production — the circle established by the value-form once it takes hold of the production process as industrial capital — risks dissipation into a general economic history. Such history should not be dismissed: perhaps man *can* be the key to the anatomy of the ape. But just as the origin problem was only displaced, its counterpart remains: if the end of capitalism is posited as that of class society, or of history as the history of class struggle, the event of this end will not be thinkable in the terms of such history..

5. Engels and Gladwell notwithstanding: quantity-into-quality shifts and tipping points may be useful figures for thinking about real processes of transformation, but they are just that. They do not ultimately dispel the kinds of impertinent metaphysical pedantry we have been pursuing here: when precisely comes the actual event? If it initiates something genuinely new, how do we think the relation of that novelty to what came before it?

generic process or transitivity have a necessary ground in the structure of revolutionary thinking and are thus not simply incorrect. Indeed, this simple dyad provides the basic coordinates by which historical cases of thinking around the question of revolution will inevitably be characterised: Bakunin, Marx, Engels, Bernstein, Kautsky, Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Lenin, Sorel, Lukács, Pannekoek, Bordiga, whoever. The classical “reform or revolution” debate is of course relevant here, though it is important to underline that it should not be mapped simplistically onto these abstract terms, since revolution can be thought in terms of both process and event, and so can reform.

Individual thinkers have typically developed their strategic visions through mixed distributions of these generic temporal categories. Marx’s pronouncements oscillated between the two poles, depending on context. Late in life, against the gradualism of the Lassalleans, in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* he asserted a revolutionary attitude to the state, but sketched a developmental vision in which the actual event of establishing communism was submerged in an indefinite process in which “bourgeois right” and the “exchange of equal values” were to persist, while “the individual producer receives back from society... exactly what he gives to it.”⁶

For Engels, the proletarian state was to take “possession of the means of production in the name of society”, and then “wither away of itself”, to be replaced by the “administration of things”; it was not to be “abolished out of hand”, as per the fantasies of the “so-called anarchists”. Yet the proletariat’s appropriation of the state was nonetheless to be an act of abolition both of itself as class and of “the state as state.”⁷ Lenin tied himself in knots arguing for a coherent, orthodox conception of revolution on the basis of these pronouncements, opposed to anarchists and opportunists alike: the concept of withering had been taken up as an excuse for opportunist delusions when it was meant only as a corrective to anarchist fantasies of a pure abolition; in reality, the state was to be subjected to both event — abolition of the *bourgeois* state through its proletarian appropriation — and process: withering away of the state *in general*. Thus the initial event of revolution at the level of the state was to be a moment in a larger process, which would itself somehow ultimately issue in the main event of revolution at the level of the mode of production.⁸

Event and process do a wild dance through even the most orthodox of revolutionary visions.

Anarchisms and non-Bolshevik communisms would of course perform alternative distributions of these terms, typically locating both event and process at the level of society, means of production, party or organisational form, rather than that of the state. The problem of revolution can start to look like a matter of good cookery: event and process are both necessary ingredients, but must be combined in just the right ratio and with a fine grasp of timing, and the problem with opponents is that *they get the recipe all wrong*. The Leninist loses sight of the actual event of social revolution by neglecting it in favour of the strategic problem of the state. The infantile “left-wing communist” is so constrained by their tight-fitting dogmas they can’t participate in the actual process of revolution. The social democrat foregoes the event of fundamental social transformation in the pursuit of an endless process of piecemeal reform and unprincipled accommodation to the capitalist state...

The material conditions which gave these debates their concrete meaning have, for the most part, long passed. And whatever remains of historical interest is precisely what cannot be reduced to the abstractions we have been considering here. Event or process: neither has, in itself, any strategic meaning of the kind that must be at stake in the actual taking up of a position, or the actual playing out of a revolutionary moment. Yet both persist ineluctably as structuring poles of the revolutionary imaginary, as is evidenced by the fact that we still find revolution imagined as abstract pure event and as simple transitivity in the ritualised disputes of the left and its heirs presumptive. If we are to attempt to subject the abstractions of this imaginary to critique, we can’t assume that we can reduce them to a mere matter of “error” in the epistemic sense: these artefacts of theory are not mere mistakes. And this “imaginary” is not merely something unreal, as in the everyday sense of the word, but rather, a determinate structure with a social reality, intelligible in the patterning of revolutionary discourses, behaviours, identities.

The simple concept of the capitalist mode of production as a synchronically self-related totality in itself implies, as abstract generalities, the structures we’ve examined so far. This concept is no mere mental phenomenon, but an abstraction given socially by the

8. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Collected Works 25), 400–6.

6. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (MECW 24), 85–6.

7. Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (MECW 25), 267–8.

movement of the value-form; that is to say, it is not simply an inductive *generalisation* about the world, since its abstraction is actually performed within certain social processes. It is thus reasonable to say that the basic forms of the revolutionary imaginary stem objectively from the mode of production itself. They are the elementary concepts through which the revolutionary horizon presents itself, an immanently-produced effect of the mode of production. As such generalities they are temporally coextensive with the mode of production and thus cannot be periodised or historicised in finer grain than the epoch that this mode of production itself established through its coming into dominance.

But this, of course, is not to say that the revolutionary imaginary undergoes no historical change at all. In its concrete content it is in constant flux, and subject to all the chaotic contingencies of historical process in general. It is only the structural “conditions of possibility” of thinking this content that are limited to such a level of generality and transhistoricity. Beyond this basic level there are degrees of specificity more amenable to historicisation: revolution as Chartist call for a “Grand National Holiday” or as Luxemburgist mass strike; as syndicalist projection of industrial unionism’s universalisation or as Social Democratic appropriation of the modern state’s bureaucratic apparatuses; as Third World detonation of colonial weak links; as generalised refusal of labour; as establishment of cybernetic or algorithmic self-regulation; as willed acceleration of capital’s own hi-tech tendencies; as extension of a new commons; as generalised interruption of commodity circulation; as insurrectionary proliferation amidst a crumbling world system; or simply as pious, empty messianic hope — all are instances of a revolutionary imaginary that can, of course, be historicised in relation to specific conditions. Each may be grasped in itself as more or less abstract, depending on its intrication with, and capacity for generating, consistent concrete strategies in the context of actual struggles, on the basis of those conditions. It is at the extreme of the most threadbare abstraction, where they appear in the form of the merest hope, that we are confronted most immediately with the revolutionary imaginary’s transcendental structures. Here the imaginary tends to mere fantasy; we might view it as a sort of social “wish fulfillment”. At the opposite pole — that of full concretion and immersion in the world of practice — these forms tend to recede

from view, dissolved into the particularities and contingencies of the moment, though the imaginary which they structure will only ultimately be cast aside with the supersession of the mode of production that is at its root.

In historical moments such as the present one, in which communist revolution can hardly be thought as a plausible direct outcome of currently existing conditions, and in which it is thus extremely difficult to orient oneself strategically to such a prospect, we are perforce reduced to a theoretical mode that is more abstractly speculative. Debates about the notion of revolution tend unavoidably towards a poverty of abstraction no matter how hard their participants strain against present conditions, no matter how eagerly they bandy about the standard signifiers of an absent political concretion — organisation, strategy, party, position etc — or busy themselves with the minutiae of speculative formalisms. In such conditions it is all too easy to mistake the playing out of the generic logic of one or another abstract, inherited rhetoric or identity construct for the taking of an actual political position. This is the equivalent at the level of thought of the pious formation of soi-disant revolutionary organisations in non-revolutionary times. Meanwhile, the actual struggles and the real strategic and organisational thinking that inevitably continue to occur, as social actors face the everyday exigencies of life in capitalist societies, tend to be divorced from questions of revolution.

We are not, however, thereby forced simply to abandon the question of the capitalist mode of production’s revolutionary terminus. An indefinite future of successful capitalist growth can hardly be thought with more confidence as a possible outcome of present conditions than can its breakdown or supersession. No: the essential contradiction of the capitalist mode of production — that it always needs both more and less labour; the inherent dynamism and future-orientedness of the accumulation process; and the necessarily conflictual playing out of that process — these posit, of themselves, another structural aspect to the revolutionary imaginary that we have not yet examined. This is a sense of the mode of production’s — and thus also the revolutionary imaginary’s own — ultimate impossibility, and of the necessity of an orientation to that impossibility. For this reason, this “end” is not simply a static generality, nor a simple subsumption of one or another arbitrary, historically-particular content under such a

generality. It is, rather, something produced and reproduced through the immanent dynamics of this totality as it propels itself towards a future in which it must ultimately, on its own terms, be impossible. This propulsion towards an end is intrinsic to this mode of production's inner temporality just as much as are the subsumption of the labour process under capital and the endless accumulation of surplus value. This is specifically an *immanent* material basis for the thought of an end to this mode of production; and as such it gives us something more determinate than, for example, the platitudinous recognition that all things pass, or the simple idea that what has a beginning must also have an end.⁹ Without such ground, the revolutionary imaginary would be reduced to literal unreality, or to the emptiest mysticism. This is also the basis of our capacity to conceptualise capital as constituting a discrete mode of production, dominant only within a specific historically-bounded epoch, rather than as, for example, the revealed truth of human society.

While an effect of its transhistorical structure, the generic temporality of the "being-towards-death" of the mode of production — and thus also that of its revolutionary imaginary — itself also imposes a certain structuring on historical experience, such that it presents itself as progression, development, maturation. The endlessly rehearsed exorcisms of mechanical Second International teleologism still cannot do away with this basic structuring a century after Gramsci's declaration of the "revolution against *Capital*", and decades after Lyotard's announcement of the end of grand narratives, since it is neither a matter of the merely objective operation of some mechanism, nor of mere ideas. Just as capital itself, in spite of all the postmoderns, never lost the directionality of its course, the structural compulsion to project a terminus to that course has never quite been extinguished. And we

9. This linking of origins to ends is a recurrent thought in Greek and Roman philosophy which one still sometimes comes across. The idea that what comes to be must also have an end is the counterpart to a notion of the eternal as that which does not come to be and therefore does not end. But the logic binding these terms, while intuitive, is not self-evident. For there are two possible further terms here: what we might call the 'one-sided' eternities, which either have an origin but no end, or an end but no origin. If there is no logical reason binding origins to ends, couldn't newly eternal beings emerge? And, indeed, why should those things that have no origins necessarily have no ends? (Such things have actually been considered in some historic cosmologies.) If we cannot logically exclude the possibility that the already-eternal might perish, or that new eternities might come to be, what are we to make of the opposition of eternity and transience? Is this perhaps an effect of the Pythagorean ontologisation of the mathematical abstract? In Hesiod the origin of the gods was a fundamental question, and their relation to time itself thematised. By the time we get to the corny

are constantly reminded of that directionality: in the accumulating masses of infrastructure and technological knowledge; in a seemingly secular global polarisation of wealth; in the tottering accretions of arcane financial claims; and in the growing mass of humanity surplus to the requirements of the specifically capitalist production process. Moments of rising social tension are inevitably promoted by these tendencies, and as movements build and subjects start to cohere in struggle, the fog of abstraction begins to dissipate while the revolutionary imaginary bends towards a real-world proletarian practice and the terrain of strategy and organisation.

DETERMINACY

If we have been concerned here with identifying an immanent basis in the mode of production for the structures of revolutionary thought, that is not because the mode of production encapsulates everything. The ineluctability of this structuring of historical experience does not justify a monomaniacal focus on the mode of production alone, as if the latter could provide the final, exhaustive explanatory ground for all phenomena occurring within its epoch. The full extent of concrete history cannot be reduced to the mere playing out of the accumulation process and its effects, for these are nothing more, nothing less than peculiarly dominant *structuring logics*, and are not the only such logics.¹⁰ The mode of production is of utmost importance in the shaping of the world, and in the question of revolution. But it does not encapsulate that world, and it may help us to loosen the antinomies that we have set at play here if we can address a certain question of *scope*.

Marx, and Hegel before him, were prone to a certain holistic or organicist tendency, but neither made much of the concept of "totality" in any technical

banalities of Roman stoicism, the divine is eternal and the human transient, and that is that. But what if capitalism is one-sidedly eternal — something new under the sun, yet stretching off into indefinite time? There are other aspects of human society one might suspect of having this nature (within, no doubt, some ultimate frame, such as the final heat-death of the universe), and thus persisting into a post-capitalist future: textual language, numeracy, science, agriculture. That capitalism has an origin does not in itself exclude it from this set; for this, communist theory needs to find other reasons.

10. These considerations have a bearing on the old socialist feminist question of how many systems there are — one for patriarchy and one for capital? One each for class, sex, race and so on? Or one mega-totality which we can show all these others to somehow be intrinsic to? In an ultimate sense there must surely be only one — for there is only one world. But the world is an indeterminate totality. Within that world, dominant social logics such as gender and class form themselves into more determinate structures, and can become tightly, systematically →

sense.¹¹ The elevation of this concept was a Lukácsian innovation. Lukács opened his reification essay as follows:

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure.¹²

Could the solution to the riddle of the *Warenstruktur* really contain that of every other problem? It is tempting to put this extraordinary claim down to rhetoric, but thoughts like this occur with such frequency in the history of Marxist and revolutionary theory that even if what we are looking at is a matter of rhetoric, it would seem to be in the sense of a deep-rooted structure of discourse rather than a superficial moment of verbal excess. The key question here is what “capitalist society in its totality” might be. What does it include? All the particular people, institutions, techniques, cultures, artefacts, geography, practices and so on that make up what people might have in mind when referring to “a society”? How might Marx have portrayed such a thing? Was his theory just an abstracted map for that particularly amorphous kind of territory, or something more specific?

Lukács should probably have said “the capitalist mode of production in its totality”, for that was surely Marx’s real object. And its nature as a totality is quite precise: it is not simply the sum of the indeterminate mass of particulars that make up capitalist societies, but rather the articulated unity of a specific set of mediations that can be elaborated through theoretical

entwined. Thus it may be possible with synchronic analysis to show how one becomes intrinsic to the other (see for example ‘The Logic of Gender’, *Endnotes* 3), while at the same time it is hazardous to identify them. If gender is only a capitalist construct, for example, how are we to account for such things as the gendered spheres of the ancient world, or even the ternary gendering of the Byzantine Empire? Nominalist solutions, such as defining our terms to exclude such considerations, just defer the problem.

11. For more on this point see Rob Lucas, ‘Feeding the Infant’, in Anthony Iles and Mattin, eds., *What Is to be Done Under Real Subsumption?*, forthcoming. See also Chris O’Kane, “Society maintains itself despite all the catastrophes that may eventuate”: Critical theory, negative totality, and crisis’ *Constellations* vol. 25 no. 2 (2018).

12. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin 1971), 83.

analysis: commodity, value, wage labour, capital and so on.¹³ Insofar as it constitutes a unity of the determinate moments that make up its own accumulation process, capital is itself a totality in this sense. But it is not the only relevant totality, for individual capitals are of course combined, through exchange, into a larger whole which has such unity that it systematically reproduces the primary condition of its own existence: the separation of labour-power and means of production, ready to be recombined again through the labour market. These totalities are both self-related and self-constituted through determinate internal mediations; they involve a specific kind of reflexivity, and those internal mediations depend upon one another such that they can be said to involve a certain kind of necessity.

The mode of production is a totality in this technical sense, which we term *determinate totality*. In contrast, when one simply invokes the abstract unity of an indefinite mass of particulars without articulating in any systematic way how those particulars make up a whole that is anything more than an aggregate, this is an *indeterminate totality*.¹⁴ Theologians of Old Kingdom Egypt were perhaps on to something when they came up with the creator god Atum, whose name means both totality and nonexistence: rather like the Being of Hegel’s *Logic*, totality as an unarticulated “all” is contentless. “Society” is an indeterminate totality; “civilisation” another; “capitalism” another — at least when this is used as anything other than a synonym for the mode of production.

At least since Lukács, Marxist theory has had a tendency to slide between determinate and indeterminate totalities. That Marx elaborated in detail the articulations of the mode of production as a totality might be taken as meaning that he also sketched the fundamental truth of everything that occurs in a hazily-defined “society”, which itself may be implicitly

13. Even Marx and Engels’s seemingly vaguest, most expansive definitions of the concept of the mode of production remain, in the last analysis, closely tied to production in a fairly narrow sense. See, for example, the opening chapter of the *German Ideology*: ‘This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. (MECW 5), 31–2.

14. Theorising systems, which are a close relative of totalities, Stafford Beer recognises both determinate and indeterminate, but adds a third: probabilistic. Investigation of this interesting parallel will, however, have to be left as a task for another day. See Beer, ‘The Irrelevance of Automation’ in *How Many Grapes Went into the Wine* (Wiley 1994), 104.

imagined as something coextensive with the modern nation-state, and which may include its populations, its territories, its infrastructures... Layers of mediation may be surreptitiously telescoped, such that a very well-articulated theory for one thing—capital, or the capitalist mode of production—may be taken for a theory of something quite different, or perhaps even of *everything*.¹⁵

And once this elision has been performed, it becomes singularly difficult to conceptualise the overcoming of the mode of production at all. Rather, we are precipitated into rather “theological” problematics of immanence and transcendence; into questions of whether the mode of production has any “outside”; into visions of the future as a completely contentless blank slate—for if everything really is to be at stake, then what lies beyond can only be *nothing*. Revolution can then only be thought of as something utterly transcendent; a sort of ineffable sublime that is the abstract, indeterminate negation of an equally ineffable, indeterminate totality.¹⁶ We return once again to our antinomies, which seem as pathological as ever.

There are objective bases for the tendency to project the capitalist mode of production as an indeterminate totality that subsumes all the world’s particulars. First, the value form that lies at its heart finds its ground in exchange-value, and particularly in money as general equivalent. It is the nature of the general equivalent to present itself as the “truth” of all particulars, since it is only through the mediation of money that they can ultimately express their value. This may appear directly, in all actual empirical acts of exchange, or as a mere potentiality, in those things which have not yet been, but could be, sold as commodities. Second, the fact that, due to certain aspects of capital’s inner temporality, we can always think of its subsumption of the labour process as in some sense more “real”, less “formal” than before seems to logically present the prospect of some completion of this tendency at which “subsumption” will be

15. The concept of ‘subsumption’ sometimes lubricates such slippages, seeming as it does to provide a theoretical justification for identifying capital with the world outside it. For more on this point, see Rob Lucas, ‘Feeding the Infant’.

16. Robin Blackburn has identified what he calls ‘simplifying’ and ‘developmental’ assumptions in Marxism, the first of which simply imagines away all complexity in the overcoming of capitalism, while the second is committed to the idea that ‘human social powers are cumulative, dialectical and various, and that in a socialist society some forms of complexity may be removed but others will be added’ (‘Fin de Siècle: Socialism after the Crash’, *New Left Review* 1/185, 1991, 12). But do these two coexist simply as two *choices*, one more sensible than the other? What we are attempting here might be taken in part as an explanation for the stubborn persistence of this dichotomy. What complexity can we

“total”. Third, the dynamism of the specifically capitalist mode of production is such that it tends to annihilate, or at minimum, dominate and sideline, all other modes of production. It is tempting to visualise this process of extension as a kind of complete *incorporation* of the entire non-capitalist world into capital. Fourth, it is in the epoch of the dominance of the capitalist mode of production that the nation-state crystallises into its own kind of articulated totality, mediating much of what remains of the lives and affairs of those within its territory beyond what is already mediated by commodity exchange, and concerning itself with the reproduction of “society” at large. Given this historical concurrence it is tempting to view the nation-state reductively as a sort of mere *emanation* of the capitalist mode of production, and thus to conceptually arrogate to the latter all that the nation-state does. Finally, in an era in which capital seems to have vanquished or absorbed all systemic opponents, what point of resistance to its march can consistently be identified?

While these grounds are real, none provides a sufficient basis for a projection of the capitalist mode of production beyond the loop traced by the reproduction of the separation of labour power and means of production. Though it has, of course, wide-reaching implications beyond this narrow circle—even to the extent of defining a geological epoch—it is here alone that the determinacy of the capitalist mode of production as a totality must ultimately be grasped, and thus also the determinacy of any revolution that would overcome it. What is determinate here is not *simple*: the process of this reproduction implies many mediations—the gendering of spheres, the separation of the political and the economic, of intellectual and manual labour and so on. But the determinate negation of the capitalist mode of production will be determinate specifically in the sense that it overcomes *this* reproduction. And while attempts to conceptualise *any* transformation in time may, at the limit, be subject to the sort of paradoxes we have identified here, the less we fixate on thinking in general terms the mutations of an integral, complex “essence” the more these will fade into the background.

And this is not simply an arbitrary intellectual choice: when it comes to ends in particular, it may make sense, for origins and ends perhaps prove less symmetrical than the preceding analysis suggested.

meaningfully anticipate yonder side of the break, if all complexities we know may be up for grabs?

At the scale of complex entities, time has an arrow: if it was easy to see how their origins could confront us with baffling conceptual artefacts, this is less intuitively the case with their demises. The origin of a single complex animal is a wonder of developmental biology, so intricate it is still barely understood—for how can it be that a single cell, with a single chain of protein-coding molecules can generate not just a single final “design”, but a whole manifold of forms of escalating complexity, each working upon but not simply extending the other, in which the supposed “code” means something different in each anatomical context and at each turn of the developmental spiral? And at what point can this be considered to have accounted for the adult? If origins are ever truly a mystery it is surely here. Yet death can come from a single knife-wound to the heart. All that complexity that we had to account for in the first case is quickly reduced to nought when a vital organ is rendered non-functional. If the origins of bafflingly complex entities must be sufficiently complex to account for that baffling complexity, their ends may prove brutally simple in reality, no matter how hard it can be adequately to think them through in a purely conceptual sense.¹⁷ It is here that the antinomies loosen, for when we acknowledge that we can start to differentiate a strategic field even abstractly, we can start to ease our own tugging at those binds: we are no longer stuck in the problem in the same way, since we don’t need to focus on everything all at once. Indeed, if our tendency is to get lost in the loop-the-loop of totalities, performing a certain deliberate strategic *reduction* may actually be illuminating—as we do when we emphasise the priority of means of subsistence.¹⁸

The crucial question is not one of rupture vs. transitivity, event vs. process, though these concepts will unavoidably play a role in how we think it through. All we need say is that the overcoming of the reproduction of that separation must occur by definition if we are to have a revolution that negates the mode of production: it must no longer be the case that the bulk of humanity has to drag itself to market to meet with its partner, capital, to continue the dance of accumulation. The occurrence of this

17. It makes sense here to differentiate the end of one mode of production and the emergence of its successor, which will have its own similarly baffling origin problem once established. The two processes will be entwined in reality, but not identical, since the disorderly breakdown of the first is liable not to correspond precisely to the formation of a new structure.

18. See John Clegg and Rob Lucas, ‘Three Agricultural Revolutions’ *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 119 no. 1 (2020).

transformation would, no doubt, *have duration in time*, and it would also by definition involve the production of a genuine *novum*. If the old transitional model of a workers’ state is no longer tenable, we are not merely left with an instantaneous universal miracle as the only alternative: the rejection of a specific kind of process does not in itself commit one to the abstract event. So let’s set aside all fantasies of the Great Riot at the End of Time; of the primitivist hope for an apocalypse that sweeps the Earth clean not just of capital, but of every concrete thing it has bequeathed us. But let’s also set aside any fantasies of a Great Deliberation through which humanity gradually makes its escape from this world at large in planned, orderly, *sensible* fashion. Any real debate on strategy will do well to stay cognisant of the tendency towards such pathological abstractions in revolutionary thinking. When it comes to overcoming the mode of production at least, there is one task to work out; achieving it will probably be *very* messy, confusing and, indeed, destructive, but it will not be mere chaos. Its determinate strategic contours will, of course, be given by the shape of the world as it is.

DETERMINATION

It is time, perhaps, to return to the problem with which we began: that of the practical recalcitrance of a material world that has been shaped indelibly by centuries of capitalist dominance. That world gives shape to possibilities for action, insofar as it makes some things easy, some hard, and others impossible; it presents us with a mass of specific *affordances*, which are for the most part fitted to the daily reproduction of capitalist social relations. Capital’s own “rationality” has been crystallised into infrastructures we have to navigate and architectures we have to inhabit. It has left its mark more-or-less directly on much of the world’s land area, and on the atmosphere and oceans as a whole. But what kind of causation is at play here?

If it is a kind of material determination, it is not the sort that people mean when they speak of economic or technological “determinism”. We are locating the primary cause fully on the level of the relations of production, for it is most importantly capital—or more precisely, the capital-relation—that shapes the world which in turn structures our capacities for action. Anyone who has paid serious attention to Marx

knows very well that the handmill *does not* “give you” society with the feudal lord, nor the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist, in any strongly causal sense.¹⁹ What Marx “really” meant by that notorious aphorism is up for grabs, but it would be consistent with his major works to read the causation in precisely the opposite direction to conventional understanding: the steam mill “gives you” capitalist society in the sense that it is only in a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production that one would find a steam mill employed in that society’s reproduction of itself; it gives you that society not in the sense that it causes it, but in the sense that it *implies* it, much as an ornately bejewelled dagger stowed in a burial site might “give you” a pre-historic class society with a fairly elaborate division of labour. That is to say, we may best read this line from an “archaeological” perspective, in which the form of a given artefact can be traced back to certain determinate sets of social relations.²⁰ That this priority of the social ought to be obvious has not stopped some important figures in the history of Marxism from equating technology with the “forces of production”, and thereby considering it the driving force of history.²¹

But if the social has priority here, that does not license a constructivist flight of fancy that would dissolve the significance of the material world’s forms into a nullity. It is obvious that the constitution of the physical world that we inhabit at the very least sets parameters for action.²² We may thus think in terms of orders of causation: the dominant patterns of the relations of production leave determinate imprints in the physical and technical world, which themselves in turn reinforce certain social patterns of activity which are, for the most part, compatible with the maintenance of the mode of production. This is essentially the problem with which we started: if this is the case, how can we — short of an apocalypse — imagine exiting this mode of production?

19. ‘The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist’ (*Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6, 166). Marx was in a heavily rhetorical mode in his confrontation with Proudhon, an opponent who was himself prone to mystifying rhetorical flourishes. Interestingly, according to Marc Bloch, Marx was wrong about the handmill anyway: feudal lords tried to suppress them, preferring watermills, since they were more compatible with the extraction of feudal dues (Bloch, cited in Donald Mackenzie, ‘Marx and the Machine’ *Technology and Culture* vol. 25 no. 3, 1984, 473).

20. A clue to Marx’s meaning which reinforces this interpretation may be found slightly later in the same text: ‘The hand-mill presupposes a different division of labour from the steam-mill’ (*ibid.*, 183).

21. See, for example, Bukharin’s *Theory of Historical Materialism*, criticised on this front by Lukács in ‘Technology and Social Relations’, *New Left Review* 1/39 (1966). Even Langdon Winner reads him in this way: Winner, *Autonomous*

ARTEFACT POLITICS

Insofar as what we are considering here is a matter of technology, this problem may be considered that of technical neutrality. Though from our perspective here it should seem obvious that the technical world is not neutral vis-à-vis modes of production or class power, this point is controversial enough to represent a significant theme in debates on the history and sociology of technology and science. What, after all, is the technical realm, if not something to be opposed in its rationality and objectivity to the flux and partiality of political contestation? The imperative to maintain the distinctness and neutrality of this sphere seems to be structural to capitalist society — an imperative that tends itself to produce a kind of meta-politics, from the Saint-Simonians through Thorsten Veblen to Howard Scott’s bizarre 1930s “Technocracy Movement” and on down to the post-2016 longing for an enlightened bureaucracy that will rescue us from the disorder of a fragmenting democratic consensus. Questioning it sometimes seems to offer a little *épater les bourgeois* frisson, or at least an air of contrarian eccentricity; note the provocative title of what is probably the most highly cited article in this area, Langdon Winner’s “Do Artefacts Have Politics?”, in which he delineates some of the ways in which technology can be non-neutral:

The things we call “technologies” are ways of building order in our world. Many technical devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity. Consciously or not, deliberately or inadvertently, societies choose structures for technologies that influence how people are going to work, communicate, travel, consume, and so forth over a very long time.

Technology: Technics Out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought, (MIT 1977, 78).

22. This is the case with the inherited forces of production that Marx discusses in his famous letter to Annenkov, summarising the position of the *German Ideology*: ‘man is not free to choose his *productive forces*—upon which his whole history is based—for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of previous activity [...] The simple fact that every succeeding generation finds productive forces acquired by the preceding generation and which serve it as the raw material of further production, engenders a relatedness in the history of man, engenders a history of mankind’ (Marx, Letter to Annenkov 28 December 1846 (MECW 38), 96). What we are discussing here is somewhat wider than the forces of production, for it includes some things that are not directly employed in production, but the same general truth of course holds: history is caked into the physical world, providing both resources and constraints, which then themselves provide the basis for further historical development.

In the processes by which structuring decisions are made, different people are differently situated and possess unequal degrees of power as well as unequal levels of awareness. By far the greatest latitude of choice exists the very first time a particular instrument, system, or technique is introduced. Because choices tend to become strongly fixed in material equipment, economic investment, and social habit, the original flexibility vanishes for all practical purposes once the initial commitments are made. In that sense technological innovations are similar to legislative acts or political foundations that establish a framework for public order that will endure over many generations. For that reason, the same careful attention one would give to the rules, roles, and relationships of politics must also be given to such things as the building of highways, the creation of television networks, and the tailoring of seemingly insignificant features on new machines. The issues that divide or unite people in society are settled not only in the institutions and practices of politics proper, but also, and less obviously, in tangible arrangements of steel and concrete, wires and transistors, nuts and bolts.²³

Winner is right to register the extent to which the material world can be viewed as a vast agglomeration of imperfect and partial past decisions. But legal-political analogies in such arguments tend to obscure the extent to which technical decisions take place within the bounds of the capitalist firm, where tyranny reigns in a way that can't quite be grasped with a nod to simple power differentials.²⁴ How could the sort of collective deliberation over technical decisions that he gestures towards ever become a reality without a communisation of the means of production? If artefacts have politics, it is not just because they are a congealment of the choices of situated individuals, but because they are produced in the context of a determinate pattern of social relations which are structured in particular by the capital relation.

23. Winner, 'Do Artefacts Have Politics?' *Daedalus* vol. 109 no. 1 (1980), 127-8.

24. Lawrence Lessig is another example of a thinker who employs legal analogies in thinking about technology as a kind of non-neutral constraint (Lessig, *Code: Version 2.0* (Basic 2006), a rewrite of the 1999 book *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*).

THE MACHINE STOPS

A sense of the irrevocable social burdens of capitalist technology can be found in Marxist theory at least as far back as Engels's anti-anarchist polemic, *On Authority*:

The automatic machinery of the big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been. At least with regard to the hours of work, one may write upon the portals of these factories: *Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate!* [Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind!] If man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him by subjecting him, in so far as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation. Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself, to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel.²⁵

25. Engels, *On Authority* (MECW 23), 423.

26. *Ibid.*, 424.

It is notable, however, that the point of Engels's argument is precisely not to put technology in question, but rather to show that the social non-neutrality of technology renders the idea of abolishing authority in general a quixotic fantasy. He links the abstractness of any idea that we might simply break with the capitalist use of machines to the abstractness of anarchist critiques of authority because, for Engels, the operation of specific technical apparatuses requires corresponding social forms in which "authority" is an important dimension. Without a certain authority, "no matter how delegated", how else are the trains to be made to run on time? And how are we to handle ships on turbulent seas if there are no captains? Ships, trains and factory machinery in themselves imply some social hierarchy — and socialism, it seems, must involve all of the above.²⁶ If machines are non-neutral for Engels, this is a matter of power relations which are apparently detachable from the mode of production.

Marxism was for the most part silent on the "question concerning technology" through the first half of the 20th Century, but following

Raniero Panzieri's pathbreaking essays of the early 1960s and Braverman's 1974 *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, Marxists seized upon the specific non-neutrality of technology in the sphere of production. For Panzieri, citing Marx, "the development of technology takes place wholly within" a process of the separation of the worker from their intellectual potentialities; as such, "technological progress itself thus appears as a mode of existence of capital, as *its* development". The capitalist use of machinery is no "mere distortion of, or deviation from, some 'objective' development that is in itself rational", for it is capital itself that has "determined technological development". If this is the path of "progress", it follows that:

The *class* level expresses itself not as progress, but as rupture; not as "revelation" of the occult rationality inherent in the modern productive process, but as the construction of a radically new rationality counterposed to the rationality practised by capitalism.²⁷

We are, of course, back once again in our problematic of rupture vs transitivity, event vs process. And Panzieri's logic is consistent: if the entire process of technological development is in some sense internal to capital and at odds with the worker, then it makes no sense for working-class struggle to embrace technological progressivism. On the contrary, "there is no continuity to be asserted, across the revolutionary leap, in the order of techno-economic development".²⁸ Panzieri's position thus starts to look like a call for the apocalypse. Yet he steps back from the brink, appealing instead to a revolutionary action that subjects technological means to new ends: "the socialist use of machines".²⁹ Event and process are thus left hanging, as always, in unresolved tension: we must have the Great Break, but we must have it rationally, on the basis of what already exists.

Similarly for Braverman, machines represent not the enhancement of human control over the labour process, but of managerial control over workers:

27. Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists' in Phil Slater (ed.), *Outlines of a Critique of Technology* (Ink Links 1980), 45-7.

28. *Ibid.*, 54, 58.

29. *Ibid.*, 57.

Machinery comes into the world not as the servant of "humanity", but as the instrument of those to whom the accumulation of capital gives the *ownership* of the machines. The capacity of humans to control the labour process through machinery is seized upon by management from the beginning of capitalism as the *prime means whereby production may be controlled not by the direct producer but by the owners and representatives of capital*. Thus in addition to its technical function of increasing the productivity of labour — which would be the mark of machinery under any social system — machinery also has in the capitalist system the function of divesting the mass of workers of their control over their own labour.³⁰

If the logic of such "political" readings of the labour process points towards a view of capitalist machinery as non-neutral, the Soviet adoption of Taylorism and Western industrial technology should, at the very least, be considered in a critical light:

In practice, Soviet industrialisation imitated the capitalist model; and as industrialisation advanced the structure lost its provisional character and the Soviet Union settled down to an organisation of labour differing only in details from that of the capitalist countries, so that the Soviet working population bears all the stigmata of the Western working classes.³¹

It would follow that to stand a better chance of success, any social revolution to come should put technology at stake, rather than merely accepting its capitalist inheritance on this level. If workers' control was what was lacking in the Soviet Union, perhaps it made sense to pursue the mathematical implications of Lenin's equation "communism

30. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review 1998), 133. This Marxist reading of machinery famously finds its brazen confirmation in Andrew Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures*: 'High wages, instead of leading to thankfulness of temper and improvement of mind, have, in too many cases cherished pride and supplied funds for supporting refractory spirits in strikes, wantonly inflicted upon one set of mill-owners after another ... Mr. Roberts ... set his fertile genius to construct a spinning automaton. ... This machine confirms ... that when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility.' Ure, *Philosophy of Manufactures* (Charles Knight 1835), 366-8. Some historians of technology have, however, questioned the extent to which one can take the statements of figures like Ure at face value (MacKenzie, 'Marx and the Machine', 492).

31. *Ibid.*, 9.

is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country” as per the old Russian joke, and conclude against electricity—for it follows logically that “Soviet power is communism minus electrification”. Yet Braverman too senses and recoils from the apparent absurdity of imagining revolutions as clean breaks at the level of technology:

the same productive forces that are characteristic of the *close of one epoch* of social relations are also characteristic of the *opening of the succeeding epoch*; indeed, how could it be otherwise, since social and political revolutions, although they may come about in the last analysis because of the gradual evolution of the productive forces, do not on their morrow provide society with a brand new technology.³²

32. Ibid. 13.

Braverman’s classic no doubt catches something important in its analysis of the technological subordination of skilled workers. But the political quality of such interpretations may risk a certain distortion: are the negative implications of machines for workers traceable ultimately to the malign intent of capitalists? Don’t capitalists introduce new technologies under pressure from market competition, rather than simply to squeeze payroll?

Miriam Glucksman has criticised writing in the Braverman tradition for implicitly thinking of “conscious class aims” as the “motor of historical change”, and of the introduction of new technologies as “a mere strategy of employers in their struggle with the working class”. On the contrary, as in Glucksman’s account of women workers in the assembly lines of interwar Britain, capitalists are often reactive in their introduction of new methods of production, responding to competition or financial crisis.³³ There is perhaps after all an objective basis for the conventional association of technology with the simple, market-driven pursuit of efficiency and productivity.³⁴ Simplistic understandings of non-neutrality as a matter of capitalist bad intentions will struggle to grapple with the ways in which technological change may be forced not just on workers, but on capitalists too. Who then is the agent with the ill intent?

33. Glucksman, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain*, (Routledge 1990), 153.

34. As ever in Marxist critiques of capitalist thought-forms, we would do well not simply to assume we can refute

If it is capital, this can only be true at the total social level—the figure of capital as social meta-subject or *bad Geist*. Technological development is certainly deeply entwined with the dynamics of the capitalist class relation, but it is so in a way that is mediated by competition such that the intentions of individual capitalists are themselves subordinated to the general process. If capitalist technology is non-neutral then, this is not just because it has been formed intentionally to suit the ends of capitalists, but because those ends are in turn subordinate to the end of capital itself, as subject—which is to say, the valorisation process. If capitalist machinery is the kind of artefact that has politics, this is not reducible to the way in which it is deployed by particular capitalists to disempower particular workers, though that is certainly an important part of the picture. It has politics because it is a key mediation in the mode of production as a whole which helps to perpetuate the constitutive separations between planning and execution, owning and operating, producing and reproducing, wage labour and capital. As such it should be at stake in any overcoming of those separations.

But all of this still leaves open the question of where specifically to locate this non-neutrality in relation to the material body of the artefact itself. In its physical constitution, is the thing neutral, and merely overlaid with the values of the society that uses it? Is its non-neutrality ultimately reducible to the ends to which it is subordinate? If a machine embodies capitalist ends, what happens when it is taken out of a social context in which it can serve those ends? Andrew Feenberg has taxonomised the different modes of the critique of technology that one finds in Marx under the headings of product, process and design. *Product critique* attacks the ends which technology serves, while approving of the means; *process critique* finds technology non-innocent in the sense that it can be a source of danger; *design critique*—coming third, one anticipates a cry of *aufhebung!*—tackles the principles that are applied in the very design of artefacts, regarding them as “shaped by the same bias that governs other aspects of capitalist production, such as management”.³⁵

them politically. Just as commodity circulation considered in itself really is ‘a very Eden of the innate rights of man’ (MECW 35), 186, there are real reasons for the appearance of technology as neutral, apolitical and singular in its path of rational development, even if this appearance itself provides a useful ideological device for capitalists and bureaucrats. Penetrating to the real nature of capitalist technology will require first taking seriously such forms of appearance.

For Feenberg such design critique is exemplified in David Noble's important 1984 study of the post-war introduction of numerical control into the machine tools industry, *Forces of Production*.³⁶ What differentiates Noble's book from other works in this area is his identification of alternative technological paths that were available at the time. Though options existed which would not have been in fundamental conflict with the status of workers in the industry, and which made some economic sense, capitalists — backed by the American military — took the path of class conflict, choosing the design that would stand most to alter the power balance between workers and managers. Thus that design may be read as non-neutral, in the sense that, when other choices were available, it was picked specifically because it directly served the ends of capitalists and state against workers. Noble's is a particularly strong case of the political reading of labour-process technology, but we might question the extent to which general conclusions can be drawn from such cases: if capitalists and bureaucrats can sometimes consciously deploy a design that will disempower workers, that is certainly not the only way in which technological development occurs, and we should be wary of any implicit conclusion that what is *not* deployed in such an emphatically political way will be innocent. Beyond the "design critique" of technology, there is the possibility of an understanding of non-neutrality that depends less on conscious intent, and which nonetheless finds the very form of the artefact to be a "bearer of social relations".

Hans-Dieter Bahr's rich, ultra-dialectical response to the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, "The Class Structure of Machinery" attempts to push much further in this direction:

The historical development of the means of labour (*Arbeitsmittel*) as the transformation through labour of nature-given forms into the socially purposive forms of the labour process is simultaneously the "naturalization" of the social forms of instruments of use (*Gebrauchsmittel*). As a material thing, the means of labour not only mediate between *nature* and *subject* of labour, but also serve as the mediation, the "means", among those who carry out labour.

35. Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited* (OUP 2002), 44–8.

36. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (Transaction Publishers 2011).

The fact that the tool can only serve the function of mediating the living relationship among workers if this living relationship is simultaneously severed is the reason why — in the form of private property — it can also "mediate" a social relationship between workers and non-workers, or between different types of labour. If the means of labour, as means of production, come to mediate between the ruling and the subordinate class, they must acquire a dual social character in the course of their historical development: the means of labour are a means by which the ruling class can directly satisfy its wants, but they are also the "purposive basis" for perpetuating the one-sided relation between worker and non-worker. As a means, therefore, the tool not only stands between nature, history and society, but also between different classes in society: it is not merely the *means*, but in fact the *purposive basis* for *one-sidedly* uniting the subject of labour with the subject of appropriation. Hence, the genesis of the means of production, as this objective basis, is in fact the process of the mediation of two asymmetrical social subjects.³⁷

In Bahr's reading, which is too subtle to be fully captured here, the material aspects of the labour-process are inextricable from the complex roles they play in mediating the relations of worker to worker, class to class, science to society, proletariat to its alienated intellect, and so on. The technical aspects of work are subordinated ultimately not to the ends of their operators — or even those of managers — but to an "autonomisation of the process of valorisation" which "produces its own structures of labour" that "can only yield use value through the mediation of the market".³⁸ Individual craft-workers had once finished off whole goods ready for use, which were thus illustrative of a certain transparent purposiveness, before having their work-process broken down into obscure fragments as capitalism advanced. But at a more advanced stage even individual capitals tend decreasingly to create finished commodities that have any direct relation to final use, for the market intervenes in the process, orchestrating the assembly of often vast numbers of components into

37. Bahr, 'The Class Structure of Machinery' in Slater (ed.), *Outlines of a Critique of Technology*, 101–2.

38. *Ibid.*, 119.

finished objects. The purposive agent behind the finished artefact thus starts to look like a social one.

What are we to make of the micro-component that is useless in abstraction from elaborate global supply-chains, such as, for example, the old iMac's 922-9884 Screw, T10, WH, DLTA, PT3X24MM? This thing would seem to be completely meaningless outside of the context of a very social valorisation process. It is probably not designed primarily with the subordination of workers in mind, but the specificities of its form are intelligible only in the context of global processes of capitalist accumulation. For sure, the screw *in general* could no doubt be employed to other ends — communist ones, for example — but one does not need to venture far into the concrete construction of any complex contemporary artefact to find relationships between technical parts that are thoroughly shaped by relations between firms in a global marketplace. Yet again, Unabomber armageddon beckons.

TECHNOLOGY BECOMING SOCIETY

Once we have ventured into considering this valorisation process at the social level, we are no longer looking solely at the politics of the labour process. From the 1960s onwards various Marxisms and feminisms of course began to question the assumed centrality of that process, with varying degrees of theoretical coherence. That turn at the level of theory found justification in real transformations in capitalist society, as the labour movement — and with it the hegemonic figure of the male industrial worker — entered into crisis. And it is reasonable to reconsider the Marxist critique of technology in a similar light: is it only class struggle within the (stereotypically male) workplace that marks the artefact indelibly? Even within the bounds of labour-process studies it is possible to raise the question of technical neutrality on levels other than that of class. Thus for Glucksman, once assembly line work was constructed as women's work, "the detailed division of jobs and the design of jigs and tools were made with the gender of the workforce in mind".³⁹ David Noble has even suggested that the urge to create autonomous machines might be explained not in terms of standard capitalist imperatives, but rather the masculinist desire to do without women, or *womb envy*!⁴⁰

39. Glucksman, *Women Assemble*, 221–2. It should be noted though that, in keeping with her arguments discussed above,

And if we extend our perspective beyond the workplace to take in the constitution of the built environment at large, other non-neutralities come into view. Architects and urban planners have long pondered the ways in which certain constructs might promote or hinder crime, affect social control and so on.⁴¹ Considerations of political upheavals and possible insurrections of course enter into some designs: one need only look at the construction of many government buildings or embassies around the world, or indeed the Hausmannisation of Paris. Constructing an analogy with the subtle tendencies of software to play a malign regulatory role, Lawrence Lessig identifies ways in which post-war infrastructural design reinforced racial segregation in the United States:

After 1948 local communities shifted their technique for preserving segregation. Rather than covenants, they used architecture. Communities were designed to "break the flow" of residents from one to another. Highways without easy crossings were placed between communities. Railroad tracks were used to divide. A thousand tiny inconveniences of architecture and zoning replaced the express preferences of covenants. Nothing formally prohibited integration, but informally, much did.⁴²

A classic example of such infrastructural non-neutrality is that of Robert Moses's decision to place "low-hanging overpasses" on Long Island to keep buses — and thus the racialised poor — off the parkways.⁴³ Another would be such "hostile architecture" techniques as sloping or divided public benches, aimed at preventing rough sleeping. Disabled struggles have had some success in demonstrating that many artefacts others take for granted are constructed in

Glucksman views the idea of any technical gendering of the work process with suspicion: 'The suggestion had even been made during the First World War that technical developments simplifying production methods were undertaken in order to suit the 'inferior' capacities of women. In reality, however, both technical and organisational advances, assembly lines and subdivision of labour, represented an intensification of pre-war developments in engineering, and were by-products of the demand for standardised mass produced goods rather than the need to accommodate technology to women.' (Ibid. fn 12).

40. Noble, *Progress Without People: New Technology, Unemployment and the Message of Resistance* (Charles H. Kerr 1993), 86–7. Note the inverted parallelism with another utopia of the artificial womb: Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (Bantam 1971).

41. For example, Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (Collier 1972), and Alice Coleman's *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (Shipman 1985).

exclusionary forms which entrench certain social divisions, helping to push some people to the margins of the labour market and of society at large. If disability tends to coincide with labour-market surplusness, this surplusness is reinforced by the technical constitution of artefacts. Even the humble bathtub may be complicit in capitalist atomisation and the subordination of life to production:

This century, in the time of full mechanisation, created the bath-cell, which, with its complex plumbing, enameled tub, and chromium taps, it appended to the bedroom. Yet the fact cannot be lost from sight that this convenience is no substitute for a social type of regeneration. It is tied to the plane of simple ablution. A culture that rejects life in stunted form voices a natural demand for the restoring of the bodily equilibrium of its members through institutions open to all. [...] A period like ours which has allowed itself to become dominated by production, finds no time in its rhythms for institutions of this kind.⁴⁴

Particularly in a world where “technology” is something most of us carry in our pockets, consult for entertainment, employ for navigation and consumption, and through which we mediate our social lives and our learning, it no longer makes sense to consider the question of technical neutrality only in terms of the sphere of production. There is now a vast literature on the biases of social media and search algorithms, of advertising placements, AI training datasets, and so on.⁴⁵ If one of the major outcomes of modern capitalist development has been the girding of the Earth with layer upon layer of infrastructure, crystallizing the social itself in railways, roads, pipes, cables, satellites and data centres, we approach a point where the social and the technical are so imbricated that disputes over the politics of technology appear simply as one obvious kind of social contestation.⁴⁶ When we conduct our social lives largely via the contrivances of giant

42. Lessig, *Code 2.0*, 135.

43. Winner, ‘Do Artefacts Have Politics?’, 123–4.

44. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanisation Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (OUP 1948), 712.

45. Among many others, see for example Latanya Sweeney, ‘Discrimination in Online Ad Delivery’, *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 56 no. 5 (2013); Rodrigo Ochigame and James Holston, ‘Filtering Dissent’, *New Left Review* 11/99 (2016).

46. Rob Lucas, ‘The Free Machine’, *New Left Review* 11/100 (2016), 139–40.

American corporations that furnish the leading capitalist states with unprecedented troves of surveillance material, it can seem ludicrous even to ask the question of whether technology is “neutral”. It should be as obviously non-neutral as architecture. And increasingly, it is co-extensive with the entire strategic terrain that any revolutionary theory must confront.

TECHNOLOGY AS TOTALITY

This capacious consideration of the politics of artefacts has led us back to the indeterminate totality. Once again, it seems, the whole world must be put at stake, all at once. We will have to smash not just the factory machines, but also the bathtubs, datacentres, low-hanging overpasses... If it is so easy to construct a negative object of the entire technological world, it is perhaps unsurprising that behind debates on technology there always seems to lurk the ghost of Ned Ludd — or, more recently filling the same role, the anarcho-primitivist. Ned must constantly be exorcised, but he always comes back, now as John Zerzan, now Ted Kaczynski. Boo! Indeed, one begins to suspect that Ned represents yet another enduring structure in the thought-forms of capitalist society. At least since William Cobbett’s 1816 “Letter to the Luddites”, commentators — sympathetic or otherwise — have displayed a strange rhetorical tendency to totalise technological reality, as if with any specific challenge it was necessarily at stake in its entirety, and thus in need of a general defence:

[A]s to the *use of machinery in general*, I am quite sure, that there cannot be a solid objection. [T]he writers on the side of Corruption are very anxious to inculcate notions hostile to machinery as well as notions hostile to Bakers and Butchers. This fact alone ought to put you on your guard. These men first endeavour to set the labouring class on upon their employers; and, then they call aloud for troops to mow them down. By machines mankind are able to do that which their own bodily powers would never effect to the same extent. Machines are the produce of the *mind* of man; and their existence distinguishes the civilised man from the savage. The savage has no machines, or, at least

nothing that we call machines. But, his life is a very miserable life. He is ignorant; his mind has no powers; and, therefore, he is feeble and contemptible.⁴⁷

Odd that machinery should seem so fragile a thing as to need defenders like Cobbett. Surprising that even at the time of the historic Luddite movement, rhetorical structures were already coming into place by which this *particular* struggle against the introduction of *particular* machines — a struggle that rejected not technology per se, but rather “Machinery hurtful to Commonality”⁴⁸ — would somehow always conjure the spectre of opposition to technology in general. It would become a standard tic of bourgeois political economists to emphasise the benefits of machinery against an imaginary opponent who rejected it wholesale — a tendency that Marx rightly skewered:

[The bourgeois economist] saves himself from all further puzzling of the brain, and what is more, implicitly declares his opponent to be stupid enough to contend against, not the capitalistic employment of machinery, but machinery itself. No doubt he is far from denying that temporary inconvenience may result from the capitalist use of machinery. But where is the medal without its reverse! Any employment of machinery, except by capital, is to him an impossibility. Exploitation of the workman by the machine is therefore, with him, identical with exploitation of the machine by the workman. Whoever, therefore, exposes the real state of things in the capitalistic employment of machinery, is against its employment in any way, and is an enemy of social progress!⁴⁹

Luddism of course became a generic term of abuse, typically hurled at workers resisting one or another manifestation of Progress in the workplace.⁵⁰ But the left too has typically struggled to negotiate the identification of an indeterminately totalised “technology” with a vaguely defined progressivism —

47. Cobbett, ‘A Letter to the Luddites’, *Political Register*, 30 Nov 1816.

48. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage 1980), 579.

49. Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (MECW 35), 444–5. Yet he was not completely immune to this tendency himself, for example seeing the Luddite rising as failing to ‘distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital,

something against which figures like Panzieri understandably railed. Some have waded into the debate totalising with wild abandon, and thereby provocatively fulfilling the old bourgeois fantasy that Ned Ludd is still out there somewhere, stalking the Nottinghamshire countryside. Marcuse’s 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, for example, took aim at a hypostatised technological rationality that was practically coextensive with capitalist society itself.⁵¹ In some ways prefiguring the visions of figures like Jacques Camatte, anarchist theologian Jacques Ellul’s 1954 *Technological Society* imagined a “technique” that had entwined itself with humanity to such an extent that the human and the technological were effectively becoming identical; in which “technique is entirely anthropomorphic because human beings have become thoroughly technomorphic.”⁵²

We have completed our examination of the monolithic technical world that is coming to be. It is vanity to pretend it can be checked or guided. Indeed, the human race is beginning confusedly to understand at last that it is living in a new and unfamiliar universe. The new order was meant to be a buffer between man and nature. Unfortunately, it has evolved autonomously in such a way that man has lost all contact with his natural framework and has to do only with the organised technical intermediary which sustains relations both with the world of life and with the world of brute matter. Enclosed within his artificial creation, man finds that there is “no exit”; that he cannot pierce the shell of technology to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years.⁵³

and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used’, thus suggesting a view of machinery in general as at stake in these struggles, and as neutral in itself if abstracted from its capitalist use (ibid., 432).

50. For example ‘The Press: Washington Luddites’, *Time*, 13 October 1975, on typesetters waging a last-ditch struggle against the introduction of machinery that would destroy their jobs. Noble, *Progress Without People*, 43.

51. See the critical discussion in Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 65–79.

52. Langdon Winner on Ellul in Winner, *Autonomous Technology*, 42.

53. Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Knopf 1964), 428.

The expansiveness of the term “technology” is itself perhaps symptomatic, referring not just to machines, but also techniques, methods, infrastructures, organisational forms...while philosophers such as Heidegger tend to represent it—in Langdon Winner’s words—“as a totally univocal phenomenon, a monolithic force in modern life”.⁵⁴

Let’s venture a hypothesis: that the technology which seems to dominate contemporary society so; which appears as autonomous and out of control in so much literature; about which bourgeois economists were always so defensive; which seems to range the whole of social reality under a single concept; which even threatens to subsume the human race itself... is but an avatar of capital.

54. Winner, *Autonomous Technology*, 9–10, 130.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

If anything lends an ultimate unity to the malignancy of the bathtubs, datacentres, low-hanging overpasses and so on, it is surely the mode of production that has so profoundly shaped existing societies. It is perhaps not entirely unreasonable to espy a malevolent presence behind all these things. But when one finds oneself enumerating indefinite lists in such contexts, that is a sure sign one is peddling an indeterminate totality, and thus not yet operating in a properly theoretical mode. We may then stop and remind ourselves that not everything in such lists should be considered of equal strategic priority. The infrastructures in which capitalist social relations are mineralised have determinate forms, with some particularly important spots. Although tech-capitalist “cloud” ideology has done its best to obfuscate the materiality of current computing and communications infrastructures, the old coastal or riverine cities of global capitalism remain the leading sites of essential network infrastructure. The undersea fibre-optic cables upon which the global internet primarily depends largely hit land in port cities, following the same routes as previous generations of network infrastructure dating back to the telegraph.

Whole regions may be disconnected from the net by the simple snagging of these cables, as in fact happened to much of south and east Asia when an earthquake hit Taiwan in 2006.⁵⁵

And probably the most important route remains that linking New York to London, through which a vast

55. See Andrew Blum, *Tubes: Behind the Scenes at the Internet* (Penguin

proportion of global internet traffic flows. At the London end, the main cables come up in Telehouse, in the Docklands—the focus of at least one foiled terrorist plot, from al-Qaeda in 2007.⁵⁶ If the location of these links is unavoidably public knowledge—for a lot of people have to engage with them physically for work in one or another internet exchange or data centre—the organisations and states that are their custodians are unsurprisingly concerned for their security, and police, FBI and so on often seem to be housed nearby.⁵⁷ Indeed, the sites of the tech giants’ data centres are sensitive enough to have warranted a scoop from Wikileaks.⁵⁸

Real power is evidently embodied in this geography. It should be unsurprising that we find such places as New York and London dominant in the material body of the net: new networks tend to inherit the structure of old ones, and the form of infrastructure to a great extent directly reflects existing distributions of power both internationally and within individual states. Thus special microwave connections which approach the speed of light itself—the ultimate physical limit—now link Chicago to New York, London to Frankfurt, to give finance capital’s high-frequency trading algorithms just that little more edge.⁵⁹ This is another kind of non-neutrality: the dominance of these places is a material fact, written into the landscape. But rather than fantasising some *tabula rasa*, after the world is scrubbed clean of such blemishes, it makes sense to consider the determinacy that such definite structures must give to strategic thinking. Telephone exchanges represented key locations in the October Revolution and Spanish Civil War, and now the very same buildings often house internet exchanges.⁶⁰ Just as in the past, anyone in control of such places could fairly easily deprive whole regions of essential communications, and one might reasonably speculate that any revolution of the future will have to

2012), 200–1. On occasion, major disconnections have actually been deliberate, such as when the Sprint network ‘de-peered’ from Cogent in 2008, thereby cutting off 3.3 per cent of global internet addresses from the rest of the net (*Tubes*, 123).

56. David Leppard, ‘Al Qaeda plot to bring down UK internet’, *The Times*, 11 March 2007. This apparent attempt to blow up the internet was reminiscent of the ill-fated anarchist conspiracy to blow up time itself just across the Thames at the Greenwich Observatory in Joseph Conrad’s 1907 *Secret Agent*.

57. Ingrid Burrington, *Networks of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide to Urban Internet Infrastructure* (Melville House 2016), 70–4.

58. ‘Amazon Atlas’, Wikileaks, 11 October 2018.

59. Donald MacKenzie, ‘Just How Fast?’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, no. 5, 7 March 2019; Burrington, *Networks of New York*, 10–1, 35, 61–2.

60. See, for example, John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (Boni and Liveright 1919), 192–9 (among others); Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish* →

make a priority of co-opting the network engineers of organisations like NANOG (North American Network Operators Group).

This is not to rule out the deployment of alternative infrastructures in the midst of a process of struggle: the innovation of optical telegraphy in revolutionary France established fast communications between Paris and the frontline; the risk or reality of state intervention into wireless and cellular networks has prompted people to use peer-to-peer mesh networking apps such as FireChat in Iraq, Hong Kong, India and elsewhere.⁶¹ And amid the turmoil of revolutionary Chile, Project Cybersyn's newly-established telex networks played an important role in defeating a reactionary CIA-backed truckers' strike.⁶² Although the major internet services are now inextricable from towering capitalist firms which are tightly entwined with dominant states, early net-utopians were not wrong to identify something prefigurative in things like the TCP/IP protocol on which the internet runs. It is one thing to dream of assembling in advance a social force of the requisite scale and organisational capacity to be able to expropriate Google and Facebook — while at the same time presumably taking on US security forces — and another to assume that, given the availability of some physical network infrastructure, basic internetworking should always be possible.⁶³

That is to say that capitalist infrastructure should not be identified with the mode of production and considered non-neutral *en bloc* and all in the same way; its development has proceeded in layers, some of which may be more tractable than others. This is not simply fortuitous: there are some great dialectical ironies and ambivalences in the history of technology. The radically open-ended nature of TCP/IP, for example, was an important prerequisite for the development of the capitalist internet, since it enabled firms to focus on building higher levels of infrastructure, rather than constantly renegotiating the basics.⁶⁴ It is perhaps not stretching it too far to say that the

Civil War (Penguin 2013). On the conversion of telephone exchanges into internet exchanges see Burrington, *Networks of New York*, 64.

61. See Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, (Berkeley 1998), 7–14; Hannah Kuchler and Simon Kerr, "Private internet' FireChat app grows in popularity in Iraq", *Financial Times*, 22 June 2014; Archie Bland, "FireChat — the messaging app that's powering the Hong Kong protests", *The Guardian*, 29 September 2014; "Firechat comes to UOH students' rescue", *Times of India*, 22 Jan 2016.

62. Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries* (MIT 2011), 141–69; Stafford Beer, *Brain of the Firm* (Wiley 1981), 311–29.

63. Internetworking: network connections between networks — such as between local networks and ISPs, or between ISPs — which constitute an internet.

development of dot.coms depended upon a layer of dot.communism that still underpins a thoroughly capital-dominated net, and which probably always will. As long as we do not identify them with the major centralised providers, basic technologies like email retain these birth characteristics, and there's always a subculture of hackers consciously assembling new alternative tools that have a similar constitution.⁶⁵ Regardless of Richard Stallman's muddled affirmations of "capitalism" in code production⁶⁶, free software too has played a role analogous to TCP/IP at the level of the servers that run much of the internet: a latent communism which, under capitalist conditions, inevitably ends up providing a very helpful layer of infrastructure *gratis* to capitalist firms, but which, under the right conditions, could plausibly shed its capitalist integument without too much trouble.

If current internet infrastructures are thoroughly lacking in political neutrality, deeply entwined with the dominant mode of production, Lessig views the process of inscription into these artefacts of new non-neutralities or capacities for what he calls "regulation" as an inevitable one, in which states follow where firms lead. On this reading, first came the open-ended internet which was capable of filling the ideological void left when post-Cold War market utopianism dissolved into the hard realities of "transition" in the ex-Warsaw Pact countries. Documents like John Perry-Barlow's 1996 "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" are symptomatic of this moment, when the proliferating technology really was largely beyond the existing regulatory capacities of companies and states, and thus when the question of its intrinsic politics was up for grabs. But a relentless drive to commercialise the new technology soon began to lead to new infrastructural layers with more determinate "politics", which were also more amenable to state regulation.⁶⁷ For Lessig, the constraints

64. See Susan Crawford, cited in Lessig, *Code 2.0*, 112. That open-ended nature can itself be read as a pragmatic accommodation to the pre-existing telephone networks that engineers had to work with at the time (Blum, *Tubes*, 54). We might thus view this as a process in which underlying capitalist infrastructure produces a layer of latently 'communist' infrastructure, which in turn produces another layer of deeply capitalist infrastructure. Such wavering, ambivalent politics may be typical of these kinds of artefacts, and a real basis on which we can attempt to imagine another future. Even in the era of Big Tech, many internet exchanges are still run as cooperatives 'for the good of the internet' (Blum, *Tubes*, 111).

65. Speculation about, and experimentation toward, a re-decentralised 'Web 3.0' has been going on for a decade or so. Already in use are technologies such as the federated social networking technology 'Mastodon' (currently largely used by alternative tech people and the alt-right).

66. See Richard Stallman, "Talking to the Mailman", *New Left Review* 11/113 (2018), 83.

that “code” places on action are analogous to those of architecture; it is a new threat to liberty, comparable to that posed by states and markets in other periods.⁶⁸ Drawing on Roberto Unger, he concludes that the nature of code should thus be subject to collective deliberation, but—he assures the reader—this does *not* mean “collectivisation”.⁶⁹ Yet, as we saw with Langdon Winner, in a world where the major design decisions embodied in such technologies are taken within the despotic realm of the capitalist firm, it is hard to imagine how such deliberation could be achieved without specifically communising these spheres.⁷⁰

COMMUNIST TECHNOLOGY?

What then of communist technology? We have already seen that some aspects of existing infrastructure are at most ambivalently tied to the capitalist mode of production. In terms of affordances, these constitute paths of least resistance for struggle: their use will not run directly counter to revolutionary ends in the way that, say, use of Facebook to cultivate your ultra-radical self-image almost certainly will. Short of having a fully pre-organised world-commune-in-waiting, some terrains are simply intractable for struggle, but some are not. Any successful process of communication will pragmatically put to work those technologies that can open new possibilities, rather than hemming us in. And these deployments will have to work at whatever organisational scale the struggle is able to articulate, or—in cybernetic terms—at the level of *variety* that the struggle can cope with.⁷¹ Thus no particular scale should be fetishised: communism does not equal localism.

But those technologies that could only plausibly be appropriated at an epic scale of organisation will have to await the achievement of such scale.⁷² And it is plausible that a communising movement would

67. Lessig, *Code 2.0*, 2–3, 34–8, 72.

68. *Ibid.*, 121–4. The argument of Lessig—a liberal Harvard legal professor—here takes him amusingly close to perennial bogeyman Ted Kaczynski. See ‘Unabomber Manifesto’, *New York Times*, 26 May 1996: ‘The degree of personal freedom that exists in a society is determined more by the economic and technological structure of the society than by its laws or its form of government. Most of the Indian nations of New England were monarchies, and many of the cities of the Italian Renaissance were controlled by dictators. But... these societies... allowed far more personal freedom than our society does. In part this was because they lacked efficient mechanisms for enforcing the ruler’s will: There were no modern, well-organized police forces, no rapid long-distance communications, no surveillance cameras, no dossiers of information about the lives of average citizens. Hence it was relatively easy to evade control.’

69. Lessig, *Code 2.0*, 78.

70. Social demands for control over the technical realm can sometimes seem to have a certain

choose to break up such things in order to render them more amenable to communist ends. The existence of towering Big Tech monopolies, for example—which imply hierarchical structures of control as surely as do the ocean-going boats of Plato’s *Republic* and Engels’s *On Authority*—is an artefact of the capitalist subordination of the internet driven by a ravenous finance, and no revolutionary movement should accept them as given. Barely two decades ago it was still possible to imagine alternative arrangements even *within the horizon of capitalism*, so we should not now simply reconcile ourselves to fantasising socialist uses for such things as “Big Data”; capitalist tech does not need leftist ratifications. But the alternative is not blanket rejection or the dissolution of all structure into an abstract anarchism. To imagine so is to get led astray once again by the antinomies that we have traced through the course of this essay. No: communism implies *determinate* organisation to *determinately* negate the *determinate* totality of the capitalist mode of production, and to produce the *determinate* structures of a new world in the process.

For strategic reasons it makes sense to prefer more distributed arrangements where possible, for concentrations of technical power helpfully simplify the task of any organised enemy or would-be exploiter. As Gilles Dauvé puts it in *When Insurrections Die*:

The best guarantee against the reappearance of a new structure of power over us is the deepest possible appropriation of the conditions of existence, at every level. For example, even if we don’t want everyone generating their own electricity in their basements, the domination of the Leviathan also comes from the fact that energy (a significant term, another word for which is power) makes us dependent on industrial complexes which, nuclear or not,

unwittingly ‘transitional’ character.

71. See Stafford Beer, *Designing Freedom* (1974, Wiley 1995). Though he is in many ways a fascinating figure, one should probably take the precaution of holding Beer—a cigar-smoking, Rolls Royce-driving career management consultant prior to his revolutionary epiphany in Chile—with tweezers. In spite of his vocal support for workers’ autonomy, Eden Medina has suggested that his political position was closer to Fabian socialism than Marxism (*Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 41), and he had a relatively warm, filial association with Taylorism and work study (*Brain of the Firm*, 384–5). Nonetheless, his strange, abstract cybernetic meditations can sometimes seem to offer a glimpse of a possible theory of revolutionary *virtù*—for example, *Brain of the Firm*, 349–95. For an intellectual portrait, see Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future* (Chicago 2010).

72. See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, ‘#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’, *Critical Legal Thinking* (May 2013).

inevitably remain external to us and escape any control.⁷³

As Dauvé suggests, this does not imply the absurd idea that only individualised electricity generation will do. The key measure here is not the height of a single individual, but the level and scope of collective organisation that can be maintained. A world of renewables would be much more distributed at source than current fossil fuel and nuclear-based power in any case; this in itself may be enough — as long as the generator can be subordinated to communal control at the level of the area it serves. Even bracketing the enormous question of global heating, communist movements to come will have a strong interest in a speedy transition beyond fossil fuels, for these largely condemn us to violent, globe-straddling power-structures which will necessarily escape the organisational capacities of all but our fully pre-organised world-commune-in-waiting. It is, that is to say, probably best not to place bets on a communisation of Saudi oil fields and a defeat of the US military and its regional proxies *upfront*.

Again: this does not imply an absence of structure, but simply a different structure. Even highly distributed renewables may be “non-neutral” in the sense that in the most immediate material-technical terms they might tend to empower those who inhabit the site in which they are located over others.⁷⁴ But to imagine away such concrete geographical texture would be to imagine a communism of grey goo. The question is whether such matters are organisationally tractable outside of relations of class exploitation. Communism would thus not be the creation of a “neutral” technology in this sense. In the last analysis, what matters is whether a given thing can be subordinated to communal ends, and that is an organisational matter at least as much as a technical one. Even the fabled ship at sea, eternally in need of its captain, need not detain us long, for captaincy may be temporary, revocable, rotated, random, delegated or whatever formal nicety best fits its subordination to collective deliberation. What matters in this case is the broader set of social arrangements into which captaincy fits: it makes all the difference whether taking charge of a boat

73. Gilles Dauvé, ‘When Insurrections Die’, *Endnotes 1* (2008), 71.

74. They should also not be idealised as a perfect ‘communist technology’: they no doubt bear many markers of their birth under capitalist circumstances. The point of discussing them here is simply to consider the ways in which they would create an entirely different strategic terrain to the current dependence on fossil fuels.

in a storm represents the presumptuous act of someone with a specific class position or the obligation of someone allotted, by collective decision, a terrifying responsibility.

Dependency on fossil fuels and the atomised use of the combustion engine; on mass-surveillance platforms; on elaborate global supply-chains: much of the current technical structuring of the world is profoundly *anti-communist*, and struggles to come will have to work around such things until they can defeat or subsume them. Building that power will involve the establishment of new technical mediations and the repurposing of old, to the ends of a collective self-reproduction outside of class and an offensive expropriation of those who will attempt to reimpose relations of exploitation. It will require as its first priority the establishment of collective control over the production and distribution of means of subsistence, since this is the most important step in disempowering the enemy.⁷⁵ But this in itself already implies such things as control over means of communication; the first act of communisation is not rustication. And as long as their power is shored up by some artefacts and infrastructures, the agents of capital will have opportunities to regroup.

75. Clegg and Lucas, ‘Three Agricultural Revolutions’.

ERROR

In engineering, the gap between a specification of how things should function, and how they actually do is termed “error”. A cognate of the verb “to err”, error refers to a straying, a mistake, a lapse. Thus always a relation between two points at minimum: something right, something which deviates. In mathematics, when an exact value can only be ascertained at infinity, error margins can specify proximity to that value without depending on an assumption that the value itself could ever actually be obtained. Here, the gap that error identifies is no mere mistake. Let’s term “error” the objective gulf between the unavoidable abstractions of the revolutionary imaginary and the real conditions of any actual revolution. It’s a present incapacity that makes abstract speculation unavoidable here. But as that speculation starts to resolve into concrete practice the measure of error diminishes.

This gap is not confined to simple matters of epistemology. In statistics, the error term refers not to a shortcoming of measurement

or the failure of a model (that's the residual), but rather to any difference of the observed value of y from an unobservable "true" value — e.g. the value one would expect given full knowledge of y 's determinants. It can thus be seen as a disturbance term, measuring the extent of "true randomness" in the data-generating process. In computer science, error is often technically defined, categorised, given a code number: 404 not found. In instances of error, our technical means fall short of the ends we project, and the error we confront names this lack of possibility. The delimitation of error is a key aspect of the everyday practical world; a negative specification of the space of affordances in which particular ends may be pursued. In a fragile, interlocked world whose affordances are increasingly defined by the humourless literality of logic gates, you don't have to stray far from the pre-given cowpaths to bump into error.

Indeed, as soon as one attempts something not given by the affordances of the world, the state of error — as a measure of incapacity — appears absolute. But with reconstructive effort, error may gradually be pushed back to the limits or captured by a homeostat, defining a space of possibility. As lived activity errs from the vectors shaped by capital's worldly movement, new paths will already be being trodden, new uses found for existing things, old uses taking new tools. Communist use, we might say, is repressed by capitalist crud, hemmed in as error. Incapacity is the immediate condition faced in most instances of erring from the affordances written into the most intricate of capitalist infrastructures. But in running up against that incapacity, lived activity will have to find ways to drive the error back, carve out new affordances, such that erring becomes the path, and capitalist use becomes the error.

CONTOURS OF THE WORLD COMMUNE

1.

For years, the only claims that a different world was possible came in the form of messages from the Lacandon jungle or from those who thought creating a new world meant nothing more than introducing a financial transaction tax. When the 2008 financial and economic crisis hit the markets, all that quickly changed. Since then, sketches of a post-capitalist society have emerged in abundance, some even becoming best-sellers. Radicals have also increasingly renewed their efforts to think through how things could be otherwise. All the alternatives currently being discussed share one thing in common, namely, the fact that they've been drafted at desks rather than being hatched in the streets. To the extent that such conceptions have been shaped by recent struggles (the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring or the protests against mass immiseration in Southern Europe), they have been shaped mostly in a negative way. Not so much because these struggles were ultimately unsuccessful, but because they took place largely outside the sphere of production and instead fixated on achieving "real democracy". As a result, they hardly broached the question of a new society.

While both the mass strike debate of the Second International and the theory of council communism were more than mere reflections of real struggles, they did refer to such struggles—"The soviet was not a theoretical discovery" (Guy Debord). Today's musings on a new society, however, seem to be mere abstract utopianism, exactly the kind rejected by an entire lineage of critical theorists, from Marx to the famous *Bilderverbot* of Frankfurt's late Marxists. This line of thought saw utopias as presumptuous phantasies and held that it should be left to the people liberating themselves to determine the new forms of their collective life. Against ready-made outlines of a "liberated society", counterposed to the status quo in a purely abstract way, the Frankfurt School rightly insisted on working from concrete social contradictions: only the proletarians themselves, through lengthy class struggles, might eventually be able to build a new society. Communism should not be an ideal but a "real movement".

However, "scientific socialism" itself—which did acknowledge the utopians' "stupendously grand thoughts and germs of thought that

everywhere break out through their fantastic covering" (Engels)—ultimately took on an ideological character to the extent that it cited historical laws as a guarantee for victory. This historical optimism, completely discredited by 1914 at the very latest, nonetheless continues to inform contemporary theories. Unimpressed by all the catastrophes past and present, they either still hope that future struggles will unfold automatically and that everything else will follow, or declare the development of the productive forces to be the motor of history, which will ultimately lead to a happy ending. The partisans of revolutionary spontaneism never lost their faith in the growth of the global working class, while the delusion that technical development will somehow lead to liberation has now made a comeback in the guise of the exaltation of the digital.

If one does not think of revolution as being a complete miracle, as something that proletarians will achieve in the heat of the moment, almost accidentally, spontaneously, and without any goal set in advance, and if one does not delegate the project of human emancipation to the machines, then it would appear reasonable to try and reach some sort of understanding concerning the basic features of a classless society. Several objections to this have been raised: it's premature ("the struggles aren't quite there yet, the time isn't ripe"), unnecessary ("people will take care of it eventually"), pretentious ("you can't just predetermine it"), or simply impossible ("you can't anticipate that"). But there's never been a continuous movement defying the existing order without an idea, however vague, of what could take its place. A purely negative critique of the status quo, which some radical leftists invoke, is ultimately impossible. For example, aiming for "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common" (*Capital*) follows necessarily from the critique of private property. But because this leaves a lot of room for imagination—including scenarios that have little to do with freedom and happiness—revolutionaries should state clearly what they want. Not in order to peddle recipes for redemption, but as a contribution to the necessary discussion on how to leave the old world behind. The commune shouldn't be conceived as something that will put an end to all of humanity's problems. On the contrary, only after the relations of production have been revolutionized will everything that is today "solved" by blind mediation, domination, and force even begin to appear

as a problem requiring a solution. It is in this sense that Walter Benjamin rejected the accusation that he absolutized communism as "the solution for humanity". On the contrary, he soberly described it as the possibility to "abolish the unproductive pretensions of solutions for humanity by means of the feasible findings of this very system; indeed, to give up entirely the immodest prospect of 'total' systems and at least to make the attempt to construct the days of humanity in just as loose a fashion as a rational person who has had a good night's sleep begins his day".

2.

Many recent outlines of post-capitalist society tend to "freeze" the social imagination at a level corresponding to the year 1875, a time when trains had already started chugging around the world, and the European workers' movement had reached a certain degree of organization; but the productive forces then were minuscule compared to those of today. In most regions of the world, the modern class of wage labourers did not yet exist, even Europe was mostly inhabited by peasants and illiteracy was widespread. One may or may not see why Marx, in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, divided communism into two phases. In the first phase, one's share of social wealth would still be determined by the working hours one had contributed, while only in the second phase (with the productive forces reaching ever higher levels) would the principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" be implemented and the state abolished. Whether such a "first phase" is necessary or even desirable today needs to be reconsidered given the enormous changes that have taken place since 1875. The orphans of Soviet Marxism aren't the only ones who still cling to the concept of the distribution of goods according to working hours: many anti-authoritarian leftists do as well. Even in pointedly modern conceptions, in which councils go by the name of *hubs*, each and every communard without question has a "timesheet" to fill in.

This model cannot simply be dismissed as the mere continuation of wage labour by other means: Private property in the means of production would be replaced by social planning, labour power would no longer be a commodity bought and sold haphazardly in a competitive

market. It also presupposes strict equality: each hour is worth the same, whether it belongs to a brain surgeon or to a mason. And yet, this first phase of communism is still visibly stamped with the “birthmarks of the old society” insofar as the distribution of goods follows the principle of the exchange of equivalents. Each worker “receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds); and with this certificate, he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labour cost.” (Marx) Only under socialism would the exchange of equivalents, reduced to a farce under capitalism, be truly realized. Of course, not everyone would receive exactly as much as they’ve contributed—part of the total product would have to be spent on new means of production, general public projects, and care for children, the elderly, and the sick—but there would be no more exploitation. To this day, even the most elaborate models of “a new socialism” based on computerized planning remain on this level.

One could object that wherever there is still the exchange of equivalents, communism does not exist. Already in 1896, Peter Kropotkin rejected the idea that “all that belongs to production becomes common property, but that each should be individually remunerated by labour checks, according to the number of hours he has spent in production”, arguing that this model was just a “compromise between communistic and individualistic wage remuneration.” Marx deemed it “inevitable” at a certain stage, but never denied its imperfection, and consequently, in the long run, he aimed for a society that would finally break free of the horizon defined by the exchange of equivalents. But isn’t holding on to such a two-phase model anachronistic today, given that the “springs of co-operative wealth” would flow much more abundantly after the revolution? At a time when, generally, the world is populated by decreasing numbers of peasants and increasing numbers of unemployed people with college degrees, why cling to such a view? This is the fundamental question.

Scenarios involving an intermediate stage seem to at least bring to bear a certain realism. Instead of taking for granted that there will be complete social harmony from day one after the revolution, they take people as they actually are today as their starting point, namely, as generally selfish, taking too much and giving too little. But the

apparent realism of said model quickly collapses as soon as one thinks it through. Of course, any reasonably planned production in the commune would require at least a vague understanding of how much work goes into something. For example, the construction of an apartment building requires a certain number of people working for a certain number of months. Tying individual consumption to the number of working hours performed, however, is a different story, because it assumes that one could quantify the exact amount of time that has gone into making each product. Even with the most fastidious book-keeping—which already requires a ridiculous amount of time and effort—counting the working hours embodied in even the simplest of products would be an extremely difficult task. Take a bread roll, for example. One would have to know not only how many hours of labour went into the making of the oven (into which a whole chain of preliminary products went as well) but also, how many years the oven will be in operation, and how many rolls it will churn out in that time. Plus, the more one takes into account things like the means of transportation and all the other general preconditions of production, the more difficult the task becomes. And it becomes downright impossible, when one takes into account the increased application of science in the production process. How many seconds, for example, would one budget for the writing of software that is used at different points in the production chain, and how many for the body of common social knowledge that went into the totality of all production processes? Something that might still work for the petit-bourgeois concept of bartering clubs—where A would mow B’s lawn for an hour, and B would wash A’s Volkswagen in return—turns out to be completely impossible when applied at the level of social production based on an advanced division of labour and technology; any such attempt would require continuous time-tracking and would still be bound to fail. Communism, thus understood, would be a poor imitation of the capitalist market, in which the law of labour-time reigns in a blind and disorderly fashion.

What’s more, the model also rests on a strict separation between work and non-work which not only seems fairly unappealing, but would also require an administrative regulation of something that today works through blind force. Work, by definition, is that which is remunerated, and it will be remunerated only insofar as it appears profitable or is deemed necessary by the state. In said “first phase”, therefore,

the commune would have to sort every social activity into one of two categories in order to measure working time. This sorting would bring with it all sorts of arbitrary decisions. While the brewing and drinking of beer, for example, may easily be distinguished from each other as work and leisure activities respectively, things would be a lot harder with regard to intellectual activities. When it comes to the reproductive sphere, this would be nearly impossible, for it is not by chance that this sphere, historically assigned mainly to women, has sparked endless debates about the very concept of work. Would anyone who takes care of a child for an hour have that hour credited to their “timesheets”, or would that only be the case for those who take care of larger groups of kids on a regular basis? More generally, how desirable is it to divide life according to such categories? Furthermore, the mentality inherited from bourgeois society, upon which this model largely rests, would most likely fail to discourage people from cheating when taking account of their working hours. An apparatus that monitors the performance of each individual would be indispensable, even though proponents of this model are reluctant to admit to that necessity. Even if “timesheets” are not the same as the wage system, they are still backed by coercion. Such coercion is diametrically opposed to the declared objective of a change in consciousness, which cannot be taken for granted from day one of the revolution, but must rather orient all revolutionary activity from the outset.

The allegedly realistic designs of a “first phase” of socialism hinge upon contradictory assumptions: on the one hand, it presupposes people who are partial to free association, but on the other hand, these same people would still be animated by the good old shopkeeper’s spirit, wanting to take advantage of everyone else. A social revolution would once again risk missing out on creating a free society if it did not from the get-go act according to its new principles: making all work voluntary and transforming it—as much as possible—into *travail attractif*, free access to all goods, and the re-absorption of state power by society. Marx’s “first phase” of communism, therefore, was specific to a certain historic era, literally born out of necessity. Rejecting the idea of a transitional society, however, does not mean dreaming of a commune that magically appears overnight. Of course, this transformation would be a tedious and lengthy process, marked by adversities and setbacks. Still, rather than clinging to a century-old model with nothing

going for it but Marx’s seal of approval, revolutionaries would be better off charting the conditions for a revolution today, not least of all with respect to the development of the productive forces.

3.

Traditionally, communist critique of existing social relations would begin from the premise that the technical productive forces developed by capitalism, reified into machinery, simply need to be freed from the fetters of private property by overthrowing the relations of production, so that the productive forces can then enter into the service of a self-conscious humanity. Yet as early as the 1840s, Marx and Engels had noticed that capital-driven development would eventually reach a stage “when productive forces and means of intercourse are brought into being which under the existing relations only cause mischief, and are no longer productive but destructive forces.” (*German Ideology*) Just as Herbert Marcuse noted that certain “purposes and interests of domination are not foisted on technology ‘subsequently’ and from the outside,” but that they “enter the very construction of the technical apparatus,” the Operaist Raniero Panzieri, with reference to Marx, criticized existing technology as a means of subjecting living labour to the commands of capital. The purpose of generating surplus value is not external to machinery, but constitutes and shapes every fibre of it just as it shapes the totality of the labour process.

This idea should be taken up. On the one hand, the “automatic factory potentially establishes the domination of the associated producers over the labour process” (Panzieri) and is therefore a precondition for a free society without scarcity. On the other hand, machinery in the modern factory system appears as “the subject, and the workers are merely conscious organs, co-ordinated with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with the latter subordinated to the central moving force”. The capitalist use of machinery then does not appear to be a mere distortion of or deviation from an “objective”, basically rational development, but rather this use determines the development of technical progress itself. This was true when chimneys were still smoking and machinery was used to replace muscle power as much as for the age of bits and microchips, where code is supposed to replace the intellectual capacities of workers. Under existing

conditions, digital technology and analogue machinery both serve as a means in the class struggle from above: their purpose is not to improve living conditions, but to effect the most efficient exploitation of human labour. Specifically, they determine the rhythm of work and the organization of production, ensure the conformity of employees, and finally serve to destroy all interpersonal contact. By enforcing the Taylorist program of an extremely fragmented work flow in all areas of production, they contribute significantly to the devaluation of the commodity labour-power and consequently to the weakening of workers' bargaining power. In addition to this weakening, it also subjects those dependent on wages to the "despotism of the factory," as Marx described it. Workers are even more demoted to being mere appendages of the — now "intelligent" and networked — machinery. Driven by process-optimizing software, they primarily experience emptiness, stress, overwork, they are robbed of even the smallest amount of freedom and sometimes of any knowledge of the production process at all.

Where left-wing computer enthusiasts find "cell forms" of a new mode of production, which can already be seen in today's Industry 4.0, there is above all a triumph of capital over labour. The idea that new, digital "options for action expand the workers' disposition over the conditions of their activities" (Stefan Meretz) must sound like a sick joke in the ears of every Amazon worker. This circumstance, and the fact that just a handful of capitalists would be enough to secure the status quo given the present state of development of destructive forces, even if only at the expense of destroying the world, is familiar to those critics who see in this development nothing but a *technological attack* by elites on social movements and the allegedly insubordinate lower classes. One weakness of this theoretical tendency is that rather than making capitalism responsible for the current forms of technological development, it lays the blame on a small group of powerful people whose sovereign ability to act is overestimated, even if such individuals and their strategies undoubtedly do exist. Nonetheless, this position does accurately interpret one *function* of (digital) technologies. The consequence, however, is a predominantly defensive program aimed at sabotage and destruction, in which the potentials of new technologies for a communist society are hardly considered.

That a revolutionary transformation of existing conditions would

also mean the occasional organized sabotage of machines results from the fact that not all currently available technology can be used for a reasonable purpose; but only the productive forces developed under capitalism make a consciously organized mode of production conceivable in the first place. Undoubtedly, the wealth of contemporary society includes many things for which a liberated society would no longer have any use. Certain forms of work organization, energy and food production would have to be abolished alongside technologies invented solely for the supervision, control and regulation of human labour and the freedom of movement. However, a distinction should be made between the technical elements of contemporary machinery by themselves, and the arrangements they assume for the purpose of producing surplus value. Machinery as it exists today is more than the sum of its parts. Gears, rollers and belts, as such, do not make an assembly line. Although modern scientific progress and technical inventions have been subordinated to the imperatives of profit maximization, liberation will have no other forms of knowledge, technology, and machinery (or at least not in sufficient quantities) to start from. The notion that the machinery and science left behind by capitalism would be of absolutely no use after the revolution then seems ideological.

The crux of the matter is a widening gap between the consequences of the development of the productive forces for wage-labourers today and their possible uses for the commune. This is true especially when it comes to recent developments, which, despite any distrust one might have of pompous corporate talk of "technological disruption" and "Industry 4.0", do constitute a profound change. Just as the wheel and belt don't naturally form an industrial production line, the circuit integrated microchip doesn't necessarily serve to surveil the wage-dependent. A headset, a camera and Java code, as individual technical components, are not surveillance systems for logistics, and it is not for nothing that socialist hopes have been linked to the emerging digitization. The — often fetishized — figure of the hacker, for example, embodies qualitatively new possibilities for sabotage, diffusion and seizure of technologies of domination. Certain goods (operating systems, software, music, texts and so on) can be digitally duplicated without much effort and loss, and as a result they do not fit easily into the commodity form. This has made it possible to conceive

of new, non-proprietary forms of distribution and collaboration. Even the Internet, despite its military origins, nourished early ideas of cyber-socialism, where people's needs would be evaluated on a global scale in real-time, and production would be adjusted accordingly.

Under the label "the internet of things", which means nothing more than the fact that different devices (things) are connected to the Internet and can respond according to predetermined criteria, this potential for satisfying needs in real-time has expanded to the sphere of tangible products. This does not just refer to "smart" refrigerators or to cybernetic housing units, that is to say, the often overemphasized consumer side of things, but to the changes brought about in production, maintenance and transport by networked machines. Here, automatically monitored and demand-oriented maintenance cycles unleash a great potential for saving time. The principle of just-in-time production can be implemented much more efficiently this way than by warehouse workers, simply because the warehouses can communicate directly with the suppliers, bypassing human intervention. Storage robots receive, sort and register the orders directly. Once put into operation, such fully automatic feedback loops replace a considerable number of workers, since the only human intervention they require is to be serviced from time to time. Under currently existing conditions, where potential free time and leisure manifest themselves as unemployment, this is indeed a technological attack on workers' power, but it also points to the possibility of a world that makes physical labour superfluous on an unprecedented scale. For these reasons, the digitalization of labour and distribution processes should be welcomed as steps towards a well-functioning planned economy and the actual abolition of toil. Even if it only serves to exploit human labour power more intensively, it would be a fetishization of technology to blame technological progress as such for the misery of the current situation: though ascribed to technology, the forces at work are in fact social in origin.

Like every new productive force, the "digital revolution" can at times point beyond what currently exists and come into conflict with the given relations of production and ownership. Capital has responded with "innovations" that curtail the potential of ever-increasing computing power. In the software industry, a large portion of the research has gone into enforcing the commodity form in the digital sphere for

many years. Furthermore, personal computers are no longer "universal machines": their possibilities are limited by their assigned interfaces and programs so that they function only as the terminus of digital capitalism. This is justified as "user-friendliness": anyone who uses a computer for reasons outside of research, development and production today is no longer *supposed* to understand what is going on in the device, and is instead made dependent on digital services. As with most productive forces within capitalism, the development of the computer is characterized by the fact that in dealing with them, the user does not learn any of the skills proper to the productive force. On the contrary, we find ourselves in a situation in which the widespread usability of computers is paired with an extensive digital illiteracy. Technological progress has become a source of social regression; the culturally pessimistic suspicion that smarter phones require ever dumber people is not that far-fetched.

A revolutionary movement must advocate neither for the socialist mass-production of computers and smart objects as they are today, nor for a blind destruction of technologies. Instead, it would have to work towards the potentials latent in these technologies. On the one hand, this means spreading the knowledge necessary to use them and on the other hand, identifying those elements of the machinery whose sole purpose is to serve the mandates of surplus-value production and rendering them harmless. The point is not just to abolish titles of ownership, but to reclaim social control over technology, which would also mean profoundly transforming the existing machinery to meet people's needs.

4.

Scarcity is no longer the result of an insufficient means for producing wealth; it is caused solely by the existing property relations. Monitoring individual labour performance becomes even more questionable with that in mind. Despite the immense scale of productive forces that the commune will acquire, it is certainly possible that bottlenecks will still occur. However, these will not be eliminated by adopting timesheets. A control system of that sort would actually unnecessarily tie up energies and hinder the transformation of consciousness necessary for the creation of an "association of free individuals" and "social

individuals.” The success of the communist revolution may ultimately depend on this change of consciousness. People themselves must be added to the list of productive forces whose potential can only fully develop in a free society. Here, it is apt to recall thinkers from Fourier to Marcuse, who theorized a liberated society in which ‘passion’ would become productive without coercion.

According to various sociological studies, the top priority of employees in technologically and economically developed regions of the world is that their work be interesting, meaningful, and that it carry responsibility. As David Graeber shows by pointing to *bullshit jobs*, jobs so stupid that their completion would fill any half-sane person with shame rather than with pride or satisfaction, capitalism is unable to satisfy these needs. In the commune, these jobs will be eliminated. Others will be automated. What remains will be transformed as much as possible into *travail attractif*; work that is done in free cooperation with others instead of under the command of a boss, work that helps develop the workers’ “senses, capabilities, and faculties of reflection” (Meinhard Creydt) rather than just aiming at maximum output. And finally, even boring jobs could become bearable if they are rotated and thereby only performed for short periods of time.

Of course, steel production cannot simply be turned into play. But even there, automation booms have resulted in global overproduction despite a shrinking workforce. However, ‘passion’ will become productive not so much when it comes to monitoring mostly automated processes, but in solving tricky problems. Rather than establishing a control regime that prevents people from shirking their work duties, the communards ought to dedicate themselves to organizing and imparting practical and theoretical knowledge, education, and skills in all sectors of society in an egalitarian manner. Even today, skilled workers are more productive than the unskilled, and communism can be less than ever a communism of factory workers. Instead, everyone’s capabilities would be developed so that fields like mechanical engineering, medicine, transportation services or computer science would be available to them. Overcoming the division between manual and intellectual labour as quickly as possible would have to be a guiding principle for the revolutionary movement from the start: the noticeably high amount of manual labour performed as a hobby—the arts and crafts boom, urban gardening, model making, fixing up old cars, etc.—

indicates a ‘productive’ passion to do something with one’s hands. The goal should not be the most fair distribution of work and free time, but rather the humane abolition of this very separation along with the greatest possible automation of production.

5.

Despite the unprecedented potentials for eliminating stupid jobs, humanity’s old dream of a technological abolition of work won’t be fulfilled even in the so-called digital age. Sceptics most commonly reference care work to demonstrate the limits of automation. However, an equally important example is agriculture, where the commune would first have to undo a number of productivity advances which have had catastrophic consequences. This exemplifies the unpleasant fact that the commune would inherit from capitalism today not only sci-fi-esque productive forces, but also a mountain of unresolved problems. The Communards of 1871 certainly did not know about computers, but they also didn’t have to worry that the planet would be irreversibly destroyed. The trajectory of critical theory in the 20th century reveals how alongside relations of production, there is an increasing focus on *what* is produced and with *what* consequences. The Situationists in the 1950s were probably the first revolutionaries who attached importance to the destruction of cities by automobile traffic and whose program called for the abolition of the “parasitic sectors”.

For the commune, the infinite list of pointless or even harmful activities which determine everyday life in the metropolis seem to be a gift at first, since their abolition would immediately free up huge amounts of time; entire industries could be shut down and therefore many more people could work on tasks that can neither be automated nor transformed somehow to be enjoyable. But in the course of its development, the irrationality of capitalism has impregnated humanity’s entire metabolism with nature and materialized itself concretely in space. As more than mere examples, see the completely unsolved energy problem and the “fragmentation of cities into the countryside” (Debord)—those notorious urban sprawls whose bleak non-places only exacerbate the former through small scale development and by making the use of cars unavoidable. The commune would not only have to invent a new energy supply, it will most likely have to work for a long time demolishing

such non-places and rehabilitating slums in the global south, reshaping agriculture and restoring degraded areas, without being able to count on too much help from robots for these tasks. This is no reason not to exhaust the possibilities of automation in other fields — especially in poorer areas of the world where cheap labour power has hitherto made it unattractive — indeed automation would free up forces for cleaning up. But it reduces expectations that a real cornucopia has fallen into the lap of humanity with the advent of new technologies, merely because digital goods can multiply infinitely and now the hair dryer can communicate with the toaster via the internet.

6.

The wealth of the commune will hardly be the same as the wealth we know, only produced under different relations. Nor is the point to give metropolitan residents more of what they already have: more flights, cars, cell-phones, and ugly, cheap t-shirts. And not because those needs could be denounced as “artificial” and juxtaposed with so-called natural ones. As the late Marxists from Frankfurt demonstrated, distinguishing between artificial and natural needs tends to be arbitrary in an authoritarian sense, because nature, as manifested in individuals’ drives, and society are inextricably intertwined in every need. As products of the existing *class* society, however, needs are not innocent nor should they always be projected into a classless society. Adorno answered this dilemma on the one hand with the dialectical core of his argument: reorganizing production towards the satisfaction of “even and especially those [needs] produced by capitalism — then the needs themselves would be decisively transformed”. It would “quickly emerge” that the masses don’t need the “trash” forced upon them today. On the other hand, he answered with ideas of equality and solidarity: “The question of the immediate satisfaction of need is not to be posed in terms of social and natural, primary and secondary, correct and false; rather, it coincides with the question of the *suffering* of the vast majority of all humans on earth. If we produced that which *all* humans now most urgently need, then we would be relieved of inflated social-psychological concerns about the legitimacy of their needs.”

Due to the extent of those most urgent and unsatisfied needs, especially in the southern hemisphere, and additionally the limits of

nature’s resilience, a *world* commune would have to completely re-shape many things on a global scale. This would not be in order to make everything look the same everywhere; there would surely be regions that would be considered to be “lagging” by today’s standards, in other words less technically and industrially developed. But, in order to redress the prevailing lack of almost everything in poorer regions of the world — housing, hospitals, even sewer systems — without destroying any prospect of the planet’s recovery, energy and resource consumption will have to sink drastically in the old centres of capitalism. Despite a certain tendency for proletarian conditions of existence to homogenize worldwide, those on social welfare in Germany are still materially better off than any textile worker in Asia, and the average Western European still causes several times more carbon dioxide emissions than the average resident of the African continent.

Without posing the question of ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs and far from any austere anti-hedonism in a green guise, a social revolutionary movement would aim at a different kind of wealth in the capitalist centres. While wealth today presents itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’, being not so much social, but a mere sum total of private, unequally distributed possessions, the commune would have to aim not only for maximal socialization in the sphere of production, but also in the spheres of use and consumption. Contrary to any cult of community, the “right to solitude” (Marcuse) and the retreat into private life would be inviolable. However, unlike in the profit economy, built on bulk sales and planned obsolescence, the private sphere in the commune would no longer be primarily the space in which a steadily increasing flow of accumulated commodities must be devoured in order to keep the machine running. If canteens and laundromats became spaces of encounter beyond their bare functionality, it would no longer be necessary to have a dishwasher and washing machine in every apartment. With a few immediate measures, the commune would be capable of solving problems in a flash that technocrats endlessly grind their teeth on. Rather than continuing with the unmitigated disaster that is “e-mobility” — electric cars consume the same amount of labour, resources, streets and space in cities as cars that run on gas, and instead of exhaust gas pollution there is the highly toxic production of batteries — the commune could simply build a few tramways (with cars gone, there is no need to expend huge amounts

of effort to dig tunnels into the earth). With no harried tourists and managers, air traffic could be reduced drastically in order to let the planet breathe a little.

Even those proletarians who live in the better-off regions of the world would still have much to gain from a revolution. The notion of *communal luxury*, which first appeared during the Paris Commune in 1871, denoting efforts to abolish the separation between profane material production and art in a new way of creating urban space, would be worth taking up again. Communal luxury would have to be the leitmotif of any new society. At best, luxury for all exists today in the form of public libraries that the state has to operate since they are not profitable. The more the commune develops its social wealth, the more the question of keeping track of individuals' consumption will be obviated.

7.

The irrationality of the status quo on the one hand and the potentials it has given rise to on the other give us a rough idea of what a free society might look like: reconstruction of existing machinery in accordance with the needs of producers; elimination of senseless occupations, with necessary tasks automated or reorganized to be enjoyable, or, if this is not possible, job rotation for onerous, yet indispensable tasks; the elimination of wage labour with access to goods no longer being contingent on one's own contributions; the development of a truly social form of wealth. But this says little about the social forms that would make all these things possible.

Such forms are the key: no matter how obvious the destructive and irrational character of the current mode of production has become and no matter the potentials which new technology presents, nothing will change as long as the current social forms are the only conceivable ways for billions of people to coexist. Just as one rejects the left-wing realism that merely perpetuates aspects of the existing misery, so too one must reject a pseudo-radicalism that gushes over isolated revolts, preaches the greatest possible destruction, but can only answer questions concerning a new society with vague platitudes about the total freedom of the individual. Those questions ask for a new form of social mediation, one in which what is general is not inimical to what is particular, but is its deliberate creation. Real socialism,

though born out of the October Revolution, turned Marx's program of the "reabsorption of state power by society" into its gruesome opposite by enthroning a state power with totalitarian traits. This underscores the enormity of the challenge in overcoming the unfettered particularism of the bourgeois market economy by means other than state coercion, a solution which assigns every individual her place. A free society would have to overcome both. That is, on the one hand, it would have to shape the vital material processes in a planned, cooperative and deliberate manner, processes which today take place blindly and haphazardly as a result of competition and crises. On the other hand, it would have to "reabsorb" those functions previously performed by the state but which continue to be necessary, yet do so without being an instrument of coercion apart from society. The first is the necessary condition for the second: only an egalitarian society in control of the material essentials of life is capable of making the state — an external nexus (Marx: *Zusammenfassung*) holding together a disjointed society — superfluous. The separation of the economic and the political, typical of capitalism, is then eliminated.

Historically, sketches of this sort, far from being utopian, were informed by the actual practice of the proletariat. Only after the Paris Commune of 1871 did Marx and Engels conclude that their 1848 program of taking state power was obsolete, while the workers' councils that arose repeatedly from 1905 onwards inspired a decidedly anti-state communism. In the first case, what led Marx to speak of a "revolution against the state" was primarily "the suppression of the standing army by the armed people", the fact that elected municipal councillors were recallable at any time, and that the commune was a "working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time". The communards' uprising was geared towards smashing the old centralist state power and replacing it with a network of communes ruled by the local "self-government of the producers". In the later council model, most elaborately described by Anton Pannekoek, the idea of a "working body" with recallable delegates was extended, but here it was to be strictly based within and coupled with *production*. Society was to be built like a pyramid from the ground up with the factory plant as the decisive unit: "There is no separation between politics and economy as life activities of a body of specialists and of the bulk of producers.... The councils are no politicians, no government. They are

messengers, carrying and interchanging the opinions, the intentions, the will of the groups of workers". "Not even the most central councils bear a governmental character", for they "have no organs of power". There is no longer a state as a centralized force separate from society.

For decades, workers' councils would remain the alternative to Eastern state socialism for many radicals. The "remarkable persistence of the *real tendency* toward *workers councils*", which gave the Situationists some of their optimism, is now long gone. Yet, no other form of organization has emerged in the struggles of the last decades which hints at a stateless society. The recent occupations of city squares are a *means of struggle*, arising from—and appropriate to—the fragmentation of the working class; but unlike councils, they do not *anticipate a new organization of society*. With their horizontal self-organization, the occupied squares of Greece, Egypt, and Spain followed in the footsteps of councils, to a certain extent. However, they not only remain detached from production, that is, from the decisive lever for the dissolution of capitalist relations, but they also had no clearly defined practical foundation other than general discontent. The mass assemblies on some of these squares, in which everyone simply represented themselves—distrusting official politics, for good reason, but nonetheless latching onto their identities as citizens all the more strongly—resulted in endless idle talk that bored everyone fairly quickly. Everyone simply meeting on a lawn to discuss anything and everything is hardly a model for the commune.

In many ways, the old conception of the council certainly seems old-fashioned, if not obsolete. In Pannekoek's sketch from 1947, every worker is assigned to a single workplace, her entire life is centred on production, and the entire social fabric appears as a conflict-free organism. If a council, however, is simply understood as everyone who lives or works in a certain place discussing matters of common interest, putting the results of those discussions into practice, and consulting with other councils by means of delegates recallable at any time, then this form would likely be the backbone of a new commune. That is, if it should come into existence at all, and only until something completely different is invented. The basis on which councils, grass-roots assemblies—or whatever one may want to call them—organize and how they interface with one another would differ from place to place in accordance with local conditions and would certainly change

frequently. According to Horkheimer, "the instability of the constitution would be a characteristic trait of a classless society: the forms of free association do not condense into a system."

The conditions, particularly in the global North, for such a free association have improved considerably in several respects over the last few decades. First, there is the increase in free time. Only those not overly absorbed by the realm of necessity are able to take part in public affairs. Secondly, the general level of education is higher today than it was when the first councils emerged. More people can now read and write and speak foreign languages, many have travelled a bit of the world, and have been able to pursue personal interests beyond wage labour. Thirdly, information technology presents completely new opportunities to coordinate production and gauge needs without a central planning authority. What is needed can likely be determined much more easily with computers and the internet than using the postal service and commissars, just as it would be easier to communicate at which points of production additional help may be required. Just as today people arrange "events" electronically, agricultural communes could signal when help with the harvest would be welcome and anyone could check whether or not they could contribute. Factories could coordinate their workloads, regulate the circulation of goods, and exchange knowledge born out of experience. At each node there would have to be responsible teams, but people could move extensively between occupations in accordance with their interests and talents. Goods would not rot in one place while they are needed in another, as they did under real socialism. Production and distribution would not be the only things facilitated by technology. The ecologically mindful collective utilization of goods, today just another branch of capitalist business known as the *sharing economy*, would also be made easier. Anyone could track any process in which they were interested. The transparency which Pannekoek expected from the dissolution of the individual plant ("now the structure of the social process of labour lies open before man's eyes") would be realized to an extent he could hardly have imagined in 1947. Moreover, the "abundance of telecommunications techniques" which the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem expected twenty years later to be put into the service of "constant control of delegates by the base" has since grown considerably. Because sociologists keep rambling on with buzzwords like "communication",

“networks”, “knowledge society” and so forth, one could almost be ashamed for entertaining notions like this. Such notions do suggest themselves, however, and the many opportunities that digital technology could present in a free society underscore the narrow-mindedness of those for whom they are merely a perfected way of measuring working hours.

As a result, councils or assemblies today would not have to grapple with a number of trivial tasks. What remains would be the problem of making certain decisions that affect many and hence cannot be made at a local level or by mere technical coordination. Decentralization, as envisaged in the 1871 program of the communards and still desirable to this day, has its limits. For example, it does not make any sense and it is not even possible in some cases to produce everything locally. A global commune, or one encompassing only large regions for a time, would face questions concerning the use of limited resources that can only be answered centrally. Such a commune, based on non-authoritarian structures whose central organs merely follow directives “from below”, could be easily overwhelmed by its tasks. For everyone to be involved in every decision may be utopian in the *negative* sense of the word. Such limits would have to be dealt with in some fashion to prevent the emergence of a political sphere populated by specialists.

Hence, the disappearance of the state would not yield an amorphous condition, but rather require a highly developed form of social self-organization. The “re-absorption of state power by society” would demand an entirely new way of dealing with problems for which the law, criminal justice and prisons are responsible today. Much, even most, of what is now crime, like property crimes, is the product of material necessity and would automatically disappear with said want, but some problems would remain. We must build on the critique of the Soviet legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis who deemed “criminal law, like law in general” to be “a form of the relationships between egoistic and isolated subjects” and rooted in the bourgeois principle of equivalence. Retribution must be replaced by a practice of betterment and rehabilitation which will “render the court case and court verdict totally superfluous”. Instead of building prisons — “a social crime and failure”, according to Emma Goldman — and wasting time with a legal system, which today is growing out of control, the communards of

the future would have to work towards a new method of resolving conflicts which helps “ameliorate” violent individuals. This may even involve some coercive measures. Fundamentally, the challenge is to make sure that the dissolution of legal relations does not amount to a regression to a condition worse than the status quo, in which at least the very abstractness of the law ideally protects the individual from state despotism. The “re-absorption of state power by society” cannot mean that the individual is entirely at the mercy of the caprices of their neighbours or that a bourgeois society governed by abstractions is replaced by the immediacy of small communities. For this, there is no guarantee. It is one of the many great but not unsolvable challenges that humankind would face.

8.

The changes outlined here would affect gender relations in a number of ways, but they would not necessarily put an end to the misery that comes with those relations, which range from the gendered division of labour and gender stereotypes to violence against women. Gender relations would likely play a central role in the class struggles which create the commune, and female communards would certainly insist on concrete and immediate changes. The complete elimination of established gender relations would likely remain a task for several generations. In other words, no immediate harmony would be established, and in fact struggles around gender would actually intensify as they did in most modern upheavals, like in 1871, 1917 and the subsequent years, 1936/1937, and in 1968. Despite being intimately entangled, gender relations and the capitalist mode of production are not one and the same. That is why today many feminists make do without any critique of capitalism and why, conversely, there could be male communards who would be unwilling to relinquish their gender roles and who would be more drawn to writing software than changing infants’ diapers. Still, attempts to overcome the ways of the old world in this respect would find much more favourable conditions.

Firstly, the end of wage labour would do away with a factor which contributes to (but does not necessarily create) the stability of this peculiar gendered division of labour in spite of the tendential erosion of classical patriarchy. As we wrote in another text: “The ability to bear

children is generally a disadvantage on the labour market for women, whether they actually intend to have kids or not; if and once they actually have children, this almost directly leads to women, as they earn lower wages, being the ones who take care of them." If the labour market is replaced by a deliberate division of social tasks, this would somewhat improve the chances of overcoming this archaism. Where everything is subject to collective discussion, men would at the very least have to think up a few good reasons for not contributing to mundane things like child rearing and housework.

Secondly, many of the tasks assigned to women today could be dealt with collectively. In this respect, the next revolution would not have to invent all that much; this idea is as old as the practical attempts to implement it—one need only think of Alexandra Kollontai's advocacy for collective living arrangements and communal child care in the early Soviet Union. This is not even necessarily incompatible with capitalism: when women are to be mobilized for wage labour, government institutions sometimes take care of children. However, this interest in female labour appears, in light of mass unemployment, to be rather limited in most parts of the world; even where it exists, child care remains a private endeavour left to grandparents and neighbours (in China there are entire villages inhabited only by the elderly and children), since it is cheaper. Liberated from financial considerations, the commune could reshape, according to existing needs, all that is neglected in today's world because it is not productive.

Thirdly, the married couple and family would disappear, if not as a way of life, then as an economic unit, since there would be no private wealth, no bank accounts, no real estate, no inheritance. The unholy fusion of material interests and intimate human relationships would be eliminated. This would almost certainly be beneficial to the relationships between parents and children and between genders. No woman would be forced to suppress her wish for a divorce for fear of sliding into poverty because she no longer has access to her husband's income or a roof over her head. Moreover, the private and the social would take on an entirely new character through changing their relationship. The hope for happiness placed in the family today, often only to be greatly disappointed, is mostly a reaction to inhuman conditions; the homey existence in the small family collective is the polar opposite of a society in which no one can feel at home. If people still want

to live in nuclear families after the revolution, certainly no one would be inclined to forbid this, but the desire to live this way would diminish. And if it does not disappear entirely, it would still yield less tragic results than today, as individuals would have a completely different place within society, and the economic function of the family would be gone.

To the extent that today's gender relations are enmeshed with a certain opposition between wage labour and housework, including child rearing, a social revolution would fundamentally facilitate the emancipation from those relations. There is, however, no guarantee of any progress whatsoever. Even if child rearing is organized rationally and socially, it could still be left to women; thus, all those facets of gender relations outside of a certain division of labour would be even less likely to disappear by themselves. The historical link between classical gender stereotypes—which continue to exist, though they are in flux in late capitalist, liberal countries—and the partition of the social process into a market economy and private reproduction is quite obvious. Nevertheless, they have thrust deep roots even in the most hidden corners of people's inner lives and continue to be a source of identity. If only because these gender roles are developed and lived *subconsciously*, their complete elimination will take time: "Whereas particularly the destruction of state power can be thought of as a concentrated 'overthrow', the necessary transformation and self-transformation of (one's own) gender subjectivity can hardly be thought of as anything but a lengthy, culturally revolutionary process, that can become eruptive from time to time but will generally only take place little by little in everyday interpersonal relationships and new cultural production" (Lux et al).

9.

The transition to the commune can neither be thought of as the conquest of state power nor as the result of a gradual expansion of an allegedly already burgeoning new logic of production, and not even as a combination of both, that is, as a joint venture of a left government and alternative practices from below. Not much needs to be said about the Marxist-Leninist understanding of revolution: conquest of state power, nationalization of the economy followed by a patient waiting

game as the state “withers away”. In rejecting this view, however, the necessity of a rupture has given way to an alternative gradualism under titles like Commons or *Wertkritik*, an allegedly ground-breaking renewal of Marxist thinking that, after its farewell to the working class, moved increasingly closer to the green, alternative ideology of the 1970s. Embellished as a decoupling from the “commodity-money system”, islands with a different way of living and producing are to be established in order to undermine that system step by step. To the extent that it is possible to create a livelihood outside of the market, there is certainly no reason not to do it. Not much can be done, however, without putting an end to property, understood not just as the expropriation of those who currently control the means of production (the first decisive confrontation), but also ending the separation *between* enterprises, which would be abolished as such and replaced by mere nodes in the flow of social production. Without a revolutionary mass movement, it is not possible to attain sufficient resources for a different kind of life and, if they were available, they could hardly maintain their independence from market relations in the long term.

The transition to the commune is only conceivable as an *unstoppable movement of occupations*, appropriating whatever is of use for it—housing, public buildings, factories, farmland, means of transportation—while blocking or sabotaging anything that must be shut down. The key is to use anything that is captured to keep expanding the movement, otherwise the whole thing would collapse. Goods must simply be distributed, services like medical care or transport provided for free; money would not be “abolished” by decree as in Soviet war communism, but would become superfluous, likely having already been devalued by the deep social crisis. Such a practice has appeared in all the great uprisings as the common goal makes petty questions of ownership irrelevant; in May 68, farmers brought the fruits of their fields to the occupations in Paris; in many of the square occupations of recent years food was given out freely, the injured were treated, tasks that needed to be done were shared voluntarily.

The challenge, however, which can hardly be overstated, is to go beyond the looting and distribution of goods and to start producing in a new way. How a factory works is best known to those who work in it; nothing happens without their cooperation, even in the age of high-tech; supported by anyone who is interested in this endeavour,

they could begin immediately to adapt work processes to their needs, and, if necessary, to convert production in accordance with the requirements of the movement and give their products to the embryonic commune. Even the social revolution in Spain in 1936/1937 already faced the problem of being economically dependent on regions that were *not* in upheaval. More so today, the global division of labour would quickly doom any purely local attempt at revolution. This does not mean that the revolution would have to break out on the same day everywhere in the whole world, but rather that everything would be lost if it does not quickly spread to large areas which, at the very least, are able to furnish it with the bare necessities. A deep crisis spreading to a number of countries could turn out to be the catalyst for such an expansion.

The course of such a movement would obviously depend to a large extent on the reactions of the powers that be. Whether they attempt to militarily annihilate the focal points of the uprising, like in the Bloody Week of 1871, or if they abdicate—tired and resigned—as the aging bureaucrats did in the East in 1989, could prove to be decisive. The key would be “splitting the armed forces along class lines” and weakening the military apparatus by denying it its “supply of essential goods and services” (*Angry Workers of the World*). Although achievements would likely have to be defended with arms, the revolutionary movement’s most potent weapon would be its ability to satisfy people’s material needs and to create new human relationships even in the course of the uprising. The point is to combine both elements in such a way that it suddenly seems self-evident to masses of people, despite all the risks, to desert the existing order. Not even tanks can save what the working class no longer keeps going.

The crux of the matter is that, in its present state, the production apparatus that today spans the entire globe is a terrible starting point for an upheaval, no matter its potentials. There is a deep chasm between the present state and the possible commune, and the leap over that chasm suggested here may appear in some respects quixotic. Politically, this is reflected in the aforementioned turn to the localized *Commons* and to a kind of neo-anarchism that sees “infrastructure” as the enemy and which aimlessly destroys railway tracks. But it is also there in the postulate of the indispensability of the state: the world has become so complex, it is claimed, that the transition to a postcapitalist

society cannot do without the leadership of the great helmsman. That both extreme positions are wrong can be shown quite easily. The first surrenders without hesitation before the enormous challenge of re-appropriation, while the second overestimates the controllability of the capitalist economy. Drafting any kind of counterproposal is all the more daunting. Precisely because the commune is not predetermined by the objective course of history, an outline of what it might look like should be discussed today. The more that the working class discusses it across the globe today and the more clearly a completely different world can be visualized, the more likely it is that another revolutionary movement could arise after all.

Annotated references

"The socialization of knowledge has reached such a high degree", notes Johannes Agnoli in 1975, "that 'authors' in reality merely take up and edit collectively produced material, information and reflections as well as collectively experienced results of practice." (Introduction to *Überlegungen zum bürgerlichen Staat [Reflections on the Bourgeois State]*, Berlin 1975). It is in this sense that we do not lay claim to any originality. Rather than proclaiming new "approaches", "paradigms" or "theoretical schools", we try to make use of the wealth of thought that approximately two centuries of modern class struggles have produced; almost everything has already been said, we merely say it somewhat differently in the face of the current situation.

More specifically:

1.

Quotes are from Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1; Benjamin, Letter to Werner Kraft, July 26th 1934, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. Common objections to posing the question of what communism should be have been refuted by the German circle Paeris: "Spinner, Utopisten, Antikommunisten. Gegen das Festhalten am Bilderverbot und für eine Verständigung über Kommunismus" ["Freaks, Utopians, Anticommunists. Against Adherence to the Ban on Images, for Clarification about Communism"] *Phase 2*, no. 36. Proponents of the "Frankfurt School" were in fact not too pedantic when it came to the *Bilderverbot* or "ban on images". According to Horkheimer, to acknowledge that it is not isolated theoreticians but only people engaged in practical emancipation who can decide about the new society "would keep no

one who accepts the possibility of a changed world from considering how people could live without politics of genetic regulation and penal authority, model factories and repressed minorities" ("Authoritarian State", 1940). Adorno noted: "The ban on imagining how things should be, the scientification of socialism, has not always been beneficial for the latter." ("Introduction to *Quatre Mouvements* by Charles Fourier"). Shocking examples of left-wing faith in technological progress are currently provided by Paul Mason, *Post-Capitalism: A Guide to our Future* (2015), and the so-called "accelerationists" (Nick Srnicek / Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 2016), who by propagating the mirage of "guaranteed basic income" merely accelerate the decay of class consciousness. A devastating critique of Mason has been formulated by Rainer Fischbach, a left-wing Keynesian for some funny reason: *Die schöne Utopie. Paul Mason, der Post-kapitalismus und der Traum vom grenzenlosen Überfluss* [A Beautiful Utopia: Paul Mason, Post-Capitalism and the Dream of Infinite Abundance], (Cologne 2017).

2.

Marx advanced his idea of two stages of communism, the first still linking individual consumption to labour time performed, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), a text that at the same time was very prescient in its attacks on the deification of the state by German social democracy. This conception is today taken up by the neo-leninist Dietmar Dath, advocating "labour time accounts" (*Klassenkampf im Dunkeln* [Class Struggle in the Dark], Hamburg 2014), by the anti-authoritarian Marxist Peter Hudis (*Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, Leiden 2012), by W. Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell (*Towards a New Socialism*, 1993) and way too many others. Our critique mostly follows the excellent contribution by Raoul Victor, "The Economy in the Transition to a Communist Society", *Internationalist Perspective* 61 (2016); The quote by Kropotkin is from *Anarchism* (1896).

3.

Quotes from Marx/Engels, *The German Ideology*; Marcuse, "Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber" (1964). A still brilliant critique of machinery, following Marx's chapter on the issue in *Capital* vol. 1, is provided by the Italian adherent of *operaismo* Raniero Panzieri: "The capitalist use of machinery: Marx versus the objectivists" (1964). Important proposals for discussions in the framework of critical theory can be found in Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man* (1964), as well as Hans-Dieter Bahr, *Kritik der "politischen Technologie"* [Critique of "Political Technology"], Frankfurt 1970. The so-called germ form theory is documented on the blog keimform.de. An account of new technologies—including, of course, a call for a guaranteed income—is given by the two spokespersons of the Chaos Computer Club, Frank Rieger and Constanze Kurz (*Arbeitsfrei. Eine Entdeckungsreise zu den Maschinen, die uns ersetzen* [Off work: An exploration of the machines that replace us], Munich 2013). Much more critical and taking into account current working conditions: Matthias Becker, *Automatisierung und Ausbeutung: Was wird aus der Arbeit im digitalen Kapitalismus?* [Automation and Exploitation. How Does Digital Capitalism Transform Labour?], Vienna 2017. A good presentation of a workers' inquiry at Amazon is Georg Barthel/Jan Rottenbach, "Reelle Subsumtion und Insubordination im Zeitalter der digitalen Maschinerie. Mit-Untersuchung der Streikenden bei Amazon in Leipzig" ["Real Subsumtion and Insubordination in the Era of Digital Machinery. A Co-Inquiry of Striking Workers at Amazon Leipzig"], PROKLA 187. An academic study of the increasing deployment of robots in China is Yu Huang and Naubahar Sharif, "From 'Labour Dividend' to 'Robot Dividend'. Technological Change and Labour Power in South China" (2017).

4.

See David Graeber, "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs"; quote from Meinhard Creydt, *46 Fragen zur nachkapitalistischen Zukunft. Erfahrungen, Analysen, Vorschläge* [46 Questions on the Post-Capitalist Future: Experiences, Analysis, Proposals] (Münster 2016).

5.

In "Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management" (*Internationale Situationniste* 12, 1969), a scenario for revolution still worth reading, Raoul Vaneigem names as examples for "parasitical sectors, whose assemblies decide purely and simply to suppress them" somewhat vaguely "administration, bureaucratic agencies, spectacle production, purely commercial industries". Living in a late capitalist service sector metropolis like Berlin, one wonders what, apart from hospitals and public transport, does *not* fall into this category. On suburbia as a non-place: Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, ch. VII. On the unresolved problem of energy production: Rainer Fischbach, *Mensch-Natur-Stoffwechsel* [Man-Nature-Metabolism] (Cologne 2016). Fischbach shows that renewable sources of energy are hopelessly overestimated and that a drastic reduction in energy consumption is needed in order to at least curb global warming. He attacks the green-alternative fetish of small-scale and local production with respect to both the energy sector and industry (only a grid extending over vast areas can balance out the ups and downs of renewables while standardized mass production requires the least energy, resources and labour power; we refer to this in section 7, though somewhat reluctantly—we do not have any green-alternative inclinations, but decentralization, it seems to us, still has certain advantages).

6.

Adorno's "Theses on Needs" (1942) constitute a revolutionary agenda in four and a half pages. On the "right to solitude", see Marcuse, *Über Revolte, Anarchismus und Einsamkeit* [On Revolt, Anarchism and Solitude] (Zurich 1969). On "communal luxury": Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (New York 2015). Ross unearths aspects of the Paris Commune of immense actuality: The separation of mental and manual labour, hierarchical gender relations, art as a luxury good separated from everyday life, the state and the nation were practically challenged already in 1871. If we use the term commune more often than communism in this text, then this is not only because the latter term has maybe irredeemably been contaminated by the history of state socialist regimes in the 20th century, not seldomly engaging in mass murder, but also to make visible a hidden thread leading from the still pre-industrial Paris of 1871 to contemporary high-tech capitalism.

7.

Marx, *The Civil War in France*; Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*. A surprisingly good contribution is Alex Demirovic, "Rätedemokratie oder das Ende der Politik" [Council Democracy or the End of Politics] (PROKLA 155), questioning in particular the complete absorption of politics by economics as envisaged by Pannekoek. On the critique of law: Evgeny Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism* (1924). On prisons: Emma Goldman, "Prisons: A Social Crime and Failure", in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (Stilwell 2008).

8.

Quote from Kat Lux/Johannes Hauer/Marco Bonavena, "Der halbierte Blick. Gedanken zum Geschlechterverhältnis im Kommenden Aufprall" [The Bisected View. Thoughts on the Gender Relation in *The Coming Collision*], *diskus* 216 (2017).

9.

The key text by the proponents of *Wertkritik* on how to overcome capitalism is still Robert Kurz, "Anti-economics and anti-politics", published in *krisis* no. 19/1997. Whereas Kurz still had a vague idea about the limits of evolutionary change, contemporary proponents ascribe to parties "like Syriza and Podemos, which after all emerged from social protest movements, a truly important function" for overcoming commodity society (Norbert Trenkle, "Gesellschaftliche Emanzipation in der Krise" [Social Emancipation in Crisis] (2015)). The contribution "Insurrection and Production" (2016) by the Angry Workers of the World (London) should be widely discussed. Using the British isles as an example, they reflect in an unusually concrete manner on how a proletarian revolution could unfold today. We hope their proposal for a 9-hour working day is limited to the very early stages of this process.

REVOLUTIONARY MOTIVES

Why do the dispossessed revolt? Or, more to the point, why don't they? There is no shortage of reasons; in every direction we look, the fully capitalist world presents itself as an immense accumulation of injury and outrage. And yet, on their own, these reasons rarely suffice as explanation. What is unbearable to one group of proletarians is bearable to another; what produces a rebellion on one occasion, or in one place, fails to elicit any response on another. We might be tempted to approach the problem from the other side and list all the reasons *not* to revolt, chief among them the enormous repressive power of the state. Most revolts end in failure, even if we define success in the most modest terms, and failure means, let's be clear, not only wasted effort but injury, death, imprisonment. Except in situations where survival is truly at stake, there is always good reason to keep one's head down, to stagger on under the nightmare weight of history. But fear explains both too much and too little, since many *do* revolt in situations when the odds are not particularly good and the risks great. At a first pass, we are confronted by an insufficient positive explanation (reasons for) and an insufficient negative one (reasons against). Moreover, as nearly all commentators have noticed, since the odds of success for a revolt are not determined by the force of the enemy alone but by the number of those who participate, there is something circular and self-fulfilling about whatever judgments participants make about the risks. Bad odds can be transformed into good ones if, by misapprehending the situation or ignoring the risks, some small group decides to go ahead anyway, creating felicitous conditions for everyone else. A leap into the void can make the ground appear, just as a refusal to leap can turn solid ground to thinnest air.

The self-fulfilling character of such judgment has led many pro-revolutionaries to conclude that the decisive element is the consciousness of would-be rebels, who must be educated or provided with the right leadership, in order to realise the reasonableness of revolt, the possibility of success given unitary action. This view, which I will call *voluntarist*, finds its most important articulation in the words of Karl Kautsky, as interpreted and popularised by V.I. Lenin in *What Is To*

Be Done? “Socialist consciousness”, writes Kautsky, “is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.”¹ For Lenin, this position necessitates the formation of cadres of “professional revolutionaries” who can provide intellectual leadership to the working class, lest their default to a spontaneous “trade-union consciousness” leave them incapable of effectively combating their domination by capital.² We might think of Lenin’s interpretation of the voluntarist thesis as *pastoral*, meaning it emphasises leadership. Other voluntarisms are *pedagogical*, identifying the education of the underclasses as the decisive element. Antonio Gramsci may be the clearest exemplar of this latter variant, but it should be noted that voluntarists are rarely pastoral or pedagogical completely. We can talk here only of tendencies.³ Lenin’s professional revolutionaries were to sell newspapers in order to develop close contact with the masses they might later mobilise, and Gramsci himself continuously describes education as a form of leadership.

Most voluntarists acknowledge that revolt does occur independently of pastoral or pedagogical intervention.⁴ A certain class of revolt — riot or strike — is more or less spontaneous, reflexive, and unexplainable except as the result of contingency, our pedagogues or would-be leaders might say. But more massive, durable, open-ended, and strategic revolt depends, in their estimation, on consciousness and leadership. The voluntarist account of spontaneous action must therefore be distinguished from what I call *fatalism*. For the fatalist, spontaneity goes all the way down, and there is no way to cheat the process through acts of will. Fatalists see revolt as unfolding from either inexorable objective mechanisms or, perhaps, the advent of an ineffable event. Why do people revolt? Let me tell you, say the pastors and the pedagogues. We just don’t know, say the fatalists.

1. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin* (Courier 2012), 82. There is some debate about the extent to which Lenin’s interpretation of Kautsky’s views is accurate.

2. *Ibid.*, 147–48.

3. In many essays from the mid-1920s onward, Gramsci emphasises the decisive role of intellectuals and of education in preparing the way for revolution. In short, and at the risk of vulgarising a complex and fragmentary body of work, Gramsci argues that there exists among the working class ‘organic intellectuals’ who, by virtue of their position in production, control the ‘ideas and aspirations of the class’. Organised into a class party, such intellectuals and the educative role they play will secure ‘hegemony’ for the working class — that is, ensure that working-class ideas are dominant in society. This ‘war of position’ is a necessary precursor to any ‘frontal attack’. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers 1971), 3–13, 106–13, 257–63.

4. These views are not confined to Marxists or socialists. Anarchists are often prone to a pedagogical view of human

action, even if they are axiomatically opposed to a pastoral one. The popular eco-anarchist (or ‘green nihilist’) text, *Desert* (2011), rejects the possibility of revolution in its first pages by way of an off-hand anthropology. Revolution, in the views of the authors, can only be made by dedicated revolutionaries, anarchists, and this group will always be marginal: ‘Anarchists can be wonderful. We can have beauty, and self-possessed power and possibility in buckets. We cannot, however, remake the entire world; there are not enough of us, and never will be’. Considering very briefly the possibility that revolution may be made by people who are not already dedicated revolutionaries, they quote from a previous eco-anarchist text: ‘There is unfortunately little evidence from history that the working class — never mind anyone else — is intrinsically predisposed to libertarian or ecological revolution. Thousands of years of authoritarian socialisation favour the jackboot..’ They offer a negative version of the pedagogical thesis; education goes all the way down, producing perfectly compliant social subjects, and only a small number of freaks or deviants will ever break out of the straitjacket of ideology.

Declaring something unknowable is always a safe approach. But as I will argue below, political struggles often require people to make assumptions about the motivations of others; in revolutions, such assumptions can prove quite powerful. Indeed, as I show, the pedagogical and pastoral assumptions are at the heart of the processes that allow revolution to turn to counter-revolution. Those who say they don’t know now may find themselves, at a practical and intuitive level, relying upon common sense conceptions later on. Obviously, there is a great deal within history that is unknowable. We may never be able to say why, for instance, the murder by the police of a young unarmed man in one instance produces a riot, and in the other nothing more than a few small protests. But we may be able to say something about why the riot continues, dies down, or passes over into insurrection. To do so, we need a theory of revolutionary motives. The pedagogical and pastoral approaches fail because they confuse people’s motives with people’s beliefs. Motives, for the most part, and especially *revolutionary motives*, exist at a deeper level than the sort of consciousness or ideology that pedagogues and authorities can target: survival, desire for increased well-being, concern for the well-being of one’s familiars, hatred of oppressive heteronomy. These motives do not need to be taught, even if they are conditioned and transformed by social structure. Nor can they be untaught. For an ideology to succeed, it must work with and not against people’s underlying motivations.

motives described above — that is, concern for material well-being — though it should be noted that such concern extends to dependents, companions and intimates. Within Marxist and other left thought, interests name the deep though often unexplained forces that mobilise the underclasses. An interest, importantly, is something more than a reflexive action, something other than instinct or drive as such. We use the term to name internal forces that can be repressed or ignored, that appear as strong inclination or felt need, that motivate action but do not immediately produce it, and that therefore prompt deliberation or reflection.

Motive is perhaps similar to what Baruch Spinoza called *conatus*, or striving. “Each thing”, Spinoza writes famously, “as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being”.⁵

This being in which people strive to persevere is not identical for every person, and some aspects of it are quite clearly historically determined, unique to particular social relations and institutions, but every society or human community has as its given that it must allow people to survive, if not flourish, and the motives that correspond to these survival needs will form the basis for much (though certainly not all) of what people do: humans will strive to feed themselves, to find shelter from the elements, and to avoid pain and illness, to speak of three of the most basic material motives.

In capitalism, these basic motives fuel the fires of accumulation. The apparatus of the wage, for example, depends upon the motivated-yet-free action of proletarians who, dispossessed of the means of production, voluntarily sell their labour power in order to survive. Proletarians are not gripped by capital at a neuromuscular level, their bodies directly recruited to produce things of value. Domination and power is everywhere, and its history thousands of years deep, but people are almost never the simple objects or tools of others. Even those forms of domination which we imagine to operate almost entirely through force and to be more or less indifferent to the consent of the dominated presume some limited margin of freedom.⁶

Prisons are constructed and organised, for example, on the assumption that prisoners will try to escape, and even plantation slavery, which seems in some regards the infernal maximum of dehumanising and

5. Benedictus de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, E. M. Curley, ed., (Princeton University Press 1994), 159.

6. For Foucault, power presupposes ‘a limited margin of freedom’. He writes: ‘Even when the power relation is

objectifying oppression, presupposed that slaves were free to refuse work, attempt to escape, revolt. Hence its recourse to violent punishment, at every turn, as necessary compulsion.

It should be made clear that a theory of revolutionary motives is not a theory of motives in general. People are no doubt driven by all manner of unique, perverse, and complex desires, understanding of which must be left to psychology if not psychoanalysis. Since we are talking of inclination rather than instinct, motive and interest are probabilistic concepts. Rather than seeking to explain every single thing that people do, interest is similar to the Marxian concept of *tendency*, asserting itself in the long-run and in the aggregate, despite and against deviations. A theory of revolutionary motives is concerned with proletarian interests that are basic, common, and elemental. Revolutions have a tendency to bring these elemental motives to the surface, because survival is so often at stake and because they aggregate many actors, thus putting into question what they may have in common as goals. Furthermore, because they involve the breakdown of existing institutions, people can no longer rely on habit or commonplace rubrics, and instead must elaborate, through deliberation and collective conversation, new ways of doing things based on shared motives.

The theory of revolutionary motives therefore emphasises the practical reasoning that inhabits the gap between compulsion and action. In revolutionary situations, proletarians reflect on what they are doing. They do not simply act instinctively. The concept of reason will no doubt sound the alarm for some readers, trained by various antihumanisms and structuralisms to see people as character-masks for impersonal forces. Many have critiqued the Marxian theory of interests as universalising a Western or post-Enlightenment philosophy of mind, and there is little doubt that certain presentations of it naturalise a limited and ultimately European psychology.⁷ But reason and “rationality” are not the same thing, and to suggest that people think about what they do is not the same thing as suggesting that

completely out of balance, when it can truly be claimed that one side has “total power” over the other, a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window, or of killing the other person. This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all! Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984* (Allen Lane 1997), 284, 292.

they are utility-maximising computers or vessels for transcendental faculties. Reason can be irrational by the lights of an Immanuel Kant or a Karl Popper, and when it comes to social practice, what matters is that it works, not that it's correct. In any case, capitalism is now a global phenomenon, and capitalism is, as indicated above, nothing if not a form of unfreedom that acts through reasoned choice, through a paper-thin freedom, constraining and limiting the autonomy of the exploited. Capitalism presupposes the theory of motives advanced here.

Where there is reasoning there are also ideas and though voluntarists over-emphasise the role of ideas, consciousness, and ideology, this is not to say that ideas are inconsequential, nor that there is no role whatsoever for a theory of ideology. Inasmuch as proletarians reflect on what they do, then ideas will play a role in the actions they take, since evaluating the consequences of one's actions depends upon ideas about how the world functions. This is also well described by Spinoza: "Both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of the striving it has".⁸ In other words, contrary to the assumptions of voluntarist theory, ideology is significant inasmuch as it conditions what people do, but it has little effect on the deeper underlying motives. The motives we are concerned with here are either givens of social reproduction or products of social structures that are unchangeable without a change of structure. They exist at a deeper level than the sort of consciousness or ideology which pedagogues and leaders aim to transform. You cannot unteach hunger.

Many will no doubt want to know why it matters that we know why people do these things. The answer is that, in any revolution, there is always the formation of a dedicated and organised mass whose motives are, in some regard, idiosyncratic, undertaken out of commitment

7. This is the view of many within the Subaltern Studies Group, in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty who, in *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton University Press 1989), argues that Bengali workers' attachment to communal ties cannot be explained in terms of the ability of such ties to satisfy material needs, a Marxist mode of explanation which would project bourgeois rationality onto such workers. Rather, Bengali workers valued such cultural commitments for reasons internal to their culture. See Vivek Chibber for a strident and ultimately too narrow attempt to defend a universalist account of material interests against the Subaltern studies critique of Chakrabarty and others: *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (Verso 2013), 178–207. Chibber points out, importantly, that even arch-relativists like Chakrabarty rely on material interests as explanation in the final instance.

8. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 160.

to the cause of the revolution rather than personal well-being or the well-being of familiars. Many of the people who write and read texts such as this one, author included, will likely find themselves in this weird class of people, whose motives and desires are no doubt various and deserve study in their own right. This is a porous zone, into which and from which people pass in and out, and certainly not exclusive of other more basic motives. Some may engage in struggle for basic reasons and stay for other ones and, needless to say, such basic motives can reappear and trump all, such as when a person, threatened with ten years in prison, decides to inform on their comrades. Nor would we want to imply that whatever forms of altruism, libidinal passion, death drive or need for recognition motivates those who inhabit radical milieus do not exist among others as well. We talk here of distributions and primacies. But the historical evidence is clear that the vast majority of people participating in a revolution do so because of the deeper motives described above and in what follows — a desire for safety, for increased well-being, autonomy for themselves and their intimates — and will withdraw their support if they see nothing of the sort on the horizon. The problem is that the "organised minority" takes its own motives — and its capacity for sacrifice, discipline, self-abnegation — as evidence of the structure of motivation in general, and as such will frequently turn to pedagogical or pastoral supplement in order to compel the support of the larger revolutionary mass and install in them its own motives. As I argue in the pages that follow, this is bound to fail, and in fact sets in motion a number of counter-revolutionary processes.

We therefore need a better theory of revolutionary motives. For most of the 20th century, fatalism was supposed to provide that theory. Anton Pannekoek and Paul Mattick demonstrated how the organisations that resulted from voluntarist projects would, during non-revolutionary conjunctures, either be destroyed or integrated into capitalism.⁹ The emergence of any meaningful struggle would always seem "spontaneous" from the vantage of the pastors and the pedagogues. Since it emphasised the futility of the projects and interventions of the active minority, fatalism provided a counter to the voluntarists who

9. Both Mattick and Pannekoek owe a great deal to Rosa Luxemburg, whose account, in *The Mass Strike* and elsewhere, fuses the fatalist and voluntarist positions. Paul Mattick, 'Spontaneity and Organisation' in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Merlin 1978), 117–38; Anton Pannekoek, 'Party and Class' (1936).

insisted on the crucial role of their own education or leadership. But this leaves open the question of what happens during revolutionary conjunctures. It is one thing to counsel non-intervention during quieter moments, but another thing altogether to do so during revolutionary ones, when not only the success of the revolution seems at stake, but when suffering and death are either present or imminent. As the pure distillates of the fatalist position, Monsieur Dupont, the uniplural authors of *Nihilist Communism*, recognise this problem and attempt to find something for the fatalist pro-revolutionary minority to do when it goes down. The answer: disable the voluntarists. In revolutionary conditions, the fatalist minority will be called upon to “actually go against most of the ‘revolutionary’ communist and anarchist milieu”.¹⁰ There is certainly some truth here, in that the attempt by some fraction of the revolution to seize power and begin to lead the revolution will need to be contested vigorously by a revolution within the revolution. But fatalists such as Monsieur Dupont are, in a sense, the weird twins of the voluntarists, relying on a view of the masses of ordinary proletarians as fragile, easily manipulated, diverted, or betrayed, even if capable of spontaneous revolt. Monsieur Dupont lack the courage of their convictions: if the working class is truly capable of organising itself and directing its own action on the basis of motives internal to it, then it is also capable of critically evaluating and rejecting the leadership or education offered. If one believes, as the theory of motives I will develop leads one to believe, that revolutions and the revolutions within revolutions and against counter-revolutions are produced by proletarians acting on the basis of motives internal to them, and by way of innate critical endowments, then intervention as such is no longer a problem. Indeed, one no longer needs to argue, futilely, that the dedicated minority sit on its hands; rather one can articulate the ways in which the kinds of things this minority does can either hinder or help the unfolding of the revolution. One can distinguish, ultimately, between two types of intervention: *vanguardist* and *adventurist*. The vanguardist seeks to control, lead, and shape proletarian action through pastoral and pedagogical intervention and, as such, sets in motion counter-revolution. The adventurist, however, engages in self-directed action that seeks to facilitate the conditions under which the vast majority of people will decide that going in the direction

10. Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism* (Ardent 2009), 20.

of the revolution, of communism, means satisfying their materialist motivations. This may mean expropriating capitals and turning them over to people so that they can meet their needs, engaging in defence of the revolution from capitalist counter-attack, or subverting the attempt by revolutionary factions to establish leadership, or any number of other “communist measures”. The point is that the purely negative theorisation that the fatalists offer is inadequate; people will choose among positive actions, not among action or inaction. We can only evaluate positive actions on the basis of an adequate theory of motives.

The theory of motives matters, then, because it is the basis for action by those who have transcended, always partially and for the moment, materialist motives and begun to act on the basis of their commitment to the cause of reform, revolution, or struggle. Theory is always the product of history, of struggle as it is reflected on by those directly and distantly concerned. Abstracted from immediate struggles as it may be, this essay reflects the ongoing self-examination of the activist and radical milieu as it worries about its own existence and its relationship to the masses of proletarians who would be necessary for any revolution. If the pedagogues and authoritarians wildly overstate the importance of such activists, the fatalists wildly understate it. One attempts to arrogate to this group a power that it can never have, the other engages in perpetually abortive fantasies of the self-abolition of this group. Consider this essay an attempt to cut diagonally across both positions, neither arguing, fallaciously, for the utter insignificance of the active minority nor attributing to it some fictional burden of leadership.

The Materialist Conception of History

Before the interventions of Marx and Engels, nearly all radicals imagined communism or socialism as the conscious, ideologically-motivated undertaking of committed reformers and revolutionaries. The radical milieu into which the pair entered in the mid-1840s viewed the overcoming of capitalism as largely a moral and sometimes a religious project. The League of the Just, whose members joined with Marx and Engels to found the Communist League and commission the text that became the *Communist Manifesto*, had previously rallied around

the moral and religious perspectives of Wilhelm Weitling, who attempted to identify communism with the essence of Christianity.¹¹ But Weitling's eminence within the cluster of communist secret societies of the 1840s eventually weakened, partly as a result of contacts made with struggle-oriented and practical-minded English Chartists and partly due to the emergence of Marx and Engels' Communist Correspondence Committee. At the time, communism distinguished itself from "socialism" and its utopias primarily through an association with the legacy of the Jacobins and the various French insurrectionists who organised in secret during the 1830s and 1840s. Many communist groups had some degree of continuity with the followers of Gracchus Babeuf and his pre-empted uprising against the Thermidorian Directory, the goal of which was to radicalise the egalitarian revolutionary process instigated by the Jacobins and produce "community of goods and labour".¹² Babeuf and his co-conspirators held to both the pedagogical and the pastoral perspectives outlined above. Revolutionary overthrow of the Directory, they concluded, would have to grant power to a "provisional authority" that would rule until such time as the masses were capable of administering the community of goods themselves.¹³ The Babeuvians placed an enormous emphasis on "modifying the human heart by education". Part of the goal of their provisional authority would have been to allow time for the people to be educated in revolutionary "good manners" and disabused of egoism and avarice.¹⁴ Where education failed, punishment would have to suffice, and holding an anti-egalitarian opinion would be a sanctionable offence in the post-revolutionary world of the Babeuvians.¹⁵ Weitling was also both pedagogical and pastoral in his approach to the new world to be built, grounding communism in a reading of the Gospels, insisting on the need for a transitional dictatorship, and imagining a post-revolutionary world premised on "universal duty to work and consisting of a centralised economy".¹⁶

11. The best accounts are in Gareth Steadman Jones' introduction to the Penguin Edition of *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin 2002), 39–50 and August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (SUNY Press 2000), 27–58.

12. Most of what we know about Gracchus Babeuf and his failed insurrection comes from the memoirs of fellow insurrectionary Philippe Buonarroti, *Buonarroti's History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* (H. Hetherington 1836), 153.

13. *Ibid.*, 101.

14. *Ibid.*, 166, 202–4.

15. *Ibid.*, 210.

16. Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 43.

This religious and moral inheritance continued to influence the Communist League, even after Weitling's departure, evidenced by the fact that the predecessor to the *Communist Manifesto* and the first programmatic statement of the League, Engels' "Draft of the Communist Confession of Faith", was modelled on a catechism. But despite this rhetorical form, by the time they entered the league, Marx and Engels had developed both independently and together a potent theory of political action that extended the "critique of religion" of the Young Hegelians and transformed it into a critique of idealist and moralist politics altogether. In *The German Ideology*, they assert bluntly that "it is not consciousness which determines life but life which determines consciousness", rejecting any account of revolution that begins with moral education or consciousness-raising.¹⁷ "Morality, religion, metaphysics" and other "phantoms formed in the brains of man" are "sublimates of their material life process", and therefore a politics that begins with these is doomed to failure, analogised, in their preface to the book, to the actions of "a valiant fellow [who] had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they possess the *idea of gravity*".¹⁸ Historical change occurs, not as the result of various forms of "self-consciousness" as their post-Hegelian antagonists had it, but from the antagonistic "interests" that attend the division of labour and the unequal portioning out of the products of labour. Communism is only possible on the basis of these interests, and specifically, the interest-motivated action of those whom the capitalist mode of production has rendered propertyless. In opposition to the moral communisms and egalitarian political projects of their peers and predecessors, Marx and Engels declare grandly that "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things".¹⁹

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels further ground this real movement in the class *interests* of the proletariat, interests determined by the development of "bourgeois society". I have so far avoided using the term "self-interest" (often taken as synonymous with interest as such) largely because I want it to be understood as a specific, atomised form that interest can take, one effected in particular

17. Marx, *The German Ideology* (MECW 5), 42.

18. *Ibid.*, 42, 30.

19. *Ibid.*, 57.

by the individualising, competitive relations of capitalist society. Intriguingly, Marx and Engels never speak, in the *Communist Manifesto*, of “self-interest” as a characteristic of proletarian activity. Rather, the term is reserved for the bourgeoisie, which has “pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’”²⁰

We might read these famous lines as implying that the rule of the bourgeoisie has meant the universalisation of self-interest among all members of bourgeois society, including proletarians, submerged equally in the “icy waters of egotistical calculation”, and indeed Marx and Engels later describe the proletariat during the early stages of capitalism as an “incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by competition”. But the centrifugal forces of competition that divide the proletariat are counterbalanced by the centralising development of industry, which gathers the dispersed proletarians and forms them into “compact bodies.”²¹ As capitalism develops, “the various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour.”²² In other words, for the proletariat, class interest and individual interest are increasingly identical:

The organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier. It compels legislative recognition of the particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions among the bourgeoisie itself.²³

The arc of history bends toward the unification of the interests of the working class, whereas divisions among the bourgeoisie are, it would seem, less easy to overcome. Marx and Engels invert the argument about and from self-interest that one finds in Adam Smith, in which the pursuit of self-interest by individual capitalists redounds to the benefit of all. For Smith, it is the capitalist class which finds

20. Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 222.

21. *Ibid.*, 229.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 230

self-interest and collective interest identical. But for Marx and Engels — and this is the basis of Marx’s many attempts to explain crisis and the crisis-generating aspects of capitalism — such self-interested action ultimately erodes the conditions of possibility for capitalists, “cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products.”²⁴ Here this self-undermining character of capitalism is largely about the political force of a proletarian class that capitalist development unifies but the same argument will later be used to explain how the falling rate of profit results from the profit-seeking behaviour of individual capitalists, to name just one example.

Grounded in a theory of interest-based action, the “materialist conception of history” of Marx and Engels shows little need for pedagogical or pastoral supplement. This is not to say that there is no place for organisation or the elaboration of ideas; rather, these are treated as expressions of class struggle. As they write, “The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.”²⁵

25. *Ibid.*, 234.

Paradoxes of Self-Interest

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels assert that as the social division of labour develops, so too does an opposition between individual and collective interest. From here emerges their theory of the state, based in part on the earlier works of political philosophy written by Marx, such as “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” and “On the Jewish Question”. The state, for Marx and Engels, is a usurpation of the common interest: under conditions of “contradiction between the particular and the common interests, the common interest assumes an independent form as the *state*, which is divorced from the real individual and collective interests, and at the same time as illusory community, always based, however, on the real ties existing in every family conglomeration and tribal conglomeration — such as flesh and blood, language, division of labour on a larger scale, and other interests.”²⁶ The state exists as a

26. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 52.

false representation of common interest because it allows for the universalisation of the particular interests of the ruling class. The proletariat, however, is unique among classes in that its particular interests really *are* universal, since there is no way for it to emancipate itself without abolishing classes and thereby itself. The reasons Marx and Engels advance for this special proletarian destiny are multiple: for one, as we've seen, historical experience has brought proletarians together in workplaces where the divisions between them are levelled (as deskilling progresses, so too is there a universalisation of experience, ability, and consequently interest). Marx also seems to suggest, in his early writings on right and the state, that proletarian struggles exhibit a "universal character" inasmuch as they focus on forms of "universal suffering" and needs shared by all humans (such as the need for food and shelter): the wrong that the proletariat suffers therefore is not "a particular wrong" but "wrong in general".²⁷

In other words, proletarian struggles are rooted in the basic and materialist motives described above. There is also, finally, a simple numerical argument: ruling classes are, by definition, minorities. As they write in the *Manifesto*, "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority".²⁸ A revolution in the interest of the "immense majority" can institute a new class rule only by betraying its *raison d'être*; it must abolish classes.

Even though most Marxists will off-handedly speak of class interests, few have attempted to elaborate on or develop any theory of interests, instead turning to confused concepts such as "consciousness" or "ideology" or black boxing the subjects of class struggle altogether. Those who have attempted to develop the theory, such as the writers associated with Analytical Marxism have frequently come to conclusions rather markedly different than Marx and Engels, insisting that the division between individual and collective interest is far more tenacious than originally thought. While most of so-called Western Marxism pursued different themes, the writers willing to investigate the theory of interest were those who mostly rejected core tenets of Marx's thought (especially his value theory) and displayed some

27. Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' in *Early Writings* (1992), 256.

28. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 232.

sympathy for the methodologies if not the motives of neoclassical economics, game theory in particular.²⁹ The key text for left-wing and Marxist game theory is probably Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*. Though Olson is by no means a Marxist, and in fact elaborates his theory as a critique of Marx's conclusions, the problems that he poses and the conclusions he reaches strongly influence later Marxist investigations of the problem of class interest. Arguing against thinkers such as C. Wright Mills who, noting the relative lack of class struggle around them, concluded that people must not be aware of or capable of acting on their class interests, Olson claims instead that Marx was right to conclude that people are motivated by their interests but wrong to think that this will lead to collective action. "Class oriented action will not occur", Olson writes bluntly, "if the individuals that make up a class act rationally".³⁰ This is because, for Olson, group interests and individual interests diverge in cases where the group is sufficiently large or heterogeneous. Unlike the results of most individual actions (seeking out a better job, for example), actions by groups in pursuit of class interests produce, in most cases, benefits that accrue to all members of the class, whether or not those members participate in group action (think, here, of a campaign to raise the minimum wage or reduce taxes). There is thus a free-rider problem in the case of such class benefits. If individuals truly are motivated by self-interest alone, then they will conclude that it is better for them simply to take whatever benefits accrue to them from the actions of others rather than to suffer the costs of action themselves. The larger the group, Olson argues, the more likely the individual will reason thus, since in the cases of large groups the added benefit of any individual contribution to the group effort is negligible. What does it matter if I, or any one person, goes to the protest, attends the meeting, donates to the strike fund? When the group actions involve thousands or tens of thousands of people, the answer is: very little. Olson defines the matter in mathematically precise terms: if individuals will only find it rational to contribute to group efforts where the benefits from their contribution are greater than their costs, then this means that individuals will

29. Though as we will see, this literature depends upon a number of false assumptions and needless methodological reductions, it deserves serious readers, not least of all for its willingness to investigate questions others had been scared away from by antihumanist dogmatism.

30. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard University Press 1971), 105.

participate only when the fraction of the group benefit they receive is larger than the ratio of their costs to total group benefits. As groups increase in size, such a criterion becomes much more difficult to meet, except in cases where very minimal costs produce very large benefits.³¹ Otherwise, the effects of any extra individual effort will be too small to encourage participation. Whereas Marx thought optimising behaviour on the part of capitalists would lead to suboptimal outcomes for the capitalist class, Olson extends such a view to *all classes*.

As a left-wing institutionalist who worked for a period in the Johnson administration, Olson was committed to finding a rational basis for such things as labour unions and the provision of public goods by a welfarist state. Olson's treatment of the problem of collective action leads him to conclude that large collectives as well as states need mechanisms to compel individuals to act in the collective interest, lest "suboptimal" conditions result. Since the dilemmas of collective action he describes will apply to large groups of capitalists as well as large groups of workers, he argues for the necessity of a state's right to tax (in order to pay for public goods that redound to the benefit of capitalists but which they would not individually pay for, as rational profit-maximisers) as well as the necessity of the closed shop, compulsory union dues, and legal enforcement of strikes, without which, in his argument, no large union can survive. Though he is a rationalist, and relies on a rather blunt, utilitarian view of human action, this leads him to declare the inevitability of the pastoral supplement if social reform is desired. (Indeed, he suggests that it is Trotsky and Lenin, rather than Marx, who correctly perceive the consequences of self-interested and rational action and develop a coherent theory therefrom).³² With Olson, we see an uneasy alliance between the rationalist approach, on the one hand, and the authoritarian or pedagogical approach on the other; if one concludes that rational, self-interested actors can only produce suboptimal outcomes — as Marx concluded of the bourgeoisie but not the proletariat — then one might decide, despite the rationalist anthropology, that a moral, ideological or authoritarian supplement is still necessary for social change. Though Olson figures social change along left-liberal and reformist lines, rather than revolutionary ones, many Marxists who attempt to elaborate on the Marxian

31. *Ibid.*, 22–43.

32. *Ibid.*, 106.

theory of interests in the wake of Olson's intervention will derive rather similar conclusions.

While most of Olson's Marxist interlocutors hail from the "Analytic Marxist" camp, the most interesting response may be that of Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal, who come to Olson from the Frankfurt School and Jurgen Habermas rather than John Nash and the RAND corporation. Olson actually offers two separate, though related, reasons why individual and collective interests diverge. Before a collective can even begin to act in an effective way, and before individuals can determine their level of participation, there must be an agreement about common objectives. Therefore, collective action involves fixed "costs of organisation" — investments of time and other resources — that must precede any action and any benefits.³³

These are separate from the costs of action itself, and as groups become more internally heterogeneous (something that is related to but not necessarily dependent on size) the costs of organisation will rise. This provides a second reason why many attempts at collective action fail, or never occur at all, and why the centralisation of power within collective institutions is necessary, since such institutions have the ability to unilaterally decide on goals and suspend interminable deliberations about what goals should be pursued.

In their text, "Two Logics of Collective Action", Offe and Wiesenthal expand on this second problem — the heterogeneity problem — and suggest that it is the real limit to proletarian action.³⁴ Olson does not differentiate between groups in terms of class, and his mathematical treatment of the "logic of collective action" provides as its fundamental model a scenario where individual capitalist firms, competing with each other and attempting to maximise profit, must decide whether to restrict output and therefore increase price or expand output and decrease price. Offe and Wiesenthal suggest that this model is inapposite to the situation workers face and that there is not a single logic of collective action, but rather two logics, a capitalist logic and a proletarian one. Whereas capitalists can translate all of their desires into money terms, needing nothing more than to find the optima of a production function, proletarian desires are heterogeneous (some workers prioritise better pay, others prioritise conditions, others still

33. *Ibid.*, 47.

34. Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal, 'Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form' in *Political Power and Social Theory* vol. 1 (JAI Press 1980), 67–115.

more flexible schedules, childcare, health insurance, pensions). Despite the insuperable nature of inter-capitalist competition, firms will find it easier to coordinate and decide on a unitary course of action through business associations because of their singleness of purpose: profit. Workers, on the other hand, will face very high costs of organisation. Though they acknowledge that the problem of size discussed by Olson affects proletarian organisations, such that union strength follows an “inverse U-curve”, reaching a maximum at a certain size and then falling after that, they also insist that proletarian and bourgeois organisations face entirely different dilemmas: because of the heterogeneity of individual interests, proletarian organisations must deal with problems that can’t be attributed to size alone. Regardless of their differences, Offe and Wiesenthal agree with Olson that effective proletarian class struggle cannot come about on the basis of interest-based action: “only to the extent that associations of the relatively powerless succeed in the formation of a collective identity, according to the standards of which these costs of organisation are subjectively deflated, can they hope to change the original power relation”.³⁵ Offe and Wiesenthal therefore add to Olson’s pastoral solution a pedagogical, subjectivising one: one must educate workers to understand the benefits of acting in the name of the collective good.

The structures of collective action described above are, as many will recognise, forms of the *prisoner’s dilemma*, which is in many regards the primary example for social science of a situation where rational, self-interested action produces outcomes that are inferior for everyone. To review: in the prisoner’s dilemma, two conspirators, arrested by the authorities, are offered their freedom if they agree to inform on their partner (to “defect”, in the language of the game). If one defects and the other cooperates, the defector will be set free and the cooperator will serve 5 years. If both defect, they will both serve 3 years. If both cooperate, they will serve 1 year. The best outcome, from the perspective of the *class of prisoners*, is mutual cooperation. The best outcome is not the rational outcome, however, if the prisoners individually evaluate their chances in the face of the likely actions of the other. Regardless of what the other does, their “best reply” as individuals is to defect, and thus mutual defection is an “equilibrium” point of the scenario. This is in some ways the model for the

profit-lowering effects of capitalist development Marx describes, the suboptimal outcomes of Olson’s unionists, and many other rational irrationalities besides. What the game presumes, however, is that there is no trust between the players, nor communication, nor any awareness of the history of play. It is a one-off event where both players are fully individuated within the solitary confinement of a depthless carceral reason. In scenarios where these relational and temporal assumptions are relaxed, the prisoner’s dilemma can become an *assurance game*—that is, a game where mutual cooperation is an equilibrium point. For Marx and for many Marxists, proletarian action was basically an assurance game, an iterative prisoner’s dilemma which, played enough times and under certain conditions, led to a cooperative equilibrium point. In other words, even if we assume entirely self-interested, rational proletarians, mutual cooperation will be the best result, given that they will find themselves within an environment and structure conducive to cooperation. Collective and individual interests merge.

However, as Olson and Offe and Wiesenthal demonstrate, when one moves from a bilateral to an n-sided situation, in which one confronts thousands or even millions of actors, assurance is a much more complicated matter. The effects of communication between the parties as well as the weight of history, in cases where past “play” is part of the information available to present players, creates essentially incalculable complexities. Here, organisations and political leaders (“political entrepreneurs” as they are called, chillingly, by some of Olson’s readers) leap into the breach, solving the communicative and deliberative problems of thousand-sided exchanges through unilateral action and centralised communication, transforming the prisoner’s dilemma environment through sanctions and threats of sanction that then make cooperation rational. Organisations then become second-order agents confronting second-order social dilemmas, their ability to act conditioned by the size of their membership but also its militancy. Offe and Wiesenthal draw rather gloomy conclusions from these second-order effects, showing how proletarian organisations are forced into contradictory behaviour as a result of the structures in which they find themselves: on the one hand, they must demonstrate their *potential* to harm the class of capitalists through the use of the strike weapon, which requires a highly active membership; on the other

hand, in order to wrest concessions from the capitalist class they must use the strike weapon sparingly, and this requires a disciplined membership, one willing to fall in line with leadership. But such discipline will ultimately produce disaffected and passive unionists, unable to mobilise for strike when necessary. Adam Przeworski, in his use of game theory to treat class organisations, confronts a similar dilemma by way of different premises. In the essays included in *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, one of the most thoroughgoing and explicit attempts to create a mathematically rigorous Marxian game theory, Przeworski argues that, if the goal of class organisations is to conquer electoral power (as was the case for social democracy) then they will need to maximise their membership in order to achieve this aim.³⁶ But in almost all countries, the proletarian vote was never large enough for proletarian parties to conquer electoral power on their own, unless they formed coalitions with other parties and other class fractions. Therefore, proletarian parties were forced to either forsake the conquest of electoral power or seek out participants from other classes, where pursuit of the latter would require weakening the class program of the party. But this weakening would, in turn, dissolve proletarian identification with the party, and undermine the basis of proletarian belonging as such, leading proletarians to seek out other parties who might represent their interests on the basis of other forms of identification: Catholicism, or whiteness, for example. The result was failure either way. Whereas Mancur Olson thought that organisational or institutional agency might emend the problems caused by individual rationality and choice, Offe and Wiesenthal and Przeworski insist that those problems make themselves felt as constraints upon the action of organisations as well. The pedagogical and authoritarian supplements might be necessary to see any results at all, but they are incapable of fully solving the problem. As we will see, it is in fact much worse than that, and these supplements not only fail but in fact exacerbate the problem.

36. Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press 1985), 99–128.

IS IT REASONABLE TO REVOLT?

Both Przeworski's *Capitalism and Social Democracy* and Offe and Wiesenthal's "Two Logics of Collective Action" are crucial sources for

the important essay on the workers' movement, "A History of Separation", written by the Endnotes collective and published in their fourth issue.³⁷ There, the authors tell the story of a workers' movement continuously hobbled by the opposition between individual and collective interests. For Endnotes the question of class identity revolves around the problem of interest. In their view, the formation of a working-class "identity" was a way for the workers' movement to bridge, however shakily, the gap between the serial and collective interests. This involved the sort of pedagogical and moral (as well as pastoral) solutions described above. Collective interest was, therefore, mostly a construct: "Insofar as they made sacrifices in the name of the labour movement, workers generally were not acting in their immediate interest. To say that they affirmed a shared identity is to say that the movement succeeded in convincing workers to suspend their interests as isolated sellers in a competitive labour market, and, instead to act out of a *commitment* to the collective project of the labour movement". This is because, contrary to the predictions of Marx and Engels described above, the deskilling dynamic of the factory system did not effectively level the differences between proletarian factions; fragmenting forces at work in labour markets, commodity markets, and neighbourhoods nullified whatever fragile unity might have emerged in the workplace, and even there difference among workers according to skill, race, and gender remained far more tenacious than expected. Whatever weak, ideological and tentative unity did exist had to be "cobbled together" out of local organisations, and enforced by disciplinary structures that definitionally excluded proletarians who did not conform to the working-class norms (because they were drunks, or black, or shirkers.)

Endnotes is clear that this identity wasn't unilaterally "imposed" by working-class leaders, as some readings of Olson and some variants of the pastoral solution might imagine:

To the extent that workers were willing to believe that having solidarity was morally necessary, they were able to realise — partially and fitfully — the slogan "an injury to one is an injury to all". The phrase never described a preexisting truth about the working class; it was, instead, an ethical injunction.

37. Endnotes, 'A History of Separation' *Endnotes 4* (2015).

But insofar as workers accepted this injunction, their interests as *individuals* began to change: those interests were simplified, narrowed or even wholly redefined, but also partially fulfilled. By this means, competition between workers was muted, but only for as long as the shared ethic and identity could be maintained.³⁸ 38. *Ibid.*, 100.

Not an imposition, then, but a process of re-education and belief in which many workers willingly participated, offering their sacrifice and commitment, the effect of which was to establish in some limited manner a real rather than merely ideological bridge between individual and collective interest. For many of the writers discussed above, transformation of desire through education or compulsion is nothing less than the very basis of any radical transformation of society, the *sine qua non* of both reform and (for those who think it possible), revolution. Offe and Wiesenthal or Przeworski may, as Marxists, lament the untenability of Marx's view of proletarians interest, individual and collective at once, and only with a certain chagrin accept the conclusions they reach, that self-interested action by proletarians will scuttle any attempt at collective action, all things being equal, but they suggest that this is simply what we have to work with, and if we seek a different world then we must be clear about what such a search entails. There is no possibility of serial interests converging with collective interest except through the intervention of educators, leaders, or institutions.

Given their reliance on these sources, a reader may wonder whether or not Endnotes is also pessimistic in this way, and similarly resigned to the necessity of the pedagogical or pastoral approach. Those of us familiar with their work, and in particular with the positions taken in the two companion pieces to "A History of Separation" — "The Holding Pattern" and "Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture" — will know that they are actually considerably more optimistic about self-organisation than the writers referenced above. Toward the end of "A History of Separation", they acknowledge a different perspective on the unfolding of individual and collective interest, describing how, in opposition to the forgeries and falsifications of the collective worker, there may emerge a "real unity of the class... forged in self-organised struggle, when workers overcome their atomisation by creatively

constructing a new basis for collective activity".³⁹ Elsewhere, Endnotes describes this self-organisation as a cooperative solution to the prisoner's dilemma scenarios described in Olson and elsewhere, writing that "the seemingly indissoluble problem of struggle is finally solved only by struggle itself. Computationally, this solution can be described as the possible result of an iterated prisoners' dilemma".⁴⁰ As long as capitalism persists, whatever unifications are produced as a result of struggles will be fragile, transitory. In a communist revolution, however, proletarians produce a "real unification" that is at the same time an abolition of their status as proletarians, since they must become "the beyond of this society by relating to one another, materially, outside of the terms of the class relation".⁴¹ One definition of a classless society is one in which there is no longer an opposition between individual and collective interest (which is not to imply that interests never come into conflict). One of the main motivations of this essay is to further theorise the passage from the situation described in most of "A History of Separation" to the one hinted at in "Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture".

Part of our task must be to think through the many different forms in which class struggle appears. When applied to the entire class of proletarians, the Wobbly maxim "an injury to one is an injury to all" indeed must remain mere ethical attitude, a transformation of Kant's categorical imperative into the indicative mood, describing an idealised condition of maximum solidarity and universal experience. But the phrase also emerges, I think, as an extrapolation from struggles where the "one" and the "all" do converge, and where the strength and safety of numbers alone is enough to ensure collective action, independent of moral imperative. This convergence depends partly on the size of the group concerned: it occurs with struggles on the scale of the enterprise or neighbourhood, rather than industrial sector or province, because as Olson and others have demonstrated, at such scales the consequences of one's action or inaction are immediately apparent. There is, also, perhaps more importantly the question of the type of struggle under consideration. In many conditions, people are attacked as a group rather than as individuals. If an employer threatens uniform reduction in wages, workers will find it

39. *Ibid.*, 165.

40. Endnotes, 'Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture' *Endnotes 3* (2010).

41. Endnotes, 'The Holding Pattern' *Endnotes 3* (2010).

advantageous to resist together, since they are strongest that way. In this case, interests converge because of the defensive nature of the struggle and the collectivising character of the attack. Even in conditions where the attack abstracts from the group as a whole, singling out particular individuals, responding en masse may be the best response. Workers may conclude it's in their advantage to oppose the layoff of five of their fellow workers if they think it possible that a subsequent round of layoffs will target them (this indirect self-interest, in which one recognises one's dependence on the well-being of the other, is often called "enlightened self-interest"). In such a case, injury to the other promises the threat of injury to the self, and thus the maxim holds true beyond whatever moral power it may have. In the context of the workers' movement more generally, collective action was not always and only a matter of sacrifice and commitment; in many cases, there were practical and material benefits to joining the union or class party. As Endnotes indicates, the moral redefinition of interests allowed for their "partial" fulfilment. The paradox of the prisoner's dilemma is that the "irrational", morality-based or fanatical actions of some can change the nature of the interaction such that, for subsequent participants, cooperation appears as a real solution, one that can be arrived at through self-interested calculation alone. For those first dozen or so people, organising the union or the political organisation might have been a matter of sacrifice and political passion entirely, with the risks outweighing whatever meagre benefits they would see, but once the organisation has been formed, joining it may be the most logical choice of all, a clear pathway to higher wages and better working conditions.

None of this contradicts the main point of Endnotes' history, which is that the trajectory of capitalist development did more to atomise and fragment proletarians than it did to unify them. As we have seen, though, this history and the problems it introduces continues to lead many to conclude that neither reform nor revolution can occur independent of pastoral and pedagogical supplement. If, by contrast, we imagine revolution as the unfolding of proletarian self-organisation, as a solution to the problem of collective action that emerges as a consequence of struggle itself, then it's necessary to specify as clearly as possible the determinants that lead to this overcoming or, alternately, to the opposition of serial and collective interest. Some

of these determinants have already been mentioned: the size of the collective involved and its homogeneity or heterogeneity; whether the struggle is defensive or offensive, concerned with survival or increased well-being; whether the threat is individualising or collectivising. Struggles have different temporalities, too: they can be immediate or open-ended; focused on short-term or long-term goals; they can feature smooth, gradual change or sudden discontinuities. The formal models discussed above all assume a type of class struggle mediated by national trade unions or class parties, and oriented toward gradual improvements in proletarian welfare through bilateral negotiations. But this is only one of the many forms proletarian struggle can take, and the dilemmas of collective action would appear very different if these authors had taken a riot, a prison revolt, or guerrilla warfare as their foundational example.

Formal, game-theoretic analysis gravitates toward the trade union model, in part, because it can be treated with the techniques of neoclassical economics. Many of the models of rational, interest-based action that are available essentially assume, by treating choices as *purchases*, that interest is more or less monetary and every need can be given a price, with costs and benefits evaluated in directly monetary terms. This is where, despite the restriction of their own models to the social democratic scenario, Offe and Wieselthaler offer an important criticism of the literature on the logic of collective action, arguing that such reductions conflate a proletarian logic of collective action with a bourgeois one. For capitalists, interest is more or less directly correlated with *interest rate*; capitalists seek to maximise returns on investment, and the interest rate measures the guarantees capitalists would need to decide to invest in a particular endeavor, given the risks. To be sure, inasmuch as proletarians are market-dependent, and some large portion (but not all) of their needs accessible only through money, they also participate in optimising logics. The organisation of capitalist society seeks to monetise and quantify proletarian interest as much as possible, and this is one way to understand what the wage is, a machine for disciplining and conditioning proletarian reason such that it remains congruent with the requirements of capitalist reproduction. The dispiriting conclusions of Mancur Olson and Adam Przeworski result, in part, from the narrow definition of interest with which they begin, and from their assumption

that the work of subsuming proletarian need under money has been completed.

A fine example of the limits that these assumptions introduce is Przeworski's attempt, with Michael Wallerstein, to model class struggle as a pair of simultaneous equations for labour and capital, where labour chooses the wage rate (by its degree of militancy) and capital determines the rate of investment (by virtue of its property rights).⁴²

Since the wage rate affects profit, and the degree of investment affects wages, each actor is forced to maximise an equation (for wages and consumable revenue, respectively) where they control one key variable and their antagonist controls the other. While workers in this scenario are naturally inclined to increase militancy as much as possible and therefore increase their consumption, doing so will provoke disinvestment, and thus, counter-productively, lower future wages. Capitalists, for their part, must reinvest a large enough share of their returns lest they provoke a degree of militancy which will lower the rate of profit. In such a scenario, the rational strategies that the actors will pursue depend not only upon the productivity of capital but also the degree of certainty that they hold about the future. If both sides are reasonably certain that the present balance of militancy and investment will hold far into the future, then the interdependence of the actors will have a moderating influence, introducing negative feedback that counteracts any increase in militancy or disinvestment. The main thrust of this argument is to show that workers will never choose to move in the direction of total expropriation and seizure of the whole sum of the social product, because any steps in that direction will produce capital flight that will immediately lower workers' future consumption. As a critique of socialisms that imagine a gradual process of socialisation mediated by trade unions and workers' parties, this scenario is absolutely correct, and grasps a key aspect of the problem for such attempts to maximise workers' welfare: their dependence upon a course of accumulation control over which lies entirely in the hands of capitalists. The social democratic project finds itself confronted with an uncrossable "valley of transition", in which deteriorating economic fundamentals make any passage toward eventual improvements impossible if undertaken

42. Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, 151–204; 'Workers' Welfare and the Socialization of Capital' in Michael Taylor, ed., *Rationality and Revolution: Studies in Marxism and Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

on a slow, step-by-step basis. As Offe and Wieselthel themselves note, dependence upon the rate of investment will mean that workers' organisation must be as concerned about the health of capitalists as they must be about workers' welfare.

Przeworski and Wallerstein arrive at their conclusions in large part because of the narrowness of their assumptions, excluding all sorts of revolutionary projects and motivations that don't fit the neo-classical lineaments of their model. For instance, it is not at all clear that we can model the strategic choices of proletarians in terms of an attempt to maximise future value. Proletarian uncertainty is here defined explicitly as a "discount rate" — that is, an *interest rate*. Workers and capitalists discount (or devalue) future revenue relative to present revenue according to their sense of how likely present arrangements are to continue on the same footing. Not only does this form of reasoning assume the translatability of proletarian needs into money terms pure and simple, but it also requires a prospective, future-oriented, and mathematical rationality. To be sure, most people who live in capitalism understand that money which is not spent but invested grows in value, and capitalism offers the working class options for such investment in the form of pensions, real estate equity, mutual funds and the like, but Przeworski and Wallerstein are imagining a fairly elaborate mathematical reasoning, one based on an actor peering far into the future. Given the inherent complexity and difficulty of proletarian life, these do not seem reasonable assumptions about the strategies proletarians might pursue, even if we agreed to limit welfare to money alone. Notably, however, Przeworski and Wallerstein do not, however, imagine these strategies as pursued by *individual* proletarians but rather by class organisations: the examples the writers give are of compromises and strategies such as the Matignon agreement signed by Léon Blum's Popular Front government or the pegging of wages to prices by US trade unions and employers in the 1950s and 1960s. In such cases, one can expect highly future-oriented, mathematically sophisticated reasoning by strategic actors, but this is to assume class struggle will proceed along a technocratic path dominated by class institutions. The writers therefore exclude from consideration any instance where revolution unfolds as the result of the self-organised activity by proletarians who respond to local conditions and immediate objectives and take actions that

are, as often as not, opposed by the various class organisations that would represent them and their interests. Nearly all revolutions unfold, at least initially, in this way, as a fragmented field of actions both uncoordinated and contradictory. We see therefore how formal, mathematical representation, in theory, of class interests by writers like Przeworski and Wallerstein bears some relationship to the substitutionist representation of those interests in practice, by parties and trade unions. In both cases, the heterogeneity of proletarian need must be doused in the universal solvent of money, and where proletarian reason might lead to dangerous and unreasonable conclusions, such as increased militancy, a moderating form of highly prospective and formal rationality must be asserted. Przeworski and Wallerstein state their assumptions about the rational conclusions of proletarian actors as follows: “workers consent to the perpetuation of profit as an institution in exchange for the prospect of improving their material well-being in the future. In terms of such a compromise capitalists retain the capacity to withhold a part of the product because the profit they appropriate is expected by workers to be saved, invested, transformed into productive potential, and partly redistributed as gains to workers”.⁴³ The voice we hear in such a passage is clearly not the interests of workers as they are, as they might *present* themselves to us, but the interests of workers as ventriloquised, as *represented* by class organisations.

43. Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, 180.

BEYOND SELF-INTEREST

What, then, can we say about motives, self-interest, and rationality, if models such as these fail? Though not ultimately usable for the purposes of our investigation, recent work within game theory has attempted to use its techniques while abandoning some of its more untenable assumptions about human motivation. Samuel Bowles, for example, has attempted to develop game theoretic models independently of what he describes as the “Walrasian” paradigm, where “individuals choose actions based on the far-sighted evaluations of their consequences” in accord with “preferences that are self-regarding and exogenously determined”.⁴⁴ Bowles offers a much looser sense of motivated action and a very different kind of rationality than, for

instance, Przeworski.⁴⁵ In his models, “individuals intentionally pursue their objectives, but they do this more often by drawing on a limited repertoire of behavioural responses to past experience than by engaging in the cognitively demanding forward-looking optimising processes assumed by the Walrasian approach and by much of classical game theory”.⁴⁶ In other words, the version of game theory that Bowles employs— which he calls *evolutionary game theory*— “assumes that people act with limited information about the consequences of their actions, and that they update their beliefs by trial-and-error methods using local knowledge based on their own and others recent past experience”.⁴⁷ Rather than simply trying to find equilibrium states, and imagining that society conforms to the arrangements at such points, the evolutionary approach stresses the importance of the *order of play* and the temporal sequence leading to such equilibria. Bowles emphasises out-of-equilibrium dynamics and the importance of understanding the steps that lead to any stable point. History matters, in other words, not only as knowledge that actors draw upon in making their decisions (unlike the ahistorical, purely rational actions of the prisoners in a prisoner’s dilemma game) but also as structure, as the set of past outcomes that, in persisting, condition present action. Actions are “path-dependent”. Equilibria may exist but be “evolutionarily irrelevant”— that is, not attainable by any of the paths available to actors. The relevance of this line of thinking to an account of revolutionary transformation is clear. The old, Marxist critique of “utopian socialism” can be rewritten in evolutionary terms. That a utopia is imaginable, and that it would be a workable arrangement of human affairs means nothing if one cannot demonstrate how it might result from the conflicts and motivated actions in the here and now, from the “real movement” of history.

The evolutionary approach to game theory began with early attempts to explain the cooperative behaviour displayed by humans and animals. Since the time of Darwin, many biologists had assumed that cooperation observed in nature had to do with the perpetuation of the genetic material which coded for it.⁴⁸ Natural selection would cultivate

44. Samuel Bowles, *Microeconomics: Behavior, Institutions, and Evolution* (Princeton University Press 2004), 8.

45. We might call this reason, in the sense that involves if-then reasoning, and reserve the term rationality for the more restrictive conceptualisation of Przeworski and others.

46. Bowles, *Microeconomics*, 10.

47. *Ibid.*, 11.

the expression of altruistic “genes” in cases where such behaviour helped to preserve closely-related kin and therefore, by extension, the genetic material that codes for it. And yet, numerous examples of altruistic behaviour cannot be made sense of by kinship theory: how to explain cooperation between species, or cooperation between individuals who share too little genetic material for kinship benefits? The prisoner’s dilemma scenario establishes a high hurdle for such explanation, since cooperation must benefit not only the group (as it most obviously will) but the individuals displaying cooperative behaviour. The seminal breakthrough was the publication by Robert Axelrod and William Hamilton of “The Evolution of Cooperation” which met the challenges of the prisoner’s dilemma directly by establishing the conditions for the “initiation of cooperation from a previously asocial state”.⁴⁹ Axelrod and Hamilton investigate the “iterative prisoner’s dilemma” which Endnotes refers to, examining how through a series of encounters a cooperative strategy might emerge and prevail. In such cases, the best strategy is neither “always defect” nor “always cooperate” but rather “Tit for Tat”, where the player cooperates on the first turn and then mirrors the other player’s previous move on every other turn. In the simulations that Axelrod and Hamilton ran, Tit for Tat not only scored better than other strategies but, in games where the distribution of strategies in a particular round was tied to the payoffs for those strategies in the previous round — i.e., where the number of players using Tit for Tat was proportional to the total payoff for such players — Tit for Tat eventually went to “fixation”, meaning every player was using Tit for Tat and thus every player was cooperating all the time. This is a measure of the “robustness” of the strategy, or how easily it spreads. In addition to “robustness”, Axelrod and Hamilton add two other measures necessary to determine the probable success of a strategy: “stability” and “initial viability”. Tit for Tat is stable because the emergence of players using another strategy will not displace it as the dominant strategy. Initial viability is a bit more complicated. Tit for Tat can take over whenever there is a significant clustering of people willing to employ the scenario. In an evolutionary scenario, this can happen with kinship effects, but Bowles and Gintis provide another explanation for such initial viability among humans. Noting that bands of early

48. R. Axelrod and W. D. Hamilton, ‘The Evolution of Cooperation’ *Science* vol. 211 no. 4489 (1981): 1391.

49. *Ibid.*

humans were probably too large for such kinship effects to establish initial viability, they propose, instead, that intense inter-band violence and competition for resources created a situation in which those groups which had a high number of altruists (people willing to risk suffering and death for their group) would fare better on the field of battle, and thus their genetic material would be conserved. Whether true or not, the natural historical irony here is impressive. Given the violent crises from which revolutions emerge, we may want to hold in mind the idea that altruistic human behaviour arose as a consequence of inter-group violence.

Tit for Tat is an example of what is called “reciprocal altruism”, which means that other-regarding behaviour is ultimately compatible with self-interest and self-preservation, since the results for the individual are good in the long run. In other words, Tit for Tat does not require humans to be innately altruistic. This is probably how Marx and Engels conceived of not only the class interests of the proletariat but also a communism in which “the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all”. Bowles and Gintis, however, find examples of “other-regarding” and altruistic behaviour far beyond the reciprocal case. In a survey of far-ranging studies undertaken with people in numerous cultural contexts, Bowles and Gintis find that people act with an eye to the benefit of others even when there’s no chance that such action will ultimately benefit them. People generally cooperate in the prisoner’s dilemma, even when it’s a one-off game and they’ll never encounter their partner again. Furthermore, people seem not only to value the well-being of others (beyond family and kin) but also display a distaste for inequality and unfairness: they will give up something to punish those who exploit others and they appear to value this punishment for its own sake and not just its ability to ultimately improve their lot through indirect effects. Strictly egoistic behaviour seems to be largely an artefact of certain situations and relations. In an n-dimensional version of the prisoner’s dilemma — called the public goods game — people conform to the Olson scenario eventually, over time, as a small number of defectors eventually lead people to conclude that cooperation means they are simply being exploited. This helps us understand how the self-interested behaviour we observe in capitalism is a product of wage and market and the individualising structure of modern life, rather than the other way around.

None of this implies that people sacrifice themselves body and soul to the common good; the well-being of others and equality are values in and of themselves, but by and large people are only willing to give up a certain amount for such principles. If given a magic wand with which they could heal a terminally ill stranger, few people would not do so, if their only cost was the time it took to wave the wand in the air and repeat some magic words. This alone shows that people are not indifferent to the suffering of others. But now, imagine what happens if we increase the cost for the altruist: use of the wand now requires some sacrifice. One can cure the stranger but only if one agrees to go a week without visiting one's lover, to spend a few hours filling out paperwork, or drink tea rather than coffee for the rest of the month. The costs most people are willing to assume in such a situation are not zero, it seems safe to say, but they are also probably not very high. The experiments Bowles and Gintis cite and construct, we should note, involve relatively low stakes. The point for us is that there are situations, revolutionary situations in particular, in which "social" rather "selfish" preferences, can flourish, but there are also situations which crush them. Furthermore, the criteria that evolutionary game theory hands down—robustness, stability, initial viability—are a good shorthand for the conditions which communist practices will have to satisfy. They must emerge, they must flourish, and they must repel more or less all subsequent attempts to repel them. Communism would be a situation in which the opposition between social and selfish preference has been undone, where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. We need not have anything to say about human genetic evolution, of course, nor should we accept the idea that communism relies on the behavioural characteristics of individuals rather than the practices that emerge between them. The evolutionary approach succeeds by thinking the problem of change, but along with the Walrasian paradigm there is still a focus on the micro-economic, on iterative, dyadic encounters, that may not serve to capture the complex, many-sided unfolding of motive and determination in revolutionary situations that involve both individual and collective decision making. Nonetheless, we can summarise the value of the approach of Bowles and others: its emphasis on equilibrium state as destination rather than origin and its willingness to think through the problems of path-dependency; its elaboration of the

criteria of robustness, stability, and initial viability; its reminder that egoism and altruism are, to some degree, the results of social structure rather than expressions of human essence and, in any case, only in opposition within certain constraints; and finally, its reminder that group size matters, especially for producing conditions of reciprocity.

TOWARD A THEORY OF REVOLUTIONARY MOTIVES

We now have in place a number of key ingredients for a theory of revolutionary motives. Motives are, let's recall, different from beliefs and ideas, and cannot be subsumed by a theory of ideology, even where such a theory, as in Althusser, sees ideology as the product of particular material institutions and their power to compel action. Motives emanate from underlying needs and desires, and while in the long-term these may be conditioned, formed or generated by social structure, the capitalist institutions cannot compel behaviour through a change of motives. Rather, they must act through a modification of beliefs or ideas about how such motives must be realised. Two proletarians with the same motives, for example, may behave differently for the simple reason that they have different beliefs about the consequences of their actions. The pastoral and pedagogical approaches to revolution often confuse motives with ideology, and think that the former can be educated or transformed in the same manner as the latter. But it is very difficult to educate people's most fundamental desires. One cannot easily educate away, for instance, one's desire to be fed, housed, clothed. A revolutionary theory must work with people's motives, with desires as they are. Nonetheless, a theory of motives does not imply that revolutionary action is reflexive and instinctual, a blind expression of immutable necessity. We should reject what E. P. Thompson called the "spasmodic" view of human action, in which collective action is a "simple response to economic stimuli" and "compulsive, rather than self-conscious or self-activating".⁵⁰

Motives manifest as tendency, on average and in the long-run, and since the consequences of action are unclear, motives unfold through forms of deliberation, reflection and collective discussion. The convergence of proletarian motives (not to mention the motives of other classes) is never a given, despite sometimes

50. E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' *Past & Present* vol. 50 no. 1 (1971), 76.

optimistic accounts. In certain situations, individual interests oppose collective interests, not because of an inherent egoism but because of the atomising, competition-inducing character of the wage relation, the money-form, and the fragmentation of the labour process and social reproduction. Capitalist society is structured so as to inhibit the formation of collective interests at any sort of scale. Whether or not such a collectivity emerges has to do with a number of factors, as noted previously. To recapitulate, the size of the group and the degree of its heterogeneity matters, with smaller and more heterogeneous groups finding convergence easier. Defensive struggles seem to have an easier time than offensive struggles, and this seems to depend on whether or not the character of the threat is individualising or collectivising; defensive struggles also often focus on rights and privileges that already have a clear subject, whereas struggles for gains or changes not yet achieved have to call a group into being. Struggles have different temporalities, too: they can be immediate or open-ended; they can have short-term goals or long-term goals or no clear goals whatsoever; they can feature smooth, gradual change or jagged discontinuity. The temporality of struggle is, by and large, irreversible, exhibiting a strong degree of path-dependency such that one has to consider the question of viability from given historical conditions and not simply in general. There are all manner of social arrangements incapable of any existence beyond the blackboard. Furthermore, different tactics and strategies may require different degrees of collectivisation: labour organising by way of the strike weapon, riots, and guerrilla warfare will require different degrees of convergence.

As stated earlier, a theory of revolutionary motives is different from a theory of motives in general. A theory of revolutionary motives is concerned with motives that are basic, elemental, and common and operates with the assumption that, in revolutionary situations, these become the basis for collective action. A theory of revolutionary motives is different in this way, from the concept of motive one finds in the criminal courtroom or in literary criticism. In the court, motive is the soul of incriminating evidence; it is what gives forensic shape to the constellation of empirical and pseudo-empirical observations that prosecutors must use to convict defendants. It is an absent cause, rarely observed directly, endowing with meaning the actions of the accused. In the novel and in drama, motive is the watermark that

guarantees the authenticity or coherence of a character, barely discernible between sentences or lines. Revolutionary motives are, on the other hand, the motives of the many. They may be individualising, but they individualise great masses of people. When we move from jury box to barricade, the question of motive is not why one did it but why one would. What convicts the defendant is the ground of the partisans' conviction—acting in common, without judge or jury, often requires laying bare those grounds. Such partisans do not compose a revolutionary "subject", nor much less a collective protagonist, except by the worst sorts of simplifications. Not only will the basic motives at play be multiple but the ideas about how to realise them, as well as the actions that follow from these ideas will be multiple, inasmuch as the partisans find themselves placed differently and confront different structures and constraints. A guiding assumption for most theorists of revolution is that the class of proletarians must unify itself before any revolutionary undertaking, overcoming its internal differences, in order to act decisively. If the goal is the overcoming of class society, however, such unification may be both unnecessary and counterproductive; counterproductive because it can end up hypostatising the class condition it should abolish and unnecessary because a many-sided fight, a situation of revolution inside revolution, can itself destabilise capitalism and provide the opening for communism to emerge. A theory of revolutionary motives will, ideally, help such partisans understand the plural field of revolutionary actions and its probable unfolding, understand their own and others' motivations. There is no singular protagonist, but there is a shared narrative: the revolution is an epic without heroes, a crime that, if successful, leaves behind no one who might judge it.

Reciprocity under Fire

Many treatments of motive attempt to explain the source of everyday behaviour, to tell us why a consumer may choose one commodity over another or why a worker may choose more free time instead of more money. For my part, I am only concerned with the motivated actions of people in exceptional situations of great social instability where the stakes are extraordinarily high. As such, I can leave undecided the question of whether or not any coherent economic or sociological

theory of motives can be developed from and for quotidian interactions. Revolutionary motives are not necessarily everyday motives, and what serves to explain one may be more or less useless in the case of the other. It is possible that many everyday actions and interactions are habitual or customary, unmotivated, and ungrounded. Riots, rebellions, uprisings, and revolutions, however, are extraordinary situations in which people can no longer rely on habit or custom, on conventional techniques for meeting their needs and getting through their day; they are forced to deliberate and strategise, individually or collectively, in order to meet basic needs. At the same time, these are situations of great optimism, in which the possibility of a total restructuring of society mobilises people's most profound desires, both for their own well-being and, beyond that, perhaps for the well-being of people in general.

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is unique, at least among philosophical treatment of motive, in its willingness to situate questions of collective interest and group formation in exceptional moments of crisis and insurrection. One of the key examples in his book is the storming of the Bastille, an event that transforms the atomised individuals of the working class districts of Paris into an "ensemble of solidarities" or *fused group*.⁵¹

For Sartre, group action occurs through the overcoming of "seriality", defined as the passive being of individuals as they are gathered into inert collectives, unified by and through their separation from each other. His primary example of seriality is a gathering of people waiting for a bus on a Parisian street corner.

They are a collective, in Sartre's terms, oriented by a common goal (to get on a bus and travel to their destination) but this by no means produces a practical unity. First off, they are set against each other by conditions of material scarcity: there are not enough spaces on the bus for each of them. At the same time, as generic individuals they confront "the impossibility of deciding which individuals are dispensable in terms of the intrinsic qualities of the individuals".⁵² Lest they descend into a war of all against all in the face of scarcity, some mechanism must be introduced which makes it possible to "differentiate every Other from Others without adding anything to his characteristic as *Other*". In the example of the bus stop,

51. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Verso 2004), 346.

52. *Ibid.*, 261.

this mechanism is the bus ticket which establishes their first come first serve right to a seat, but, as we learn elsewhere, market prices, gossip and radio broadcast can also serialise individuals quite effectively. In all his examples, worked matter as the residue of past labour (which Sartre calls the *practico-inert*) plays a role in determining the arbitrary orders and establishing the necessary conditions of scarcity which seriality presupposes. The technical characteristics of the bus and the abstract characteristics of the ticket together serialise individuals. The bus can only run so often and can only contain so many people; the tickets are identical and yet, at the same time, marked with a distinct number. Seriality is thus determined by objects but also by a *formula*, some way of ranking or otherwise dividing the members of the collective to assure their fungible atomisation, where "everyone is identical with the Other in so far as the others make him an Other acting on the Others".⁵³ One can know one's place in the line (n) only by taking count of every person before (n-1, n-2, ...) and after (n+1, n+2, ...).

53. *Ibid.*, 264.

Critique of Dialectical Reason provides an admirable account of the fusion of serialised and opposed interests in the heat of riot. Exchanges between potential insurgents and authorities have the effect of unifying an otherwise serialised crowd. In the breakdown that preceded the storming of the Bastille, for instance, the appearance of troops in the streets of Paris led people to loot the arsenals in the Tuileries as a defensive measure. Sartre is insistent that these were not group actions, but acts of "serial, defensive violence" motivated by *contagion* and *imitation*: "everyone was forced to arm himself by others' attempts to find arms, and everyone tried to get there before the Others because, in the context of this new scarcity, everyone's attempt to get a rifle became for the Others the risk of remaining unarmed".⁵⁴ However, what the authorities saw in the looting of the Tuileries was that "the people of Paris armed themselves against the king". This violent designation as enemy had the effect of unifying Parisians after the fact. As the army took up position outside the working-class district of St. Antoine, residents were massified by the simple fact that they shared a potential future as victims of a massacre. Sartre's discussion is unique in the role it assigns to the material construction of the neighbourhood: "the opportunity for troops to enter the district by coming from the west and

54. *Ibid.*, 354.

the north-west in order to massacre people there". This "hodological determination" produced a basic division of labour among the unified rebels; some people would have to defend against the troops, whereas others would have to storm the Bastille, whose cannons shadowed the district, and whose stockpiled arms would need to be taken from the troops and distributed to the people. It was the totalising power of the threat that unified the rebels of Paris and made possible later forms of collective action with a more explicit basis.

Sartre also provides a rich phenomenology of collective action, describing beautifully the experience of being swept up within the fused group. This experience, Sartre argues, does not depend on a binary relationship (between the individual and the group) but a ternary one (between separate individuals who, as third parties, themselves stand in for and act as the group for each other). In the unfolding of insurrection, every person becomes the face and voice of the group and anyone can speak up and direct the group: *stand back! watch out! go left! let's barricade this street!* In the same way, every person becomes, through the mediation of the group, subjected to any other person's direction. This state of reciprocity, of seeing oneself in the other and seeing the other in oneself, by way of the group, is the very basis of meaningful collective action. Sartre's book is unique in that it not only tells us what these mass affects feel like but also provides a compelling account of how they originate. Revolutionary motives emerge where material infrastructures (such as the Bastille) and the actions of antagonist forces (such as the French crown) collapse serial and collective interests. With Sartre, we have a properly historical rather than moral account of collective action. We also have an account of how an incipient division of labour results from the material arrangement of spaces and forces, such that even the most spontaneous groups must spontaneously segment themselves in order to confront an enemy that approaches, for example, from two separate directions.

In the chapters that follow his introduction of the fused group, Sartre chronicles how groups decay back into serialised collectives. For Sartre, the differentiation of functions within the group is the necessary but not sufficient condition of such re-serialisation. Groups persist beyond the immediacy of uprising through a form of *pledge*, which maintains group identification despite spatial distance (the members are members even when they are in separate neighbourhoods) and

temporal distance (the members agree to stay together because they anticipate a future moment when group self-defence will be necessary). Once pledged, the homogeneity of the group and the fungibility of its members can be maintained despite a differentiation of function. Division of labour is not itself a problem, since reciprocity and the equalities of the fused group can be maintained despite it: anybody can potentially fulfill any of the functions, just as anyone can stand up and direct the group in the middle of a riot. The decay of the group into an institution, a thing, occurs not because of functional differentiation but because individuals become identified with their function such that reciprocity is weakened: *I know what I'm doing, thus I do not need to listen to you*. The result is distrust and dysfunction and the reintroduction of atomising, serial force to which the only response is the creation of immovable structures that compel decision behind the backs of participants: discipline now must be codified by various rules and enforced by sanction, incentive, and organised violence.

Egoism and Counter-revolution

Sartre thus distinguishes between the collective, the group in fusion, the organisation, and the institution. If the serial individuals waiting for the bus are a *collective*, and the rioters storming the Bastille a *group in fusion*, the *organisation* begins to differentiate itself internally while maintaining the reciprocity of the fused group, whereas the *institution* makes those differentiations the basis of renewed seriality, once sanctioning power stands over and against each individual, weakening reciprocity. This is one way, perhaps, of understanding the opposition between serial and collective interest as an emergent, historical phenomenon rather than an ontological one. We might need to modify Sartre's presentation, however. While it's probably true that the institution emerges as a solution to the problem of seriality, it may be equally true that seriality emerges as the consequence of institutional attempts to remedy it. The cure is also the poison.

The best histories of the revolutions of the 20th century make this much clear. Donald Filtzer's study of Stalinist industrialisation, for example, revolves around a counter-intuitive but compelling argument: workers in the USSR were more atomised, egoistic, and serialised than labourers in capitalist countries, not because they were too weak

but because they were too powerful.⁵⁵ Stalinist industrialisation was extraordinarily wasteful, not only of raw materials but also of labour inputs. Demand for labour quickly outstripped supply, which led not only to widespread job turnover, as workers sought out pay differentials in the fragmented labour market, but also to extreme insubordination: the labour shortage made it difficult for managers to dismiss workers for absenteeism or insubordination. Since this dynamic was not only caused by waste of labour and raw materials but produced it as well, the Stalinist elite were incapable of eliminating the problem at the root. What they could do, however, was lower wages uniformly and, subsequent to that, crush any attempt by workers to organise openly and collectively to protect the value of their labour power. The result was a working class that was weak collectively but incredibly strong individually. Filtzer summarises the conclusions of his study as follows:

Deprived of any means to defend their interests collectively, the labour shortage and the subsequent breakdown of the traditional labour market, in particular the disappearance of the threat of unemployment, placed the workers in a position to appropriate considerable control over the individual labour process, most notably their work speed, how they organised their work, and the quality of the products they produced or the operations they performed. Managers, under their own pressures to meet production targets under near chaotic conditions, had little choice but to accommodate. Managerial concessions to workers were of two types. First were those to do with violations of labour discipline. This was a simple function of supply and demand: workers were scarce and managers could not afford to fire workers who committed grave violations of discipline regulations. As the regime imposed more stringent penalties for absenteeism, lateness, alcoholism, and insubordination, managers found themselves having to take a more active role in insulating workers from these sanctions... Managers needed not only to hold on to their workforces but to achieve some basic degree of

55. Donald A. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941* (M.E. Sharpe 1986), 116-24, 254-71.

co-operation in order to minimise disruptions to production endemic in the Stalinist system. They therefore came to tolerate workers' substantial control over how they used their work time, did little to combat the persistence of irrational and inefficient forms of work organisation, accepted relatively high levels of defective or poor quality output, and took steps to protect workers' earnings by keeping output norms low and inflating their wages.⁵⁶

56. *Ibid.*, 256-57.

The Stalinist regime also introduced various moral appeals to labour discipline combined with institutional incentives — first the system of “shock workers” and then “Stakhanovism”. But this only gave the managers more tools to retain workers and introduced more disorganisation into the pattern of accumulation, leading to waste of inputs, defective outputs, and production of goods without any sense of whether they were in demand or not. By making itself into the sole representative of the collective interest of the working class — a collective and pseudo-universal interest disguising particular, opportunist interests — the Soviet elite produced structures that amplified and overdetermined the egoism of Soviet workers, making any sort of merger of collective and serial interest impossible. Institutions of this sort produce serial interest even more than they respond to it.

This is then one way to understand the passage from revolution to counter-revolution. While Mancur Olson and others recommend overcoming the dilemmas of collective action through moral appeal, ideological re-education, and institutional sanction or incentive, these supplements in fact generate serialised, egoistic motive much more than they address it. The result is a vicious cycle in which attempts to resolve these dilemmas exacerbate the problem of serial interest, and then seem to require even more violent or unequal institutional compulsions. (Moral enjoiner is, of course, abandoned at a certain point, except as a fig leaf for organised violence or opportunism). Michael Seidman's *Republic of Egos* demonstrates that counter-revolutionary dynamics cut across ideological divides often thought to immunise virtuous and noble revolutionaries from their deluded or craven peers, plaguing anarchists in Republican Spain just as much as the Stalinist elite in the USSR.⁵⁷ For Seidman, the militancy

displayed in the first few months of the Spanish civil war, motivated not only by a quest for material well-being, but by ideological commitment, heroism, and sacrifice, quickly gave way to a succession of opportunism, cynicism, and finally, when the chance that the revolution would succeed seemed totally extinguished, a survivalist war of all against all. As expected, the subversion of Republican efforts by selfish motives was, in many regards, the result of choices undertaken by militants. For example, military units that provisioned themselves by looting peasants quickly undermined whatever support they might have expected from this group. As Seidman summarises:

The Republic proved incapable of fighting an industrial war, particularly a trench war, which required massive supplies of food, clothing, materials, and weapons. Although Loyalists inherited initial advantages in resources and industry, their enemies proved logistically superior. The ephemeral Republican victories at Teruel and Ebro and even the defense of Madrid may have boosted morale, but they could not resolve its problems of political economy. Privation caused growing alienation. The Republic was unable to retain the commitment and devotion of the urban dwellers who initially sustained it. Nor did it arouse the enthusiasm of rural populations, including collectivists, who resented its price controls... However, internal divisions among workers themselves compounded political tensions and economic deficiencies. Many, if not most, gave priority to their own needs first and then considered those of communities larger than themselves and their families. Activists devoted to a cause had to confront a relatively selfish rank and file. Village requirements provoked more solidarity than region, republic, or revolution. The degree of commitment declined as the group became bigger or the cause more abstract.⁵⁸

57. Michael Seidman, *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War* (University of Wisconsin Press 2002).

58. Ibid., 235.

The result was a cascading erosion of solidarity, as seriality was entrenched in all but the most dedicated fighters, and those originally committed to the cause decided, in the face of persistent defeat and privation, that they needed to focus on survival for themselves and their intimates. As the geography of the war placed the Republic in a materially disadvantageous situation (cut off from the grain and cattle lands of the southwest), attempts to ameliorate its logistical problems through “wage and price controls...backfired by reinforcing agrarian egotisms”.⁵⁹ These then created the situation for egotism among would-be militants and military defeat. Seidman’s book is in many regards under-theorised as an account of revolutionary motives; he doesn’t say much about whether or not egotism is the invariant bedrock of social action or, in this case, a contingent feature of unfortunate historical unfolding. His account seems motivated by little more than a desire to overturn the heroising accounts of the Spanish civil war (for many, the only noble 20th-century revolution) and lay bare its tragic flaws. It is nonetheless useful as an account of how revolutions die.

59. Ibid., 236.

Powers of Spite

In Seidman and Filtzer, we see how attempts to overcome the atomisation of interests through moral suasion or institutional compulsion produce further atomisation and further destabilising egoism. We may be inclined to believe in this sense that moral and social motives are in general only strongly held by a small group of people, an active minority which, as the residue of some prior mass action, remains in the space of the insurrection through the prolonging force of the “pledge”. This is no doubt one viable revolutionary scenario: the fused group emerges as a consequence of material infrastructures and the actions of antagonist groups but begins to weaken as the urgencies of the insurrection open into the undefined landscape of revolution. Some drift away but others remain through an act of will, bolstered by deep social motivations. Confronted with the impasses and obstacles to collective action and their own dwindling numbers, the group introduces institutional structures that re-serialise both actual and prospective partisans.

But altruism isn't the domain of the activist minority exclusively. As noted earlier, there is extensive evidence that altruist motives are, although fairly weak, present among all but a small minority of the population. Mass action can emerge not only as the result of self-defence or a collective struggle for material betterment but as collective outrage at injustice experienced only indirectly. The police kill an unarmed black man in a way that cannot help but inflame the knowledge in everyone's mind of the profound racism of the police and policing: people take to the streets, attacking the police, burning their vehicles, destroying private property, and looting markets. The black proletarians mobilised are, for the most part, those who have been the direct objects of police violence and repression. Despite the fact that most do not know the victim, they or someone they know have themselves been beaten and persecuted and killed by the police. Still, this is a different scenario than the storming of the Bastille. The participants are not under direct and immediate attack, such that they need to defend themselves by counter-attack on the police. In other words, though they are constant targets of police violence, it's hard to imagine that many conclude a riot will substantially weaken or even abolish the police, lessening the violence they suffer and improving their material well-being. No, the riot provides an opportunity to punish the wicked, to avenge their injuries and the injuries of their beloveds. Without a doubt, the opportunity to loot will encourage some to join for reasons of direct material interest, but as anyone who has ever been out in the streets in a riot like this knows, many if not most are interested in nothing so much as an opportunity to throw rocks at cops, destroy their property, and beat up white racists. Vengeance is the order of the day. It may be that this scenario activates, in a symbolic manner and through forms of group identification, the reciprocities of the Sartrean scenario — makes one feel *as if* one is under immediate attack requiring collective self-defence. Or it may be that such scenarios confirm what Bowles and Gintis have shown — which is that there is a weak altruistic and egalitarian impulse observable in a great range of human societies, independent of any sort of enlightened self-interest, and that furthermore, this impulse often manifests as *spite*, as a desire to harm those who harm others, who profit by exploitation and domination and hurt the innocent.

Revolution and Perfectionism

Such motives can explain a great deal of political behaviour, but they can also explain the *limits* of many mobilisations. Altruism and spite are, for most, weaker than materialist motives and self-interest proper. In most cases, the riots end after a few days, or they shrink to a smaller, hard core, especially if the costs of participation are raised. The passage from punctual, limited flare ups based on outrage and vengeance to something more enduring requires that participants feel that sticking it out and risking their lives is *likely* to produce change that will benefit them. This is quite clearly why riots end; people do not see any future in them, any chance that they might improve their lives, and the value of spite's enactment no longer outweighs the risks. There are, of course, many for whom spite and altruism remain reason enough, even in the face of the heaviest of consequences. Nevertheless, the fact that material interests supervene over altruism and spite explains not only the dwindling of the riot, but the inability of insurrection to convert into social revolution. Unlike the riot, the insurrection involves the breakdown of established order; governments collapse, workplaces stand idle, police begin to desert their outposts. As a result, the theological whims and niceties of private property evaporate: the things of this world no longer appear as possessions of this or that owner, but as unmarked social possibility. Participants take what they need and give what they can. Even when lives are hardly improved, such scenarios mobilise a tremendous amount of hopefulness. Even if things aren't better today, the proletarian participants reason, there is a high likelihood that they will be better tomorrow. As insurrection passes over into revolution, the faith participants extend to the process is essential; revolutions can persist on these projections, on what we might call *future anterior* motives, for quite some time. But sooner or later present interests take precedence, as participants demand immediate rather than pended satisfaction, and the counter-revolutionary dynamics described by Filtzer and Seidman and others unfold.

The future anteriority of revolutionary motives raises a point that has been hinted at but so far not enunciated. Even if survival is almost always at stake in such struggles, proletarians are motivated by more than bare, biological reproduction. The phrase I have used throughout

is “increased well-being”. Not just to live, but to live better: this is the basis of the revolutionary hope described above. There are of course infinite forms such betterment may take: increased comfort and decreased toil, more varied pursuits and new opportunities for learning or spiritual growth, for participation in collective life, in art and play. The term Marx uses to characterise this betterment is “development”: communism is a state of affairs that allows for “all-round development” or “free development” in opposition to the “one-sided development” imposed by the capitalist division of labour, which Marx continuously describes as a kind of stunting of body and mind.⁶⁰

The specific content of the improvement or betterment is left undefined, by necessity, since free development presupposes, in some sense, the open-endedness of what it is to be developed. Spinoza’s account of *conatus* is sometimes described as perfectionist, inasmuch as his emphasis on “striving” indicates not just simple reproduction of the conditions of being but expansion or improvement of such conditions. In other words, Spinoza, too, places development at the centre of his concept. Joy for Spinoza is the affect associated with that striving toward the things we desire, and increases as those things increase.⁶¹ The point of free development is free development itself, and though the content can be infinitely varied, the form is fundamentally the same.

Capitalism subsumes these perfectionist impulses, as much as possible, within money and the wage relation: any increase in well-being, in comfort, in freedom from toil, has a price. Furthermore, capitalism is unique in that it both encourages and hinders this development. On the one hand, constant increases in productivity make it possible for proletarians to receive more social wealth (often in a new form) in exchange for their labour as well as a reduction in the amount of time they need to work. On the other hand, crisis dynamics and the rule of profit ensure that these opportunities are foreclosed for some large segment of proletarians. From this dynamic of interrupted and foreshortened development, one can deduce hatred of oppressive heteronomy as an auxiliary revolution motive. Proletarians will resist whatever external arrangement hinders this development and accept what do not.

60. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 86, 272, 464–65. On one-sidedness, see *Ibid.*, 81; Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (Penguin Classics 1992), 470, 548.

61. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 60–61, 201–4.

We should not be misled, however, into believing, as capitalism would have us believe, that “perfection” is a simple function of use-values per person (or, in what amounts to the same thing, decreases in labour time per good). The very open-ended and historically indeterminate character of development precludes this understanding, and there are no doubt spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural forms of development that escape productive-force reductionism. At the same time, full development is impossible — at least for most — except where everyone can freely access social wealth and freely participate in social activities without restriction and where survival no longer preoccupies the majority of people’s activity. This is why we can aggregate it with the basic or materialist motives discussed above. It has survival and free access to material necessities as its foundation.

COMMUNIST MEASURES

We are in a position now to draw some preliminary conclusions. Riots, strikes and social movements may be fueled by a diverse arrangement of motives beyond desire for survival and increased well-being, in particular altruism and spite. Revolutions (of which insurrections are the first stem) are different, inasmuch as they involve intense dangers and hardships and therefore activate the most elemental and powerful of motives. Failure may mean death and famine, and thus survival motives are activated. At the same time, these situations activate the deepest hopes that proletarians have for themselves and for each other, the possibility of increased well-being, development, and growth, in innumerable forms. It is the combination of the survivalist and perfectionist motives that makes revolutions such profoundly passionate occasions. Revolutions must activate and satisfy these desires or fail, and they must do so relatively soon, in the medium term rather than the long term. We make a mistake if we understand counter-revolution as betrayal from within or military defeat. Revolutions will fail when they can no longer harness the enthusiasm of a majority of people, and instead must rely on moral imprecation, violence, and impersonal social structure to achieve their aims, a process which ends up subverting such aims.⁶² We do not know what a successful communist revolution looks like, but we can say for sure that it will

62. To be clear, this isn’t the only reason why revolutions fail. See Jasper Bernes, ‘Logistics, →

definitionally involve a massive number of dispossessed people consciously reckoning that communism is the best path. Revolutions involve situations of mass deliberation and mass reason that do not exist in everyday life. In revolutions, people really do consider their options and weigh the risks, and if a revolution succeeds it will be by working with this motivated reason and not against it. The best way to do this is to produce, as quickly as possible, the material benefits that other failed revolutions decided to pend until some future date. One does not win the civil war against reactionary forces and then make communism; one wins the civil war by making communism, by giving proletarians something to fight for together.

The successful revolution unfolds as a series of enchainned, mutually ramifying “communist measures” that, in their totality, weaken and eventually vanquish class society through a process of communisation. Here, I draw upon the theory of communisation pioneered by Gilles Dauvé, Bruno Astarian, *Theorie Communiste* and other French theorists, and extended in the pages of journals such as *Sic* and *Endnotes*. This theoretical line of inquiry has been enormously fruitful, but what it has lacked is a theory of motives that can help explain not only why revolution in our time must unfold also communisation but also how. Dauvé provides a lucid précis of the concept:

The idea is fairly simple, but simplicity is often one of the most difficult goals to achieve. It means that a revolution is only communist if it changes all social relationships into communist relationships, and this can only be done if the process starts in the very early days of the revolutionary upheaval. Money, wage-labour, the enterprise as a separate unit and a value-accumulating pole, work-time as cut off from the rest of our life, production for value, private property, State agencies as mediators of social life and conflicts, the separation between learning and doing, the quest for maximum and fastest circulation of everything, all of these have to be done away with, and not just be run by collectives or turned over to public ownership: they have to be replaced by communal, moneyless, profitless,

Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect’ *Endnotes 3* (2010), for an account of the many ways in which the ‘worked matter’ of late capitalist restructuring presents strong obstacles to a revolutionary project.

Stateless, forms of life. The process will take time to be completed, but it will start at the beginning of the revolution, which will not create the *preconditions* of communism: it will create communism.⁶³

63. Gilles Dauvé, ‘Communisation’ *Troploin* (2011).

What must begin from the earliest days are these communist measures. The reason is not simply definitional, but has to do with the counter-revolutionary dynamics we’ve examined; only direct satisfaction of needs through the communist measure can recruit the participation of the majority of proletarians while at the same time abolishing capitalism. These steps must go together. Further, as we’ve seen, actions that mobilise smaller, well-defined groups have the best chance of overcoming the opposition between serial and collective interests. Though there is no upper limit on the number of people that might undertake a communist measure — expropriating and freely distributing some property — for the most part, one will see this happening with groups in the hundreds or thousands if not dozens. Sometimes, these measures will overcome the coordination problem by virtue of the totalising forces that Sartre encounters in defensive struggles, because people are being dispossessed, as a group, of their access to the material necessities. In other situations, the communist measure will provide a clear, tangible objective for which coordination is necessary and therefore entirely in accord with material interests, unlike the often vague and open-ended objectives of reformist struggles. The power of the communist measure derives from this combination of small- to medium-scale with immediate objective, though it should be said communist measures are only communist measures when embedded in a sea of similar measures. Looting a store in the middle of a riot is not a communist measure, since it is quickly reabsorbed by capitalism. Looting a store while hundreds of others are likewise expropriating property during an insurrection is, however, a communist measure.

Communisation is therefore a curious thing, as Leon De Mattis makes clear in his article on the topic, “simultaneously immediate and extended in time, simultaneously total and partial”.⁶⁴ Alongside the *Endnotes* essay “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture”, De Mattis goes further than most other theorists in examining this dynamic

64. Leon De Mattis, ‘Communist Measures’ *Sic* no. 2 (2014), 20.

in terms of motive. This paradox is in part explained by the character of human action, which is both immediate and future-looking. Communist measures are not “undertaken unwittingly”, not action undertaken “because the struggle has left no way forward”.⁶⁵

If a group of hungry people raid a warehouse where food is kept, they obviously do so on the basis of material needs, but it would be a mistake to think they had no choice, that such needs produce, by some sort of chemical reaction, reflex action. They might have, at the very least, continued to suffer hunger, wagelessness, and dependency, or perhaps found another way to meet their needs. When we speak of necessity, we speak of constrained choices, and motivated actions. When taken in the context of other similar actions, the raid on the warehouse becomes a communist measure, and has the possibility of mobilising both concerns for well-being, as well as altruism and spite, such as when one distributes the food in the warehouse to other hungry people and recognises that this expropriation weakens the owners of capital who are the source of one’s hunger. However, those who looted the warehouse might also have hoarded the goods in order to sell to other desperate people. As expropriation rather than appropriation, the communist measure eclipses other forms of action under conditions of reciprocity: one has been the beneficiary of other communist measures and therefore responds in kind rather than hoarding or profiteering.

The communist measure succeeds because people are not simply short-sighted egoists, but capable of enlightened self-interest and legitimate altruism (which includes spite). It is the capacity of the communist measure to activate all of these motives without pitting them against each other that marks out the course of its potential success. Once communist measures chain together in a communising dynamic, spreading through imitation, and motivating coordinated expropriations on larger and larger scales, they produce the conditions of their own rationality with regard to material interest. One recognises that the ability of the enemy class to stop such communist measures decreases with their extent, intensity, and the speed at which they spread. The more there are, the more successful they become, and the more they make sense. Furthermore, once one has taken a communist measure, for example, to provide oneself and one’s neighbours with housing by taking over abandoned condominiums, or with food and

useful things by expropriating land and equipment, then one will naturally want to protect one’s access to such things by ensuring communism continues. As they enchain and proliferate, communist measures become more deliberate and intentional: as De Mattis notes, “in a period of communism, when communist measures are linking up and becoming widespread, the overall pattern of what is being established becomes obvious to everyone”.⁶⁶

Furthermore, just as the increasingly straitened circumstances of a revolution and the increasing use of violence by activists has a tendency to produce a vicious cycle of egoism and disinvestment, necessitating more political violence, the communist measure has the capacity to unlock a virtuous cycle: as more and more people’s needs for material well-being are satisfied through these measures, altruistic and spiteful motives are allowed to come to the fore. The active minority, people who are willing to risk much for the success of the revolution and who act not only on the basis of material interests, swells. As such, communist measures are undertaken not simply in order to directly satisfy one’s own needs, but in order to weaken the enemy, strengthen communism, and help the afflicted. Self-interested and altruist motives chain together in such actions, such that it is ultimately impossible to tell actions apart in these terms. Once social life is organised in this manner, its motivational appeal for those living in non-communist zones will be almost unstoppable, ensuring almost constant insurrection and undermining the ability of class societies to reproduce. The remaining powers will need to gather together their forces for a final assault on the offending zones—while fending off internal threats—or perish. But here the power of the revolution as we have defined it is not military nor is it merely negative; it is its ability not simply to negate or destroy capital but to actively posit something that takes its place, something that cuts along rather than against the grain of the deepest revolutionary motivations.

ADVENTURISM OR VANGUARDISM

In the old farmland where the big wave of the city’s growth had crashed with the real estate market in the years before the revolution, leaving behind thousands of acres of half-completed subdivisions, a few hundred people from one of the decaying suburbs nearby plant

squash, corn, and beans, taking advantage of the warmer climate's longer growing season. They complete some of the houses so that they can stay out there in summer, though most live in town and will only return for harvest, bringing the produce in on expropriated trucks and distributing it directly. In the next suburb over, some people with hepatitis, many of them formerly incarcerated in the nearby prison, have found the engineers who ran the pharmaceutical factory. They have re-started it and, sending for necessary equipment and inputs located in another city, converted it to produce the interferons they need, which have been in short supply since the first days of insurrection. Now that the weather has turned warm, a few dozen of the most committed take from their kitchen cabinets the money they haven't used in over a year, pack a few items into packs, and head north to the edges of the zone, where they will await communication from the partisans and guerrillas. Already food trucks and grain shipments are hijacked daily, sent back into the zone or distributed in the armed proletarian neighbourhoods; police stations and weapons depots are raided, as much to disarm the state as to arm the people. Factories in the areas still held by the state have encountered severe shortages of workers, as people flee to the communist zones where they know life is better. Some of them have taken to imprisoning their workers in order to ensure a steady supply of labour. But this only enflames the subjugated towns further. Already this month over thirty factories have caught fire in the province. Seeing the writing on the wall, many owners flee, leaving the workplaces to the employees.

In the successful revolution, just as in class society, people seek out the means to meet their needs and the needs of those they care about the most (family, friends, neighbours). The communist measure is one such way, but certainly not the only one. Where success is possible, the partisans plant the land, loot warehouses, and hijack trucks, taking what they need. But there is often a surplus, and instead of attempting to profit from it, to hoard, trade, and exchange, they simply gift it to whoever else needs it (whether through prior arrangement or ad hoc distributions). The interaction between constraint and motive is here double: in scenarios where a strong communising dynamic

is already underway, they may not find anyone with whom to trade, since everyone else is already meeting their needs directly or through gifts from others. In fact, signalling one's intention to trade and profit may motivate others to expropriate whatever surpluses one has, with ostracism and exile resulting if one continues. The risks outweigh the benefits, from a purely self-interested perspective. Furthermore, the strong conditions of reciprocity encourage one, from a perspective of enlightened self-interest, to do unto others as they might do unto you, to provide benefits for those from whom one has benefited. And once one's material needs are satisfied, the weak altruism present in most people will be activated.

For some, the activation of this altruism will be so strong, and so little offset by the panics of self-interest that situations of scarcity produce, that they will begin to act in a mostly "selfless" manner. They may travel, as above, into the areas where class society and capitalism are still operative in order to weaken it by expropriating materials and sending it back into the communist zone or delivering it to the needy residents still unfortunate enough to suffer its iniquities. They may participate in catalysing armed insurrection and expropriation of necessities by proletarians for whom such actions would definitely be motivated by self-interest but who may not act unless the scales are tipped. These communist measures are undertaken with a sort of surplus of intentionality — that is, they are a form of the pledge that Sartre talks about, a willed commitment to the cause of the revolution, an intention to intend, a way of extending intention. We should not let the presence of such will embarrass us, nor try to explain it away through a theory of human action that imagines it as analogous to biomechanical reflex.

These altruist communist measures are what we might call *adventurist*. They may lead the way, provoke, catalyse, or assist the actions of people motivated by desire for material well-being, but they do not try to direct the actions of others, to incentivise, instruct, or force through violence. (Violence is of course directed at those who have shown themselves opposed to the cause of liberation, but is all the same not part of the reproduction of the internal workings of the revolutionary zone). These actions run along rather than against the grain of human motives. Every revolution will always involve individuals and groups whose actions are based on a partial (though probably

never total) transcendence of self-interest. Successful revolutions will see this group swell, while failing ones will see it shrink, as there is for almost everyone some level of risk, danger, and probability where self-interest takes the wheel. These individuals and groups inevitably link together into formations that attempt to intervene in the course of the revolution; such is unavoidable, especially in moments of peril. The question is whether such formations act, as above, in an *adventurist* manner, and through the communist measure provide for others the material basis upon which they will freely choose to go in the direction of communism, or alternately act as *vanguardists*, using moral and pedagogical re-education campaigns, organisational hierarchy, monopoly over resources, direct violence, incentive structures, and other forms of instruction and compulsion, to *force* others down a road presumed to lead to communism but that in fact heads off a cliff.

ME O'Brien

TO ABOLISH THE FAMILY

The Working-Class Family and Gender Liberation
in Capitalist Development

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels speak of the “abolition of the family”, as the “infamous proposal of the Communists”.¹ The call to abolish the family has haunted proletarian struggle since, offering a horizon of gender and sexual liberation that has often been deferred or displaced by other strategic and tactical orientations. The phrase evokes the complete, almost inconceivable transformation of day-to-day life. For some, one’s family is a relentless terror from which one must flee to find any semblance of themselves. For others, it is the sole source of support and care against the brutalities of the market and work, racist cops and deportation officials. For many, it is always both at once. No one can make it in this world alone; and one’s personal account of their own families has a direct bearing on how to understand the call to abolish the family.

1. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (MECW 6), 501.

Not knowing what a family is, or what *the* family is, compounds the problem of what exactly to make of its abolition. For Marx, the task was to abolish the Church, the State, the Family—a striking triad of the parties of order—and ultimately the impersonal rule of the market. Marx and Engels use the word *aufhebung* for abolishment—a term that is often translated as supersession, for it conveys a simultaneous preservation and destruction. To abolish is not the same as to destroy. What is superseded, and what is preserved, in the movement to abolish the family?

Avoiding parsing distinct definitions of the family like a series of static taxidermic boxes, I argue there is an unfolding historical logic that underlies the transformation of the slogan, one that can be identified with the dynamics of capital itself. There is equally an evolving pattern to what militants mean by “family”. In the rise and fall of the workers’ movement, which corresponds to a distinct phase of capitalist development as well as its communist horizon of transcendence, is a coherent periodization of the family. The changing dynamics of the working-class family in capitalist history explain the changing critique of the family among revolutionaries, and ultimately the shifting horizon of gender freedom.

	1830s – 1880s	1890s – 1950s
Dominant family form	Bourgeois family	Working-class, male-breadwinner family form, made possible by workers' movement
Capitalist undermining of working-class family life	Crisis of working class social reproduction; peasant and artisan families undermined by industrialization; proliferation of sex work; natal alienation under slavery	War mobilization of WWI and WWII
Communist vision of family abolition	Destruction of bourgeois family in war on bourgeois society, ending hypocritical monogamy (Engels, Fourier, most socialists and anarchists)	Collectivizing unwaged reproductive labour, moving working-class women into wage labor and freeing them from compulsory family (Kollontai)

	1960s – early 1970s	1970s – present
	Working-class, male-breadwinner family form continues	Diversification of family structures, but nuclear family survives
	Growth of white collar employment opportunities for women	Working-class, male-breadwinner family form impossible
	Radical feminists, queers and black women seek to abolish the suburban, isolated family unit towards sexual and gender liberation	

The family bears the contradiction of survival in a truncated, alienated society, as both a source of solace and despair. The abolition of the family as a slogan today has become a call for the universalization of queer love as the destruction of a normative regime, and an opening onto gender and sexual freedom for all. The abolition of the family could be the generalization of human care in the real human community of communism.

I. INDUSTRIALIZING EUROPE AND PLANTATION AMERICA

Reproductive Crisis, 1840–1880

In 1842, a 22-year-old bourgeois German arrives in the thriving industrial centre of Manchester. He spends the next two years there trying to make sense of the life of the new urban proletariat of England. He sees England as the future of capitalist society, a world then taking shape in the new industrial centres of Germany and before long

throughout Europe. He talks to people, he reads reports, he walks the streets. He tries to share his horror at the proletarian condition:

Heaps of garbage and ashes lie in all directions, and the foul liquids emptied before the doors gather in stinking pools. Here live the poorest of the poor, the worst paid workers with thieves and the victims of prostitution indiscriminately huddled together, the majority Irish, or of Irish extraction, and those who have not yet sunk in the whirlpool of moral ruin which surrounds them, sinking daily deeper, losing daily more and more of their power to resist the demoralising influence of want, filth, and evil surroundings.²

² Engels, *The Condition of the English Working Class* (MECW 4), 332.

He recognizes that the working class cannot survive these conditions: “How is it possible, under such conditions, for the lower class to be healthy and long lived? What else can be expected than an excessive mortality, an unbroken series of

epidemics, a progressive deterioration in the physique of the working population?" In the middle decades of the 19th century, the English working class was dying too fast to replace themselves. The conditions that Engels documented — disease, overcrowding, workplace accidents, hunger, child mortality — was making it impossible for proletarians to raise their children to adulthood. Only the constant in-migration of dispossessed peasants kept the population up. Ruling class commentators, early social workers and socialist advocates all joined in condemning the conditions faced by the industrial working class, recognizing a crisis of social reproduction.

Research today backs up their fears.³ Rates of infant mortality were astronomically high, and life expectancy for working-class people plummeted with urbanization. For about half the working class, including unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers, wages funded the daily reproduction costs of workers, but not their generational replacement.⁴

Two major shifts in work over the early 1800s had produced the conditions Engels observed: the growth of factories drew children, unmarried women, and men to work outside the home; and married women engaged in subcontracted manufacturing work for pay within the home. Factories grew rapidly in industrializing countries throughout the century. Early in the 1800s, over half of manufacturing workers in many industrial sectors were pre-adolescent children, such as in English cotton in 1816. As late as the 1840s, 15 percent of French textile workers were pre-adolescent.⁵ The majority of children employed in England and France were hired through cross-generational factory labour teams, subcontracted through working-class men. Children were often managed through a male family member or friend of the family, in loose extended relations that served to discipline children through male violence, but limited managerial authority.

3. The following history relies on Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (Verso 1993); Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anticapitalism* (Brill 2015); John D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity'; Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe 1850-2000* (Oxford 2012); Alice Echols's *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minnesota 1989); and Claudia Goldin's *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (Oxford 1990).

I also cite heavily from all three volumes of Communist Research Cluster's *Communist Interventions* series, all available online. This argument is particularly informed by my experience with the third volume, *Revolutionary Feminism*.

4. Secombe, *Weathering the Storm*, 74.

5. Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 48-49.

Upon marriage, nearly all women immediately left factory work to never return. In both Europe and the US, almost no young mothers worked outside the home.⁶ White American women left their factory jobs immediately upon marrying, rather than waiting for the birth of their first child.⁷ In 1890, labor force participation for white women fell from 38.4 percent to 2.5 percent when they married. Instead, women took up paid work within the home in managing boarders, or engaging in "outwork", or "putting-out" manufacturing in the home:

Besides the factory operatives, the manufacturing workmen and the handicraftsman, whom it concentrates in large masses at one spot, and directly commands, capital also sets in motion, by means of invisible threads, another army; that of the workers in the domestic industries, who dwell in the large towns and are also scattered over the face of the country.⁸

Marx describes the gendered structure of this outwork: "The lace finishing is done either in what are called 'mistresses' houses', or by women in their own houses, with or without the help of their children."⁹

Engels feared urban poverty was torquing the gender and sexuality of proletarians. All manner of unspoken sexual horror lurks in *The Condition of the English Working Class*. He cites prostitution repeatedly, a symptom of moral degeneration and sexual corruption. He hints at the threat of incest and homosexuality in overcrowding housing conditions. This degeneration was not limited to a lumpen proletariat separated from the working class as a whole, but was a class-wide crisis. Social reformers of his day widely believed that the adoption of bourgeois moralism by the working class, including some closer semblance of the bourgeois family, would provide the necessary antidote to poor health conditions. Marx and Engels rejected such a solution, both on the grounds that it did not address the root causes in industrial employment, and that bourgeois moralism was always a sham. Socialism, and defeat of the capitalist class, was the only way out.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.; Secombe, *Weathering the Storm*.

8. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), 465.

9. Ibid., 470.

Collectively, these dynamics meant the disintegration of a recognizable working-class family as a defined unit of social reproduction. Working-class people still depended extensively on kinship networks for accessing work and housing, in sharing resources, or in their migration decisions. But kinship ties between proletarians could no longer serve as a ready-made naturalized system of obligation, care and domination.

Family Violence

Violence and mutual love are interwoven throughout family forms. All people rely for their survival on relationships of care, love, affection, sex and material sharing of resources. Class society forces these relationships into a variety of specific historical forms. Capitalism's logic of market dependency and generalized proletarianization forces these loving relationships into a particular structure of semi-coerced, semi-chosen interpersonal dependency. Workers subject to insecure employment depend on their family members and kin ties to get through periodic unemployment; similarly children and those no longer able to work are often reliant on their personal connection to a wage worker. Further, free wage workers often access work through kin-based social networks that provide information and support to locate and secure available employment. These relationships can be sources of genuine care, but the necessary ties of dependency leave them constantly open to violence, abuse and domination. For all forms of gendered violence, the threat may be implicit in the structure of a social institution that facilitates the exercise of violence. Families need not be actually or frequently violent for the family as a widespread institution to systematically enable and permit violence and abuse. The combination of care and violent domination is the dual character of any family structure in class society.

In European peasant societies, male domination and gendered violence took a particular form distinct from later iterations. Peasant families had a relatively low gendered division of labour, with both men and women engaging in a variety of forms of household and farm and work. Households were often multi-generational and included extended family, and there were few alternative strategies of survival for those without access to families with access to land. Men were the

heads of families, possessing both wives and children and their labour. Men could choose to exercise their power as householders through violence against their wives and children. Peasant men and their families, in turn, were subject to the violence of feudal lords. Lords and feudal states depended on violence as a central feature of their class rule and economic exploitation. The father-dominated family under feudalism was analogous for the class structure of society as a whole, and violence was its basis of power. It was this peasant family that capitalist development eroded with the dispossession of peasant land, and its counterpart in the aristocratic family that bourgeois society transformed.

As peasants were proletarianized, the nature of kinship-based domination changed. Under the chaotic proletarianization of industrialization, violence took on more heterogeneous roles. Male workers heading labour teams would use violence to discipline the women and children working under them; while men could use violence to dominate those varying family members they may live with. Sex workers and other informal workers were subject to violence from their customers and police. All proletarians were subject to violence from their employer, and through the agents of the state charged with social control and worker discipline.

Unlike under feudalism, however, violence was no longer centrally necessary to wealth accumulation through capitalist wage labour. Violence still permeated the lives of English proletarians, such as the brutality of anti-vagrancy and poor laws. But once the uprisings of dispossessed peasants were quelled, and they no longer had other ways of supporting themselves, "free" wage laborers set out in search of work. Where feudal lords required private armies to collect annually from peasants, capitalist employers could increasingly abstain from the use of force. Gradually, violence was separated from the workplace, concentrated instead in the hands of state agents — the police, national armies — or located privately within the home.

Of course, direct violence was much more central to a different capitalist labour regime: New World slavery.¹⁰ In the slave plantations of the American South, a new capitalist regime of generational reproduction of labour power took form, dispensing with any pretence to naturalized natal bonds. Angela

10. Much of this analysis of the gender politics of American slavery is indebted, as well as the authors quoted below, to the work of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman.

Davis describes this fragmented family life under slavery: "Mothers and fathers were brutally separated; children, when they became of age, were branded and frequently severed from their mothers... Those who lived under a common roof were often unrelated through blood".¹¹

Slave-owner wealth expanded when slaves had children. This embedded the dynamics of generational reproduction as central to capital accumulation and the work process. Most slaves could not effectively assert any form of parental rights, as the selling of slaves would often break up families, constituting what has been called "natal alienation". The power of the father among enslaved people in the Americas was strictly limited, for, as W.E.B. Du Bois writes, "[h]is family, wife and children could be legally and absolutely taken from him."¹² Davis, again: "Excepting the woman's role as caretaker of the household, male supremacist structures could not become deeply embedded in the internal workings of the slave system... The black woman was therefore wholly integrated into the productive force."¹³ In contrast, white American women were still seen as belonging to a protective domestic sphere. White farm wives would rarely be seen harvesting crops, no matter how poor or desperate Northern families became.

In the 19th century, capitalism was destroying the working-class family in two very different ways. On one side of the Atlantic, the kinship ties of English proletarians were fracturing due to the immiseration of factory labor, urban overcrowding and industrial capitalism. On the other, plantation agriculture was commodifying the generational reproduction of enslaved black workers, subjecting them to natal alienation. For both enslaved and waged proletarians, their kinship ties were not intelligible to elites, not easily recognized by law, and not readily conforming to elite social expectation. In each case, proletarian deviancy was understood in opposition to the consolidation of gender and sexual norms among the property-owning class, who formed sharply structured families based on inheritance and status. The demand to abolish the family as a call to destroy bourgeois society, though not taken up in the struggle against the slave-owning

11. Angela Davis, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,' 1972, in *Black Revolutionaries in the United States, Communist Interventions*, vol. 2, edited by the Communist Research Cluster (hereafter CRC 2), 329-330.

12. W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction* (CRC 2), 7.

13. Angela Davis, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,' 1972 (CRC 2), 332-333.

agricultural elites of the American South, was potentially as relevant there as it was to the struggle against the English bourgeoisie. The differences between enslaved workers and waged workers were considerable, and the racialized chasm divided the world proletarian movement. But despite these differences, in both cases, capitalism had already destroyed the working-class family. In both cases, the call to abolish the family is intelligible as a means of attacking bourgeois society—the plantation elites of the American South, and the industrial factory owners of England.

Destroy Bourgeois Society

One may distinguish the communist movement to abolish the family as a positive supersession, from the negative undermining of the proletarian family through the fragmentation of capitalist accumulation. For Marx and Engels, capitalism had already destroyed the proletarian family:

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.¹⁴

14. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (MECW 6), 501.

Marx and Engels offered no theorization of male domination within the working-class family, a central concern of later socialist feminists, because they saw the working-class family as impossible under the conditions of industrial capitalism.

The demand to abolish the family was a part of the war on bourgeois society. The bourgeois social order depended on the Church, the State and the Family, and their three-fold abolition was the necessary condition for communist freedom. Engels identified the key features of the bourgeois family: a hypocritical monogamy enforceable only against women, gender inequality that treated women as passive property, monied advancement as the motivation of negotiating relationships under the veneer of romantic love, patrilineal property inheritance, and parenting oriented towards accumulating family wealth.

The demand to abolish the family found its clearest articulation in the call in *The Manifesto* for the “Abolition of all rights of inheritance.”¹⁵ The bourgeois family was a means of managing the transfer and persistence of capitalist property. Bourgeois fathers enforced monogamy on their wives to assure their children were their own and maintain the proper lines of inheritance. The promise of inheritance and gifts of property were the means by which bourgeois parents exerted lifelong control over their children, reproduced their class standing in their children, and consolidated their own class position. Families were cohered by property, as well as acting as a form of property of their own. Children belonged to their parents, as wives belonged to their husbands. Engels envisioned that getting rid of inheritance would rob the family of its material foundation, and serve as the central mechanism of its abolition.

Destroying the bourgeois family and the capitalist social order, Engels further argued, would provide the foundation for true love, and for marriage based exclusively on “mutual inclination.”¹⁶ With questions of property and material survival removed from intimate relationships, humanity could discover its natural and inherent sexuality. Communist sexuality would be subject solely to the decisions of the citizens of the future:

When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual — and that will be the end of it.¹⁷

The call for liberation here is clear, but alongside it Engels advanced other more questionable claims. Abolishing property and the bourgeois family would

15. Ibid., 505. The demand to abolish inheritance in *The Manifesto* is a challenge to the bourgeois family, rather than a sufficient substitute for abolishing capitalist social relations, as some other socialists of the day believed. Marx was elsewhere quite ambivalent about doing away with inheritance as a demand, abstracted from a full communist program. Marx and Engels include it in the 1848 ‘Demands of the Communist Party in Germany’ (MECW 7, 4). In an 1869 address to the International Workingmen’s Association, he makes it clear that doing away with inheritance without abolishing capitalist exploitation itself would be ‘a thing false in theory and reactionary in practice. In treating of the laws of inheritance, we necessarily suppose that *private property* in the means of production continues to exist!’ (MECW 21, 66). Some have speculated he was also concerned the demand may alienate the peasantry (MECW 26, ‘Preface’ XXIV).

16. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 1884, in *Revolutionary Feminism, Communist Interventions*, volume 3, edited by the

free humanity to pursue its intrinsic sexuality, a family form freely chosen by the future, that of monogamy: “Prostitution disappears; monogamy, instead of collapsing, at last becomes a reality — also for men.”¹⁸ Marriage would find its true realization in communist love: “And as sexual love is by its nature exclusive — although at present this exclusiveness is fully realized only in the woman — the marriage based on sexual love is by its nature individual marriage.”¹⁹

Freed of the tyranny of property, humanity would also be freed of the sexual excesses of capitalist prostitution. This is only a few steps removed from the aggressive sexual conservatism of later socialists, who argued both gender deviancy and homosexuality were bourgeois capitalist perversions. Marx and Engels themselves expressed contempt and mockery of the nascent homosexual rights movements, exchanging letters thick with insulting anti-homosexual epithets about their contemporaries. Despite their shared concerns for women’s emancipation and the cruelty of hypocritical bourgeois monogamy, Engels was unable to imagine bourgeois sexual norms would not reemerge as the natural human condition under socialism. Destroying the bourgeois family, the Holy Family, and the earthly family, would produce something suspiciously like heterosexual monogamous family units.

Queer Addendum

The homophobia of Marx and Engels also showed a certain ambiguity. In an 1869 letter, Engels writes to Marx concerning a book by homosexual militant Karl Ulrich:

These are extremely unnatural revelations. The ped-erasts are beginning to count themselves, and discover that they are a power in the state... they cannot fail to triumph. *Guerre aux cons, paix aus trous-de-cul* will now be the slogan. It is a bit of luck that we, personally, are too old to have to fear that, when this party wins, we shall have to pay physical tribute to the victors... Then things will go badly enough for poor frontside

Communist Research Cluster (hereafter CRC 3), 18.

17. Ibid., 19.

18. Ibid., 15.

19. Ibid., 19.

people like us, with our childish penchant for females.²⁰

The contempt is clear, but also their own ironic play at lagging behind the coming queer revolution, contemplating the neglect of their own behinds.²¹ I will take a moment to dwell on this horrified fantasy, and on the other paths of queer possibility in the 19th century before the rise of the workers' movement.

Though it had not occurred to Karl Ulrich to call for the queer dictatorship, Marx likely encountered such a sexual utopia in the pages of Charles Fourier. Marx read Fourier closely. In *The Holy Family*, Marx favorably quotes Fourier in writing: "The degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation."²² It seems Marx was less sympathetic to Fourier's defense of sexual freedom. In *The Manifesto*, Marx and Engels mock the bourgeois fear that the abolition of property will entail the "free community of women", pointing to the implied logic whereby women are considered property by the bourgeois class. But they also implicitly reject the emphasis on free love, open relationships and sexual pleasure in the utopian socialist politics of Fourier.

Charles Fourier offered a vision of socialism where eroticism and desire were the mechanisms for social change, social cohesion and human fulfillment. He made a forceful critique of the bourgeois family, and saw permanent, irreversible, marital monogamy as a fundamental source of misery, social chaos and despair: "Could anything better than the isolated household and permanent marriage have been invented to introduce dullness, venality and treachery into relations of love and pleasure?"²³ Fourier offered instead a rational society based on the "theory of passionate attraction", a careful study of human desire and personality types, to balance the sources of pleasure and create a harmonious utopia.

20. Letter from Engels to Marx, June 22, 1869 (MECW 43), 295.

21. The word 'queer' is used here encompassing multiple forms of defence and pursuit of sexual and gender deviancy, sexual freedom and non-normative sexual pleasure. Queer life is often reproduced through densely-organized countercultures, and often articulated as a partially self-conscious political project. This study is most interested in forms of queerness sutured to the survival and rebellion of marginal proletarians. The universalization of queer love is the transformation and generalization of non-oppressive care.

22. Fourier, quotes by Marx, *The Holy Family* (MECW 4), 196.

23. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson (Cambridge 1996), 111.

Less widely recognized was his offer of "a new amorous world", where erotics were central to the new order. Society could be structured to meet not only the "social minimum" of a basic material standard of living for all, but also a "sexual minimum", the social guarantee of meeting each person's erotic needs to provide the foundation for authentic, non-manipulative love:

When all the amorous needs of a woman are provided for, when she has all the physical lovers, orgies and bacchanalias (both simple and compound) that she wishes, then there will be ample room in her soul for sentimental illusions. Then she will seek out refined sentimental relationships to counterbalance her physical pleasures.²⁴

Fourier imagined the recreation of an aristocracy based exclusively on their selfless sexual generosity in giving skillful pleasure to the sexually neglected. He sketches visions of armies of lovers on new crusades marching across continents, visiting socialist cities where they engage in amorous combat. They take consensual prisoners begging for their elaborate erotic punishments crafted to show the prowess of their captors. Eventually these brave sexual adventurers settle into their late adult lives of frequent orgies.

This enthusiastic call for an openly erotic free society informed the better-known feature of Fourier's work: calling for the formation of deliberate, carefully structured collective housing arrangements where residents shared in work and play. During the day, residents would share in the collective activity of a manufacturing speciality, using their shared effort and collaboration to increase productivity. They would further share in reproductive labor, eating together in large collective meals. The nights would be completed by the joys of orgies and other sexual liaisons. Fourier most forcefully offered a vision of socialism that linked collective living, shared reproductive labor, and free love. Fourier's immediate followers started many communes through Europe and the US in the 1830s. Communes sharing the essential features of Fourier's vision would reappear among socialists, anarchists and countercultural movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

24. Charles Fourier, *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier*, ed. by Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (Beacon 1972), 346.

Fourier is accused by Engels of utopian socialism, lacking the understanding of the agent of the proletariat to pursue and win socialism. The Marxist movement would soon arrive at the industrial worker as the pivotal figure in such a transition. But what Engels observed in his years in Manchester was not a unified, homogenous proletarian mass disciplined by factory life, but a cacophony of crime and social chaos. The communist agency evoked by proliferating proletarian sexual deviance suggests more Fourier's queer communism than Engels gravitation to a natural monogamy.

Sexual and gender deviancy were understood by their bourgeois opponents as a threat to public order, the stability of the bourgeois family, and the discipline of the work day. Rapid urbanization and proletarianization produced a concentrated mass of proletarians. These people had seen the overturning of the social mores and controls of peasant life, and were not invested in bourgeois convention. They worked when they were able, finding jobs often in gender-segregated industries; worked hard with their bodies for long hours on seasonal and boom and bust cycles. Their time outside of work was radically their own, as it never had been before. Chris Chitty described the many opportunities for gay eroticism that proliferated in the ports and streets of the booming cities:

The irregularity of work and extremely low wages for most men turns them into a nomadic population averse to family responsibility... Homosexuality is often camouflaged against a wider backdrop of proletarian sexual anarchy... This explains why all vice commissions crack down on homosexuality and prostitution, as both tend to threaten the conjugal unit.²⁵

Gay sex in the peculiar public privacy of urban life proliferated between proletarians for fun and pleasure; between the bourgeois and proletarians as tense and transgressive monetary transactions; between the bourgeoisie in the private spaces of the boarding house and parlor.

In the prostitution and sexual subcultures of the industrializing city, people seized on new forms of gender transgression. A lexicon of cross-dressing emerged, as alongside cis sex workers other new

25. Chris Chitty, Unpublished dissertation manuscript, courtesy of Max Fox.

transfeminine gender deviants walked the streets of London, Amsterdam and Paris: Mollies, Mary-Anns, he-she ladies, queens. They sold sex to the bourgeoisie on the streets, ran from police, fought in riots, held regular drag balls, and worked in one of the estimated two thousand brothels specializing in male-assigned sex workers scattered across London.²⁶

Large numbers of proletarian women similarly turned to selling sex, to both bourgeois and proletarian men. The enforcement of the anti-sex worker Contagious Disease Acts in England and the campaign for their repeal left a substantial archive on the lives of sex workers, demonstrating the fluidity with which proletarian women passed between industrial labor and sex work. Sex work provided higher-paying work than manufacturing, and many proletarian women turned to it sporadically, while maintaining strong and positive ties with their family and neighbors.²⁷ The Contagious Disease Acts were a part of a biopolitical campaign precisely to rupture these ties, isolating sex workers as deviants distant from a respectable working class.

Newly emancipated slaves in the US also pursued new visions of the family. Black proletarians seized on their freedom in forming new families and sexual relationships, drawing on the diversity of romantic codes forged under slavery. In government records gathered about black families after the American Civil War, historians find a diversity of relationship and family structures greater than their white contemporaries on farms or in factories. Many black couples during Reconstruction "took up", in "sweetheart" or "trial marriages", or were "living together" in non-marital, temporary and often non-monogamous romantic relationships. Couples could co-parent in such temporary arrangements, raising "sweetheart children".²⁸ Such arrangements by other names may be familiar to Americans today, but were rare among white families in 1870. Government agents, preachers, police and an emerging respectable layer of black people sought to aggressively

26. Fanny and Stella were Mary-Anns who were arrested and charged in London; they were taunting theater goers with 'chirruping' at the Strand theatre, likely selling sex, certainly disturbing the peace. The proclivity for cross-dressing was undeniable, but court doctors were fascinated with their supposedly feminine skin and physiques, six doctors all taking the opportunity to anally finger them as part of the examination. Neil McKenna, *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England* (Faber 2013). Brothel estimate from McKenna.

27. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge 1982).

28. Katherine Franke, *Wedlocked: The Perils of Marriage Equality* (NYU 2015), 80.

intervene in such informal unions. Legal marriage was mandated for black couples receiving a range of federal and church services, and soon black people were investigated and prosecuted for violating marital laws.

Recognizing the proliferation of sexual deviancy and family heterogeneity in working-class life of the 19th century points towards a different kind of gender politics than that which the socialist movement ultimately pursued. Black families seeking to live together outside the narrow respectability of legal marriage, transfeminine Mary-Anns heckling theater-goers, sailors and factory workers fucking in alleyways, and prostitutes driving ambulances in the Paris Commune, suggest an alternative trajectory out of the crisis of working-class social reproduction. Here is the abolition of the working-class family without its naturalized reinscription, and without the gender-conservatism that would come to dominate the socialist movement. These proletarian deviants gestured towards a different kind of queer communism, one that was lost over the subsequent decades of the workers' movement.

II. THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT AND THE MALE-BREADWINNER FAMILY

Where Marx and Engels saw the monogamous, nuclear family as referring only to bourgeois society, the emerging workers' movement began to advance the family wage as a central demand, and with it securing limited access to a new regime of respectable working-class family life. The workers' movement, lasting from the 1880s to the mid-1970s, forged an affirmative working-class identity as a basis of mass, stable political organization in socialist parties and trade unions.²⁹ The workers' identity provided a shared basis to assert the right and ability to govern, both in the struggle for working-class suffrage and in imaging socialist states and socialist societies subject to working-class control. Rather than pursuing its self-abolition, the proletariat of the workers' movement pursued a world extrapolated from the experience of industrial wage labour. These elements were the shared horizon of all mass communist, socialist and anarchist currents until the uprisings at the end of the 1960s.

29. This essay understands the workers' movement broadly in line with the terms of the critique offered in 'A History of Separation' *Endnotes* 4 (2015).

The characteristic family ideal of the workers' movement was the single male wage earner, supporting an unwaged housewife, their children enrolled in school, their home a respectable centre of moral and sexual conformity. It was in part this family form that the workers' movement struggled for and sometimes won during its period of ascendancy. This male-breadwinner family form, coupled to the parallel economic and political victories of the workers' movement, contributed to new relatively stable conditions for sustained generational working-class social reproduction. Even among working-class families unable to economically achieve removing a wife or mother from the labour market entirely, key elements of this family form became essential to an emergent working-class respectability that had been rare in the previous era: not living with other families; seeking single-family dwellings when possible; men assuming control over the household finances; father's physical and sexual abuse of household members being shielded from neighbor's scrutiny in isolated family structures and dwellings; and wives assuming full responsibility of unwaged reproductive labour.

This family form was a tremendous victory in improving the standard of living and survival of millions of working-class people, and creating a basis for stable neighbourhood organization, sustained socialist struggle and major political victories. It was also the means by which the workers' movement would distinguish itself from the lumpenproletariat, black workers, and queers. This family form would provide a sexual and gender basis for white American identity and middle-class property ownership. Here this family form is interchangeably called "male-breadwinner" and "housewife-based", recognizing the dual dependency on both masculinized wage labour and feminized unwaged labour. It could, as easily, be called "family wage" form, in recognition of the crucial role played by the wage nexus in enabling this family form.

Several factors created the conditions for the male-breadwinner norm in the 1880s and 1890s in the industrial centres of Europe.³⁰ Trade unions, workers' parties, and liberal bourgeois social reformers, aided by the threat of disruptive working-class insurgency, won a series of regulations, measures and public infrastructure developments that dramatically improved working-class

30. The primary reference here for understanding the consolidation of a male-breadwinner norm is Seccombe's *Weathering the Storm*. →

life and contributed to the emergence of a male-breadwinner norm. Concurrently, structural changes driven by capitalist development consolidated waged production in the factory, pushed children and married women out of the waged workforce, and lowered the cost of consumer goods.

Trade union agitation and organization won significant wage increases and a growing wage share, enabling an overall improvement in the standard of living. Higher wages enabled a single-wage earner household, distinguishing the respectable working class from the lumpenproletariat. The male-breadwinner family aspiration provided a symbolic solidarity between workers, employers and state. Trade unions explicitly used the demand of a “family wage” through the 1890s as a legitimating basis for higher wages. This call resonated with their progressive bourgeois allies precisely because it demonstrated bourgeois aspirations on the part of the working class. Coupled to higher male wages, trade unions organized for the exclusion of women from their industry, as a means of preventing competition and falling wages, winning successful exclusions in the 1880s and 1890s. Male workers had a rational basis to exclude women’s employment: Where unions were unable to prevent the spread of women’s employment, wages fell dramatically due to increased labor supply and women’s lower pay. Better employment opportunities for working-class men than women, in turn, made it more rational for working-class families to focus their energies on maximizing wage work for the adult male members of the household.³¹

Alongside this political advance for higher wages, capitalist competition drove down the value of consumer goods, raising real wages, improving the standard of living of all working-class people. Improvements in productivity in the making of working-class consumer goods improved the standard of living for many working-class people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the subsequent century of capitalist development.

Also see the debate on the ‘family wage’ from early 1980s Marxist-Feminist literature, including Heidi Hartmann, ‘The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism’ in *Women and Revolution*, ed. by Lydia Sargent (Black Rose 1981); Michèle Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (Verso, 1980); Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, ‘Rethinking Women’s Oppression’ *New Left Review* 1/144 (1984); and Martha May’s ‘The Historical Problem of the Family Wage’ *Feminist Studies*, 8/2 (1982). For statistics about women’s labor market participation, see Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*.

31. I leave aside, for now, the question of what role cis women’s gestational capacities played in the consolidation of this gendered division of labor, a feature of Brenner and Ramas’ argument that otherwise is followed closely here.

Further, as employers sought to more fully control the work process and eliminate work teams, they significantly reduced the employment of children. A shift away from team-based work increasingly coincided with the mounting political campaign to restrict child labor and child work hours. As children left the factories, they went into new systems of compulsory public schools, which further indoctrinated them in bourgeois family ideals.

Manufacturers gradually shifted production out of the home and consolidated it in factories, putting an end to the putting-out system through which mothers worked for pay in the home. The niche of paid work for mothers disappeared, leading to mothers increasingly engaging in unwaged reproductive labour in the home. Waged women’s work took place only before childbirth or as the children aged. This increasing division between the factory and the home consolidated and intensified a particular gendered, subjective understanding of work: masculinizing wage labour and feminizing unwaged reproductive labour. Bourgeois and working-class people alike had long been concerned with the corrosive effects of women working, reflecting a conception of the proper organization of family life. With the many changes in capitalist development and political power in the 1890s, a strata of the working class was able to achieve such a family form with its accompanying gendered division of labor.

Municipal governments built the infrastructure for these new respectable working-class neighborhoods, pushed by socialist organizing: running water and sewage systems, safe housing and trolleys as mass transit. These dramatically lowered disease and mortality, enabled working-class people to live further from their factories and in more comfortable conditions, to adopt more intensive personal hygiene practices, and further distinguished them from the poor.

Together, these factors converged to allow, incentivize and force working-class families to adopt a male-breadwinner form, providing a sexual and gender foundation for an affirmative working-class identity. In family budgets from 1873 to 1914, all layers of the working class in Europe saw a significant rise in the share of family income provided by a single adult male, often stabilizing around 70 to 80 percent. The consolidation of this male-breadwinner norm appears as a U-shaped trough of the economic activity of married women, bottoming out sometimes between 1910 and 1920.³²

The respectability afforded to the workers' movement through this family form should not be undervalued. Working-class people were not infrequently characterized as biologically subhuman, fundamentally inferior in intelligence and cultural capacity, and utterly unfit to participate in any form of governance. This hostility to working-class people bled into racial subjugation and ideology, as notions of inherent genetic inferiority were weaponized against black, immigrant, Jewish or Irish workers. For the workers' movement, achieving respectability in the eyes of some members of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois, and dignity in their own self-conception, was a crucial and necessary plank in a broader and ultimately effective struggle to achieve the right to vote and participate in government, the legalization of trade union activity, the decriminalization of many elements of working-class life, and dramatic improvements in people's standard of living and a long-term fall in infant mortality. For many, such respectability was a step in a long term revolutionary struggle towards full socialism and full emancipation. Today, "respectability" often connotes political conservatism; for many in the workers' movement, it was a means to substantial political power and a revolutionary socialist remaking of society.

This family form is a "norm", in part because it served as a measure and marker of respectability. Families where mothers continued to work for pay inside or outside the home faced condemnation from their neighbors, and increasingly social exclusion. Male workers, meanwhile, began to link their ability to support their families to a patriarchal sense of pride, accomplishment and self-respect. Workers pursued this family structure as a way of claiming a moral dimension to their wages, legitimizing pro-worker legislation to bourgeois politicians. Housewives became the main organizers of working-class neighbourhoods and social organizations. The moral legitimacy afforded to this family structure was also a means through which the workers' movement was able to extend its reach beyond the workplace into society as a whole.

There is little evidence that the male-breadwinner family form was an inevitable outcome of capitalist development, nor that it was engineered and implemented by employers at the end of the 19th century. The majority of employers lacked direct control over workers' non-work hours, choice of family, or domestic arrangements, arguing

32. Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 45.

against functionalist accounts of the family as serving capitalists. Outside of cases of company towns in geographically-isolated areas, employers seem to not have struggled for such control. Nor was it a matter of the inevitable expansion of bourgeois family values in working-class life. Key elements of bourgeois families, including inheritance, had little or no relevance for the vast majority of proletarians. This family form was a contingent outcome of class struggle.

No elements of the workers' movement, including the male-breadwinner family form, was ever universally shared or accessible, and only very rarely was it possible for a majority of proletarians. But the accessibility of this form expanded dramatically for white American and European wage workers in the 1880s and 1890s, and became the dominant family form in many stable working-class neighbourhoods. This left many working-class families behind. The bottom tiers of wage workers never achieved income allowing them to survive on a single wage, requiring mothers to continue to pursue informal waged work where they could get it, or balance jobs with child-rearing, suffering the judgment from their better-off neighbours. Workers could favorably contrast their lot to both the lumpenproletariat and colonial subjects. This was primarily a logic of racial heteronormativity, one which also excluded sexual deviants and sex workers from the self-conception of the class. In other words, with the rise of the workers' movement the nuclear family under capitalism was no longer understood primarily as a bourgeois institution as it had been by Marx and Engels, but came to represent and demarcate the distinction between civilized whites and uncivilized others. The social integration between sex workers and queers with the rest of the class in the mid-19th century shifted, and sexual deviants increasingly became pariahs excluded from respectable working-class life.

Contradictions of the Family in the Second International

The workers' movement had a two-sided orientation to the family. The normative pursuit of a male-breadwinner form was in tension with another, contradictory impulse that shaped its struggles over gender. The workers' movement saw socialist equality as depending on a shared experience of proletarianization. This provided an internal basis for asserting the positive abolition of the family through women's

employment and collectivizing reproductive labour. This tension, between the legitimacy and stability provided by the male-breadwinner family form to the socialist movement and the equality of universal employment, shaped the debates and struggles over the family over the course of the workers' movement.

Regardless of their position on women's employment, socialists of the Second International entirely abandoned the call to abolish the family. Karl Kautsky, the most influential theorist of Europe's largest mass socialist party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), explained that while capitalism was undermining the working-class family, everyone could be assured socialists would never politically attack it:

One of the most widespread prejudices against socialism rests upon the notion that it proposes to abolish the family. No socialist has the remotest idea of abolishing the family, that is, legally and forcibly dissolving it. Only the grossest misrepresentation can fasten upon socialism any such intention.³³

Women were central to the growth and effectiveness of the SPD. Women composed a substantial section of the SPD, building out its neighbourhood infrastructure as the most active volunteer organizers.

In turn of the century Germany, the best-selling socialist book was not *The Manifesto* or Kautsky's *Erfurt Program*, but August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*. In it, Bebel recounts the long history of gender oppression and foretells a coming socialist future of gender equality. Gender oppression was the dominant concern of the mass base of the largest socialist organization of the Second International, precisely because gender was the main form through which proletarians understood both capitalist oppression and socialist emancipation.

Women played major leadership roles in the SPD, including Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg. Eleanor Marx was well respected in the British section of the International. Though there was substantial disagreement on how the SPD should relate to women's issues, women eagerly pursued study of women's equality, and advocated successfully for the SPD to include an uncompromising women's rights

33. Communist Research Cluster, *European Socialism and Communism, Communist Interventions*, vol. 1 (hereafter CRC 1), 24-25

platform. Central was the problem of women's employment. Women's proponents in the Second International argued over whether women's labour-force participation was growing or falling, whether women in industry were detrimental to the cause of the class, whether housewives constituted an important sector for organizing, and whether women's employment was essential to their equality.

Rosa Luxemburg centred her claims to women's rights solely based on women's workforce participation rates. Women were political subjects precisely because they worked. Rosa Luxemburg saw the rights of proletarian women as fundamentally dependent on their labour market participation:

Today, millions of proletarian women create capitalist profit like men — in factories, workshops, on farms, in home industry, offices, stores... And thus, every day and every step of industrial progress adds a new stone to the firm foundation of women's equal political rights.³⁴

Other socialists saw the achieving of equality through women's labour market participation as too costly, advocating that socialists pursue limits on women's waged work. Clara Zetkin writes against women's employment: "New barriers need to be erected against the exploitation of the proletarian woman. Her rights as wife and mother need to be restored and permanently secured."³⁵

The respectability of a housewife-based family was deeply compelling to socialists envisioning a workers' society. The male-breadwinner family, and its accompanying neighbourhood, embodied the social respectability on which the SPD based its claims to fitness for rule. Many workers' movement papers celebrated "good socialist wives" who raise "good socialist children."³⁶ Women's community organizations were a primary mechanism to extend the trade union base of the SPD into a broader politics of working-class life. Socialist debates and propaganda regarding women most often highlighted issues faced by housewives, including consumer prices, neighbourhood conditions,

34. Rosa Luxemburg, 'Women's Suffrage and the Class Struggle', 1912 (CRC 3), 57.

35. Clara Zetkin, 'Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Women Will Socialism Be Victorious', 1896 (CRC 3), 51.

36. Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, 'Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 17 no. 1 (1975), 64.

housing, schooling, power dynamics with their husbands, the allocation of wages within the household, decision-making within worker organizations, and women's suffrage. The working-class nuclear family form and its accompanying stable working-class neighbourhoods became a primary mechanism for extending the power of trade unions into social life, constituting the depth of the workers' movement and its identities.

The Family in the Russian Revolution

The demand to 'abolish the family' took on a different and new meaning during the workers' movement; rather than a communist struggle to abolish bourgeois society, it was a socialist vision of full proletarianization through the collectivization of reproductive labour. There was one real effort to abolish the family within the logic of the workers' movement, during the Russian Revolution.

Russia's small industrial working class had not even begun to achieve the respectable housewife-based lifestyle of some of their counterparts in Germany and England, and, initially the Bolsheviks showed no concern for encouraging such family forms. Instead, Lenin and the leadership of the Bolshevik Party became convinced that the full mobilization of women was crucial to the success and survival of the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks implemented a broad and extensive set of pro-women policies, far surpassing existing policies in Europe. The Bolsheviks mandated easy divorce, gender equality in the law, and access to abortion. Informed by progressive sexology, the Bolsheviks also implemented a similarly comprehensive set of pro-gay legislation, including abolishing all anti-sodomy laws, a historically unprecedented move. For a brief period, post-revolutionary Soviet Russia led the world in women's equality.

Alexandra Kollontai took a leading role in various posts in the early Soviet government, including heading departments of social welfare and women's work. Kollontai pushed for state institutions to assume full responsibility for raising children, feeding the working class, doing laundry, cleaning homes, and all other forms of housework and generational reproduction. Kollontai called for the abolition of the family as an economic unit through collectivizing reproductive labor:

The communist economy does away with the family. In the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat there is a transition to the single production plan and collective social consumption, and the family loses its significance as an economic unit. The external economic functions of the family disappear, and consumption ceases to be organised on an individual family basis, a network of social kitchens and canteens is established, and the making, mending and washing of clothes and other aspects of housework are integrated into the national economy.³⁷

The collectivization of reproductive labor was particularly central as the actual material mechanism of this abolition. The "workers' state will come to replace the family" even in child-rearing, through the steady expansion of kindergartens, children's colonies and creches.³⁸ Kollontai saw this transformation of reproductive labour as a means of fundamentally changing gender and sexual relations in Russia, and establishing full gender equality:

No more domestic bondage for women. No more inequality within the family. No need for women to fear being left without support and with children to bring up. The woman in communist society no longer depends upon her husband but on her work.³⁹

37. Alexandra Kollontai, 'Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations, 1921 (CRC 1), 212.

38. Alexandra Kollontai, 'Communism and the Family', 1920 (CRC 3), 96.

39. *Ibid.*, 97.

She had her own evolving vision of what sexuality and gender may be like following such a social revolution in domestic life, including deeply egalitarian gender relationships, increasing rights of sexual minorities, and novel forms of organizing intimate relationships and romance. If all reproductive labour is fully collectivized, the family ceases to have any economic function, and becomes solely a personal choice.

But this emancipation was one with a cost integral to the workers' movement vision of socialist transition: the universalization of wage labour under state authority. Kollontai was explicit that the family had to be abolished precisely because it drained society of the resources workers could devote in labour: "The state does not need the

family, because the domestic economy is no longer profitable: the family distracts the worker from more useful and productive labour."⁴⁰

Kollontai's vision replaced the family with the factory as the social unity of reproduction, replacing patriarchy with a new tyranny of work and state. **40.** Ibid.

Little work documents the actual experiences of Russian revolutionary women living in the collective housing, sharing childcare and eating in the canteens Kollontai championed. The experience of the Chinese peasantry during the Great Leap Forward, however, suggests the contradictions may have been considerable. In China again state-backed programs worked to replace the family with collectivized housing, food and childcare. Mao had called for the abolition of the family through collectivization: "Families are the product of the last stage of primitive communism, and every last trace of them will be eliminated in the future... Now worker families are

no longer production units."⁴¹ Though it did much to shake up gender relations among peasant families, these canteens also became instruments of coercive discipline, as kitchen managers facing scarcity increasingly rationed access to food based on political favoritism. As state policy exasperated the famine, peasants no longer had independent means of feeding themselves. Over thirty million people starved between 1958 and 1962, and collectivized kitchens seem to be one major culprit. In 1961, one government official wrote "The masses deeply detest and loathe the communal kitchens... The masses say: 'Make friends with a canteen manager and you'll never want for buns and soup... A knife hangs over the rice ladle."⁴²

Lenin supported Kollontai's effort as means of immediate survival during the Civil War, but she was alone in aspiring to permanently transform Russian families. With the end of the war in 1922, the Bolshevik government withdrew support from efforts to collectivize domestic labour, maintaining only those like crèches that enabled women to work in the factories and fields. By 1933, Stalin had re-criminalized homosexuality, rolled back the legal right to divorce, and introduced pro-natalist policies that encouraged nuclear family formation. Kollontai spent her later years in the 1940s living as an ambassador in Sweden, quietly accommodating herself to the reimposition

of gender inequality and the consolidation of the nuclear family in the Soviet Union.

In the policies of the Bolsheviks, again we see core contradiction concerning the family for the workers' movement: the claim to socialist equality and progress through proletarianization, and yet the claim to legitimacy and stability through the nuclear family. Where the SPD tended towards the latter, the Russian Revolution swung from one pole to the next.

Jim Crow

The US followed a parallel but distinct trajectory in consolidating a working-class family norm during the workers' movement, one interwoven with Jim Crow, white property ownership and suburbanization. At the end of the 19th century, most Americans, white and black, worked in agriculture. The Northeast was industrializing rapidly with a booming manufacturing sector and white workforces, largely organized through their European immigrant identities. The Midwest was home to small white family-operated independent farms, settled following the genocidal displacements of wars against Native American nations. The Southwest, seized from Mexico mid-century, saw an influx of white settlers working in mining, agriculture and cattle following the completion of the railroads integrating the region economically with the rest of the US. Southern white landowners defeated Black Reconstruction, by the 1890s re-imposing a new white supremacist regime of legal segregation, disenfranchisement, and sustained racial terror, trapping African-Americans into sharecropping agriculture and barring them from the gains of the workers' movement. The American workers' movement was shaped by these logics of white supremacy. For the 19th century and early 20th century, cross-class white racial identity obstructed the consolidation of a major labour movement. The settler colonial seizure of land westward offered white workers the opportunity of class mobility, and provided a possibility of escape and independence from wage labour. White identity, even for proletarians, was constituted through the possibility of property ownership, and identification with the country's major landowners.

These racialized dynamics of the American workers' movement shaped working-class family forms. For white workers, the patriarchal

family possible through the workers' movement was constituted through social status, property ownership, and respectability. Black workers, excluded from these core features of the workers' movement, nevertheless were subject to an intense narrowing of family norms during this period. Instead of being achieved through respectability, however, for black families patriarchal norms were imposed through the constraints of tenant sharecropping. Black sharecroppers were forced into marriage. White landowners would only lease sharecropping tenancies to married couples. The frontier of cotton agriculture was expanding, plots were small, and land was available to new black families whenever they were ready to marry, but were not available to single black adults or those in unconventional family arrangements. When and where black people were able to escape tenant farming their rates of marriage declined sharply.⁴³

As black people moved into industrializing cities, they appear to have seized the opportunity to escape the heterosexual, marriage-based family norm. Jim Crow was an imposition not only of poverty, racial terror, political exclusion and legal subordination, but also of a particularly rigid patriarchal family. The post-Jim Crow low rates of black marriage, discussed later, may for this reason owe their source not only to poverty, lack of stable work and exclusion from the gains of the workers' movement, but also to a resistance and flight from the family regime of tenant sharecropping.

White working-class families, meanwhile, slowly moved from depending predominantly on owner-occupied farms to industrial wage work. Family-operated farms depend on long-term dyadic couples. White Americans through the 19th century enjoyed an expanding frontier of conquest and new settlement that allowed and encouraged stable family formation. Many of these family farmers were drawn to the Socialist Party and other left populisms, but were unable to untangle their class consciousness from a committed defense of property ownership, settler colonialism, and white independence. White unions of the late 19th century, rooted in skilled trades, largely inherited the gender conservatism of capitalists and independent farmers. Like their European counterparts, these white skilled workers aggressively pursued—and by the end of the 19th century, largely obtained—

43. In sections of the South that abruptly switched to wage labour agriculture due to boll weevil epidemics, black marriage rates similarly fell. Bloom, Feigenbaum, Muller, 'Tenancy, Marriage, and the Boll Weevil Infestation, 1892-1930', *Demography* vol. 54 no. 3 (2017).

access to a family wage securing a housewife-based family structure.

As in Europe, this developing family form came under crisis through the two world wars. The world wars provided many African-Americans and women their first access to non-agricultural employment. The military and war industries were gender segregated and mildly tolerant of homosexuality, and underground and extensive communities of American gays formed for the first time.⁴⁴

Americans during WWII experienced a gender order that was comparable to that of early Soviet society: organized through full proletarianization, the breakup of the family, increased space for homosexuality and women's rights, and massive state control. Newly proletarianized people not yet integrated into a stable heteronormative working-class identity found an unprecedented degree of sexual freedom during the war years, coupled to new tyrannies of industrial wage labor and state control.

This racial stratification of the workers' movement continued into the 20th century. When an industrial labour movement did finally gain strength in the 1930s, it was unable to secure a foothold in the states of the Southeast and Southwest under particularly brutal regimes of white supremacist violence, today constituting "right to work" states without legal protections for union struggles. As African-Americans left the farms and moved into wage labor from WWI on, they found an uneven reception in the American workers' movement. Anti-racist trade unions attempted to pursue an alternative vision of postwar America, building racially-integrated suburban housing around major unionized factories. But white American workers were not united in their interest in cross-racial solidarity; many were as likely to defend their interests through nativism, xenophobia, and racism as through class solidarity.

III. AGAINST AND AFTER THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT

By the end of the 1960s, proletarians globally were in mass rebellion. Civil wars, street riots, and mass student and worker strikes swept every continent. These rebellions were manifold, pursuing overlapping struggles against imperialism, colonial apartheid, state oppression, gender domination, and capitalism. In the US, the black liberation

44. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (Free Press 2000).

movement successfully toppled the interlocking racial system of legal subordination and violent terror that constituted Jim Crow. Through riots, Black Power organizations, militant protest and institutionalized political-class advocacy, they further set themselves against the conditions of concentrated urban poverty, exclusion from the benefits of the workers' movement, and the state violence of policing and incarceration. By 1970 a new form of rebellion emerged, drawing on the strategies and analysis of the black liberation movement, now challenging the gender and sexual regime of the workers' movement. These feminist and queer radicals sought the abolition of the male-breadwinner, heterosexual nuclear family form as a means towards full sexual and gender freedom.

Three overlapping rebellions against the gender and sexual conformity of the workers' movement emerged in this era: radical feminism, gay liberation, and black women's organizing. They revolted against the male-breadwinner family form, and the gender and sexual regimes it implied. They rejected the sexual politics of the workers' movement through three principle challenges: to the masculinity embraced by the left, to the heterosexual nuclear family and the miseries of suburban life, and to work itself.

Against the Family

Gays and lesbians exploded into militant visibility at the end of the 1960s, launching radical political organizations that embraced anti-imperialism, socialism, gender transgression and eroticism. In 1970, gay liberation groups rapidly grew in the major cities of the US, Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy. They shared a commitment to the liberating power of erotic joy. Gay revolutionaries like Mario Mieli in Italy, Guy Hocquenghem in France, and David Fernbach in Britain all envisioned eros as a potentially liberating source of human freedom, reflecting a broad sentiment in gay liberationist circles. Eros was repressed and subordinated by the capitalist mode of production, rigidly constrained by heterosexuality and the suburban nuclear family, and was unleashed in the transgressive potential of anal sex. It was erotic solidarity, more than any shared essential identity, that would provide the praxis for a gay communism.

Trans and gender non-conforming people of color, largely

lumpenproletarian sex workers, played a leading militant role in the riot at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, in the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, and then as a visible presence in the Gay Liberation Front through groups like Street Transvestite Action Revolution (STAR). During a time of political ferment and social toil, Latina and black trans women played a particularly dramatic and influential role in constituting an insurgent, insurrectionist pole to the the emerging queer politics. Trans sex workers of color Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Ray Rivera, and Miss Major Griffen-Gracy all became legends of the Stonewall Rebellion, and fierce opponents to the taming of gay politics through the 1970s. Rivera reflected later on the marginalization and militancy of trans people in the Stonewall Rebellion:

We were all involved in different struggles, including myself and many other transgender people. But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts. The only reason they tolerated the transgender community in some of these movements was because we were gung-ho, we were front liners. We didn't take no shit from nobody. We had nothing to lose.⁴⁵

45. Sylvia Ray Rivera, June 2001 talk at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York City.

Among queers in major US cities from the late 1950s on, trans women of color were the most starkly visible, leaving them the most vulnerable to street harassment and violence. They served as the consistent foil representing deviant queerness for police, mainstreaming gays, and gender radicals alike. Trans women of color were almost entirely excluded from formal wage labor, instead surviving through street-based sex work and crime. These trans women of color likely numbered in the low hundreds in many American major cities, but acted as the central figures in a broader underworld of thousands of motley lumpenproletarian queers, including other non-passing gender deviants, homeless queer people, queer drug addicts, sex workers, and gay criminals.

These gender and sexual radicals experimented with a range of new approaches to sexual pleasure and family arrangements, including celibacy, free love, exclusive homosexuality, group living, open

relationships, banning monogamy, equalizing sexual pleasure, and much else. Similarly, youth rebellions of the late 1960s, even when neither feminist nor queer, advanced a radical commitment to non-regulated sexual pleasure outside the logic of the workers' movement and the society it had helped build. Such sexual and gender experimentation were a feature of some male-dominated far left organizing projects, early lesbian feminist collectives, and gay liberationist groups and their associated queer subcultural scenes. University students fighting the banning of overnight male visitors at a women's dorm helped spark the May 1968 rebellion in France. Free love, non-marital casual sex and birth control were central to the counter-cultural hippie youth movements of the 1960s, which evidenced a thoroughgoing rejection of alienated society. Militant cadre-based anti-imperialist groups, like the Weathermen and later the George Jackson Brigade, incorporated strong rejections of the monogamous couple form, to mixed success.⁴⁶ Militant memoirs and short-lived communes of the era evidence a blossoming discovery of sex as a source of pleasure, freedom, and connection.

Among these gender and sexual radicals, all agreed that the heterosexual nuclear family was a place of horror and tyranny. Feminists and women's liberation movements were effectively unified in their absolute opposition to the condition of the housewife as a crux of women's domination. The major distinct currents of feminism varied according to their particular critique of the family form and proposed solution. The most mainstream liberal feminists sought equality in the workforce to enable women to leave bad relationships, and to advocated for equality within the household, paralleling the demands of the workers' movement and bourgeois feminists of previous eras. Radical feminists, identifying the family as the primary instrument of gender socialization, patriarchal tyranny and gendered violence, sought a wholesale destruction of the family as a necessary step towards any semblance of true freedom and liberation. Marxist feminists argued exhaustively over the question of the housewife's role in relation to the logic of capitalist accumulation, and differed—in a familiar contradiction of the workers' movement—in either proposing autonomous organizing by housewives or focusing organizing efforts on women in wage work. All agreed that to be

46. See Women of the Weather Underground, 'A Collective Letter to the Women's Movement' (CRC 3), 160.

a housewife was a horrible fate, and also somehow an embodiment of what it meant to be a woman in an oppressive society.

Radical feminism offered what has hitherto been the most profound and thorough-going engagement with the tyranny of the family yet produced, identifying its qualities of direct domination, violent subjugation, and fundamental alienation. They were the first to recognize how central sexual violence is to gender relations. This, they saw, was a domestic privacy that protected against scrutiny and struggle, enabling and defending the particular terrors of the nuclear family: childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, marital rape, atomized isolation, anti-queer terror and coerced gender socialization. Alison Edwards located women's vulnerability to rape directly in the dependency of the male-breadwinner relation on the unwaged character of housewife labour:

Many wives are the unpaid employees of their husband's boss. The drudgery of housewifery in turn molds the social oppression of women—the dependent sex, the soft sex, the stupid, uninteresting sex, and the readily available sex. It is these factors that have shaped the politics of rape.⁴⁷

Both in keeping with a communist legacy and challenging the gender conservatism of the workers' movement, these gender and sexual movements of the late 1960s and 1970s advanced a renewed call to abolish the family. In this demand, they both recognized the centrality of the family to the regimes of gender and gender violence, while challenging the complicity of the historic workers' movement in the ideal of the bourgeois family. Many argued oppression was built on the conforming sex roles enforced through the nuclear family. Third World Gay Revolution, in their 1970 New York platform, write:

We want the abolition of the institution of the bourgeois nuclear family. We believe that the bourgeois nuclear family perpetuates the false categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality by creating sex roles, sex definitions, and sexual exploitation. The bourgeois nuclear family as the

47. Alison Edwards, 'Rape, Racism, and the White Women's Movement', 1976 (CRC 3), 228.

basic unit of capitalism creates oppressive roles. All oppressions originate within the nuclear family structure.⁴⁸

The radical feminist and gay liberationist critique were inseparable from their rejection of the atomized, isolating and social conditions of the American suburbs. It was vague on the class character of the family they were critiquing precisely because of the success of the workers' movement in producing a stable respectable working class, and the construction of the suburbs had blurred the distinctions among white people between working class, middle class and capitalist family forms. The widely-read feminist 1963 classic *The Feminine Mystique* placed the isolated housewife as a centerpiece of its analysis. Betty Friedan opens her book with a description of suburban life:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone.⁴⁹

Radical feminists and queers of the era evoked an abolition of the family in resistant practices and analyses that still resonate today: experimenting with alternative living arrangements and forms of romance, rejecting any aspiration to suburban assimilation, refusal of subordination to the requirements of capitalist wage labour, refusing constraining sex and gender roles, and seeing interpersonal relationships as thoroughly political. The Third World Women's Alliance called for extended, communal family structures based on gender equality:

Whereas in a capitalist culture, the institution of the family has been used as an economic and psychological tool, not serving the needs of people, we declare that we will not relate to the private ownership of any person by another. We encourage and support the continued growth of communal households and the idea of the extended family.

48. Third World Gay Revolution, '16 Point Platform and Program', *Come Out!* no. 7 (1970). Recently republished in *Pinko* no. 1 (2019).

49. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Norton 1963), 15.

We encourage alternative forms to the patriarchal family and call for the sharing of all work (including housework and child care) by men and women.⁵⁰

Sometimes these group living arrangements would be apartments turned into informal mutual aid shelters for homeless trans sex workers of color, sometimes deliberate highly disciplined cadre-based group houses with rigorous lesbian-feminist dress codes, sometimes rural hippie communes.

Black feminists grappled with the history of the working-class family as a white, normative institution. With mass migration to northern cities from the 1930s on, African-Americans both entered segments of the waged blue-collar labor force, and were shut out of growing suburban and white-collar employment sectors. Many found themselves in urban 'ghettos' — neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, violent racial policing, substandard housing, and uneven access to wage employment. In the mid- and late-1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement was succeeding in its dismantling of the legal edifice of Jim Crow through the American South, African-American youth in over 150 American cities rioted. These uprisings prompted a major reorientation of black organizations, and the active concern of the Federal government.

One response came in the form of a 1965 report US Senator and Sociologist Patrick Moynihan arguing the social chaos of black urban life was the direct result of women-dominated households. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", termed the Moynihan Report, laid out an assessment that guided, in various guises, much thinking among liberal sociologists, policy makers, and even among gender conservative black nationalists: high rates of black unemployment, crime, and other social dysfunction were the result of the excessive preponderance of women-headed households in black communities, a so-called "black matriarchy"; the marital and lifestyle choices of black women, including high rates of wage work and comparative low rates of marriage, both marginalized black Americans within a broader society that expected male-headed households, and produced a crisis of black male masculinity and misbehaviour of crime, disruptive social protest and unemployment.⁵¹ Here the exclusion

50. Third World Women's Alliance, "Women in the Struggle", 1971 (CRC 3), 254.

of black Americans from the characteristic family form of the workers' movement is blamed on black women, and in contrast that heteronormative, patriarchal family form is seen as the fundamental condition of social order. Here we find echoes of Engels and bourgeois commentators of the mid-19th century panicked about the moral dysfunction of working-class life, as working-class families take new forms in adapting to material constraints.

Though the male-breadwinner family was not an option for most black people, black people's choice to avoid marriage may be identified as a positive assertion of sexual freedom, a rejection of patriarchal family norms, and a call for a different form of family structure. As discussed earlier, African-Americans fleeing the coerced marriage of Jim Crow did indeed opt out of marriage at high rates. Black men's chronic underemployment due to racist labor market exclusion was a further structural factor in discouraging marriage. During Jim Crow, exclusion from wage labor left black proletarians out of the workers' movement; with the Great Migration and dismantling of Jim Crow, black proletarians entered wage labor, but did not generally have the option—preferable or not—to form male-breadwinner families. Black women were not willing to sacrifice independence for a desperate, half-way emulation of an impossible respectability, often opting to raise children with friends or female relatives rather than husbands. In "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" Francis Beale writes,

It is idle dreaming to think of black women simply caring for their homes and children like the middle class white model. Most black women have to work to help house, feed and clothe their families. Black women make up a substantial percentage of the black working force, and this is true for the poorest black family as well as the so-called "middle class" family.⁵²

The Moynihan Report contributed to the efforts of welfare programs to shape black sexuality. The riots of the mid-1960s significantly bolstered government support for the "War on Poverty", an expansion of the

51. For an incisive reading of Moynihan, see Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' *Diacritics* vol. 17 no. 2 (1987), 64-81.

52. Frances Beal, 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female', 1976 (CRC 3), 257.

US welfare system to include poor African-Americans. Much of the US welfare and social security system had been implemented in the 1930s, when major white landowners in the American South still depended on the subordinated labor of black families. Its various programs were designed to exclude domestic and agricultural workers, the bulk of the African-American workforce, as well as locating much control in white-supremacist dominated local levels of government. Black people were largely shut out of government welfare support in the 1940s and 1950s. In an effort to placate and control the unrest of the 1960s, state and federal governments opened up access to unemployed, single African-American women.

These women encountered much frustration in the patronizing forms of social control of welfare departments. They soon organized in a network of projects that became the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Composed of African-American mothers receiving cash transfer benefits, through the late 1960s NWRO waged many campaigns to significantly improve access and treatment of welfare recipients, with the ultimate goal of a substantial, Federal universal basic income. One of their notable campaigns was in direct challenge to the effort to coerce black sexuality. Welfare departments excluded receipt of benefits for women who had a "man in the house" on whom it was imagined the mother could rely. To enforce this policy, welfare departments conducted "Midnight Raids", in collaboration with police departments, of late-night inspections to evaluate whether a recipient was in cohabitation with a man or was sexually active, and hence ineligible for benefits. NWRO successfully overturned these practices through organizing and litigation, defending the right of proletarian black people to non-marital sexual intimacy.

Against Work

A third element of the gender radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s is crucial for this investigation: their move towards a rejection of work. While many feminists remained within a framework that imagined equality through wage labor and state intervention, we will consider two examples of more self-conscious, anti-work politics among working-class women: the American welfare rights movement and Wages for Housework.

The National Welfare Rights Organization was a rebellion of poor African-Americans against work.⁵³ Where the black trade union movement was calling for full employment and jobs programs, these work demands gained little traction among NWRO militants. Many of them had worked throughout their lives, and found their jobs unfulfilling and alienated. NWRO materials offered an historical argument that African-Americans had built the country across generations of enslaved and subordinated labor, and that they had worked enough. NWRO organized against the exploitation and cruelty of low- and no-wage welfare-to-work jobs programs. Though some in NWRO emphasized that their role as mothers constituted a form of productively contributing to society, others were resistant to such narratives. Instead, they argued for the “right to life” separated from the wage, from work and from labor market participation. Staging sit-ins and occupations of welfare offices and government buildings, mobilizing in the courts and encouraging recipients to demand the maximum possible benefits, these militants sought to drive the welfare system into crisis necessitating a wholesale restructuring that would end the elaborate means-testing, behavioral discipline and work encouragement of American cash transfer benefits. NWRO’s core campaign of a Federal guaranteed annual income or negative income tax was understood by many of its advocates as the means of no longer being forced into chronically dissatisfying work. Severing the connection between work and livelihood, welfare rights activists demanded an end to the compulsion to work.

This was a radical shift from how welfare had long been understood in the social democratic imagination. Postwar welfare programs in the US and Europe were largely designed as a supplement to full employment. Elder care, child care, unemployment insurance, disability insurance or public healthcare were all designed to complement a lifetime of wage labor. Poverty relief programs like the NWRO confronted were structured to minimize the competition with labor markets: benefits were usually set well below minimum wage, means-testing sought to exclude the employable, and recipients were encouraged to varying extents to transition into work. In the American

53. The extensive historiography of NWRO almost entirely ignores this key feature of the movement. The exception, for which the analysis presented here is entirely indebted, is the unpublished work of Wilson Sherwin. *Rich in Needs: Revisiting the Radical Politics of the Welfare Rights Movement*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) CUNY, Graduate Center. New York, NY (2019).

South access to any benefits was restricted based on the seasonal need for agricultural labor. Where and when cash transfer benefits came close to low-wage employment, this could be justified in circumstances of high-unemployment and economic crisis. For NWRO, and other welfare rights militants of the 1960s, benefits were not only a supplement to wage labor, but a means of escape from it.

Anti-work sentiment among working-class women’s movements was not limited to the African-American welfare rights movement. Wages for Housework offered the most coherent articulation of the misery of unwaged housework being the counterpart to the misery of waged work. Wages for Housework emerged in the intensity of worker insurrection in Italy in the early 1970s, soon spreading to the UK and scattered sections in the US. Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s “Women and the Subversion of Community” saw women’s oppression as produced through the overall reproduction of the capitalist totality, laying the conceptual groundwork for later social reproduction theory. This offered a major theoretical breakthrough in recognizing capitalist reproduction as dependent on both the waged workplace and unwaged household reproductive labor, made possible by the intensity of insurrection both by the workers’ movement and against its limits. Dalla Costa writes that the structure of the family “is the very pillar of the capitalist organization of work,”⁵⁴ structuring the divide between waged and unwaged activities: “It has made men wage slaves, then, to the degree that it has succeeded in allocating these services to women in the family, and by the same process controlled the flow of women onto the labour market.”⁵⁵

With the advent of the housewife-based working-class family, women are relegated to the home, producing the gender division within the working class. Women’s struggle must necessarily reject the home, through building alliances with those in reproductive care industries, producing a revolutionary insurgency:

We must get out of the house; we must reject the home, because we want to unite with other women, to struggle against all situations which presume that women will stay at home, to link ourselves to the struggles of all those who

54. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, ‘Women and the Subversion of the Community’, 1972 (CRC 3), 283.

55. *Ibid.*, 282.

are in ghettos, whether the ghetto is a nursery, a school, a hospital, an old-age home, or asylum. To abandon the home is already a form of struggle.⁵⁶ **56.** Ibid., 286.

This struggle against the home is fundamentally not towards wage labor, but in rejection of work itself:

Women must completely discover their own possibilities—which are neither mending socks nor becoming captains of ocean-going ships. Better still, we may wish to do these things, but these now cannot be located anywhere but in the history of capital.⁵⁷ **57.** Ibid., 288.

Silvia Federici echoes this anti-work dimension of wages for housework:

If we start from this analysis we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us.⁵⁸ **58.** Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', 1974 (CRC 1), 336.

However counterintuitive it was for many readers, Federici was clear that the demand for wages is a demand for the ability to refuse work. For the Italian Marxist tradition, the refusal of work was not an act of individual voluntarism of avoiding a job, but the possibility of mass strike action and organized class rebellion. Here their policy proposal was a means of exposing the underlying dynamic of unwaged household labor. In Federici's assessment, work refusal was made possible through wages: "From now on we want money for each moment of it, so that we can refuse some of it and eventually all of it."⁵⁹ **59.** Ibid., 337.

Through this anti-work lens, *Wages for Housework* may be read as non-programmatic, seeing both their call for literal financial compensation for unwaged reproductive activities and their claims about the value-producing character of these activities as provocative; their

insight lies elsewhere. Dalla Costa mentions "wages for housework" only in passing and somewhat critically. Silvia Federici's call for wages for housework is argued in an essay "Wages Against Housework". No doubt many advocates for *Wages for Housework*, including Selma James, likely envisioned something quite literal.⁶⁰

Limits and Contradictions

The visions of the late 1960s and early 1970s among black women leftists, radical feminists and gay liberationists go much further in their understanding of gender freedom than previous articulations. Unlike their Marxist predecessors, they recognize the working-class family as a site of personal subjugation, violence, brutality and alienation. They understood that the self-activity of the class itself, through the direct establishment of alternative kinship and mutual aid relationships, is the primary mechanism for abolishing the family. They began to recognize, however tentatively, the relationship between empire, suburban whiteness, the institutionalized workers' movement and heteronormative patriarchal families. They yearned for home as an expansive, communal site of mutual care, love, erotic pleasure, shared struggle, and personal transformation, rather than isolation and control.

In advancing a critique of coercive binary gender expression and normative gender expectations, they moved into the beginnings of a vision of the abolition of gender and sexual identity as the endpoint of the abolition of the family. They saw the struggle to abolish the family as necessitating direct personal transformation in one's expectations and behaviour towards others, advancing and deepening the previous socialist critique of male chauvinism as an obstacle to class struggle. In their engagement with economic survival and work, the gender radicals of the 1970s moved towards a rejection of work, and a desire to escape from the subjugation of wage labour, rather than solely imagining equality through universal proletarianization.

Yet their politics is not sufficient for us today. Radical feminists and gay liberationists forged emancipatory visions that can no longer

60. In treating *Wages for Housework* as an anti-work movement and an ironic provocation, this account joins with revisionist historiography from Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke 2011), the thinking of Wilson Sherwin, and recent comments made in passing by Dalla Costa and Federici.

inspire mass gender rebellions in the form they took in the early 1970s, and rightfully come under rigorous criticisms over the coming decades of gender thought and struggle. Even *Wages for Housework*, so effectively posing the questions that resonate today, were responding to a world that has since changed.

Radical feminist and gay liberationist analysis extrapolated their overall understanding of society as a whole from their critique of the atomized heterosexual nuclear family. They identified patriarchy as the fundamental basis of militarism, the consolidation of authoritarian states, fascism, colonialism, sexual violence, gender conformity, and private property. Radical feminists located women's oppression as subject to a sex-caste or sex-class system. Women constituted a coherent social group with a unifying set of easily aggregated interests—just as the industrial proletariat had been imagined in an earlier era of the workers' movement—subject to a unique form of oppression in the family. This sex-class analysis coherently reflected their own experience of oppression, largely as white women opposed to life entrapped in a suburban family, but significantly misreads the place of the family within capitalism.

Though under feudalism there had been a homology and direct interlocking between the organization of the state, the economy and the patriarchal family, under capitalism these systems had been partially severed through wage labour. That is to say: direct domination and violence were no longer required to extract surplus value in the production process, so governmental affairs and family dynamics could take on a relative autonomy. Capitalism produced a real separation between the public and private spheres, isolating one form of gender domination within the private walls of the household. The forms of male domination that pervaded in government or business, whatever their superficial similarities to gender dynamics of families, took on a fundamentally different character, fracturing "patriarchy" as a coherent system. Extrapolating from their critique of the family ultimately prevented radical feminists from adequately grasping the dynamics of capitalism and the racial state.

Understanding women's oppression through a sex-class analysis led radical feminists into many dead-ends. They proved unable to effectively account for or respond to the eruption of debates about class and racial differences between women, as their strategy and vision

depended on the eliding of substantial stratifications between women. Trans women, politicizing concurrently with radical feminism and initially active in its ranks, soon became the subject of intense hostility, as the sex-class analysis was revealed to rely on a binary polarization based on biology or early socialization. Radical feminists developed an early hostility to sexual pleasure as inherently mired in patriarchal oppression, leading to an erupting of debates in the 1980s and 1990s known as "the sex wars" that continue in debates over pornography, sex work, and kink.

Socialist feminists and black feminists made early challenges to the sex-class model, pointing to its inability to either account for the divisions between women or the realities of capitalism and colonialism. However, with rare exceptions they were unable to offer a meaningful alternative account of the experience of subjugation within the family. Black feminist writing often located the family as a center of resistance, downplaying the role of gendered coercion that led large numbers of black women to avoid heterosexual couple family structures from the 1960s on. Socialist feminists either relied on theoretically weak and contradictory dual-systems accounts of working women's oppression, or became bogged down in an extensive and tiresome debate on whether the work of unwaged housewives produces value. After a brief period of autonomous projects, socialist feminists ultimately re-entered social democratic or Leninist politics. In the early 1970s, black women's writing was similarly heavily indebted to nationalist or state socialist politics, movements mired in other, well-documented contradictions.

Similarly, gay liberationists were unable to offer a program that could sufficiently resonate with us today. Through the 1970s gay men in some major cities had nearly free access to frequent erotic pleasure prior to the devastation of AIDS. Though one can have nostalgia for the pleasures and freedoms of this period, few today imagine they offered a path to a free society. The dramatic loosening of sexual mores among queer and straight people alike in the 1970s revealed sexual repression was not in fact the cohering glue of capitalist domination, as earlier defenders of the power of Eros had argued. Efforts at remaking heterosexuality in the New Left are rightfully remembered as largely horrible, with militants striving to "smash monogamy", ensnaring themselves in ever more elaborate forms of misogyny and trauma.

Today sexuality pervades popular consumer culture, and it is as much a neoliberal and individualist arduous injunction to enjoy as a source of freedom. The idea that the pursuit of eroticism could cohere new, revolutionary solidarities could make sense when gay sex was heavily criminalized, but no longer resonates as an inspiring politics.

Radical queer and feminist efforts to dismantle and attack the normative nuclear family form were never able to articulate coherent visions of moving beyond a capitalist society. Many passed into and out of socialist and anarchist organizing projects, or saw their gender rebellion as a direct extension of their anti-capitalist analysis. Those gay and women's rights activists most thoroughly steeped in a Marxist politics often showed a relative inability to grasp or engage the most dynamic, transgressive and rebellious queer and women's struggles. As one example, gay Trotskyists were architects of a rights-based gay movement alongside bourgeois gays, rejecting the subcultural genderfuck currents of gay liberation politics as ultra-left. The vision of socialism and anti-capitalism among feminist and queer movements of the early 1970s was by contrast usually quite vague, drawing from romantic ideas of anti-colonial Third World Marxism.

This inadequacy of the vision of sexual and gender liberation from the movements of the early 1970s extends to the limits of their vision of abolishing the family. They envisioned the abolition of the family as a voluntary activity pursued through deliberate subcultures. They could rarely see the possibility of the generalization of family abolition to a society-wide restructuring of economic relations. This limit ultimately lay in the persistence of the horizon of the workers' movement. Even as they sought to escape its masculinism, narrow focus on wage work, or the limits of vision of equality to proletarianization, they could not envision the abolition of the class relation itself. The workers' movement sought socialist freedom through generalizing the condition of wage labor. Under conditions of wage labor, the family could only be dissolved through the massive expansion of an alternative, non-market institution: the state. These youth sought to flee wage labor, but they could not envision any other means of collective, communist social reproduction beyond the factory in one form or another. *Théorie Communiste* point to this distinction between a politics that opposes and critiques work, and the overcoming of the workers' movement: "The 'critique of work' is not able to *positively* address the

restructuring as a transformation of the contradictory relation between classes", leaving the rebellions of May '68 trapped within the very logic of an affirmative workers' identity they sought to reject. The difficult language of TC applies to the limits of gender rebellion of the early 1970s:

The revolt against the condition of the working class, revolt against every aspect of life, was caught in a divergence. It could only express itself, only become effective, in turning against its own foundations, the workers' conditions, but not in order to suppress them, for it didn't find in itself the relation to capital which could have been that suppression, but in order to *separate* itself from them. "May '68" thus remained on the level of a revolt.⁶¹

61. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Much Ado About Nothing' *Endnotes* 1 (2008).

Much of what was wrong in the actually existing gender and sexual relations of the New Left became evident to later generations of feminist, queer and anti-racist thought. The intellectual trends engaging questions of gender and sexual politics of the 1980s and 1990s were mostly academic, under the varying names such as poststructuralism, black feminism, women of color feminism, pro-sex feminism, post-colonial feminism, queer theory, and trans studies. Though much maligned among some leftists today for their varying degrees of idealism, lack of coherent account of the capitalist mode of production, over-emphasis on individual experiences, and disarticulation from mass movements, these intellectual currents in fact produced an extensive, rigorous and largely valuable critique of the failures of sex-class theory, revolutionary nationalism and gay liberationism. AIDS movements in the 1990s drawing from Foucault and queer theory, trans struggles since the 2000s informed by multiple theoretical currents, and militants in US Black Lives Matter identifying as inspired by intersectional black feminism, all made major political and theoretical breakthroughs in the politics of gender in close dialogue with these academic currents. For those concerned with communist revolution, the limits of such academic work is clear, particularly given the absence of a coherent critique of capitalism. But ultimately a task today is to incorporate, rather than reject wholesale, their efforts to think and move beyond the gender politics of 1970s movements.

A call to abolish the family in the present cannot just repeat Engels, Kollontai or Third World Gay Revolution. However much these historical examples have to teach, today requires a communist feminism able to move beyond the limits of these prior movements against the family. To do so, communist theoretical work today on the family must account for the structural transformation of working-class generational reproduction since the 1970s, particularly the decline of the male-breadwinner nuclear family and the fragmentation of gender categories. To this shifting political economy I now turn.

After the Male-Breadwinner Family

Ultimately the positive revolutionary vision of these movements was defeated. By the late-1970s, the uprisings sweeping the world had overwhelmingly been crushed. Despite their varying political contexts, these political defeats were all embedded in a broader crisis of capitalist profitability.⁶² The gender insurgents of the 1970s shared in this sharp movement decline. Feminists, after seeing significant gains in women's equality in the 1970s both due to economic changes and legislative victories, faced a political backlash and the persistence of a gender wage gap. The gay liberation movement moderated its energies, shrinking into a narrow rights-based advocacy movement in the 1970s, only renewing a militant phase during the peak of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s. Welfare rights advocates stopped gaining ground by the end of the 1970s, and soon saw the wholesale dismantling of cash-transfer benefits and social services in a new era of austerity.

As the broader wave of struggle collapsed in the mid-1970s, the weakened descendants of these movements increasingly theorized and organized around gender separated from any class politics. When severed from mass economic demands, women's and gay rights movements continue to make other, more limited gains in legal equality. More importantly, these gender movements have transformed the expectations and interpersonal dynamics of young women and queer people. Most young people now comfortably embrace a right to non-marital sex for pleasure and a belief that families can take diverse acceptable forms. They are more likely than not to be comfortable

with same-sex relationships and gender non-conformity, and a concern for personal well-being most likely guides their sex- and gender-related decisions.

Yet as radical movements were defeated, key features of the family form they opposed unexpectedly shifted. The effects of the prolonged profitability crisis and defeat of the workers' movement since the mid-1970s ultimately made it impossible for most working-class people to afford to keep an unwaged housewife out of the labour market. It was not queers or feminists that ultimately brought this family form into crisis. The male-breadwinner family form is no longer characteristic of any sector of society, and has lost its social hegemony due to the convergence of several simultaneous trends. In its place, we've seen the dramatic and steady growth of dual-wage earner households, of people choosing not to partner or marry, of atomized and fragmented family structures, and of many accessing reproductive services as a commodity in the market. Together, these dynamics have produced a heterogeneous array of family forms in working-class life. Unlike the birth of the workers' movement, when worker organization played an instrumental role in creating the conditions for the ascendancy of the working-class housewife, her demise largely depended on a set of structural forces.

Women's lives saw major changes in the decades since the defeat of the insurgent feminist movement. First, married women have moved into the labor force in large numbers. Women's labor market participation grew gradually with the expansion of white collar employment from the 1920s on. In the 1950s, during the peak of suburbanization, older women began to work in greater numbers. But with the entry of young married women into work growing through the 1960s and 1970s, the shift became increasingly visible and undeniable to all. For married women with a husband present in the US, labor market participation grew steadily from in the 30 percent range from 1960s to leveling off at over 60 percent in the 1990s.⁶³

Though the persistence of labor market regulations have slowed women's increasing labor market participation in European social democracies, women's employment has still steadily climbed across the OECD. In the UK, women's workforce participation grew from 37 percent in 1961 to the 53 percent in

63. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Sandra Tzvetkova, 'Working Women: Key Facts and trends in female labor force participation,' *Our World in Data*, 2017.

1990, and remained in the mid-50s since. In Germany, women went from 39 percent in 1970 to 56 percent in 2016, a period of falling real wages.⁶⁴

Many factors contributed to women's increasing labor market participation, including the increase of feminized jobs in reproductive service labor, white collar employment, education and healthcare; declining fertility; increased availability of part-time work; and increasing desire for women to work. In many industries and nations, bans on married women's employment and the employment of mothers were eliminated through the 1960s and 1970s. Most importantly for the working-class family is economic necessity. Working-class wages stagnated and declined since the 1970s, and maintaining comparable standards of living has required the vast majority of working-class families to send wives into the workforce, supplemented with mounting household debt. Working-class families can no longer afford the housewife-based family. Capitalism has destroyed the housewife-family that was central to the respectability of the workers' movement.

Accompanying women's labor market participation, people in OECD nations have chosen to marry later, to live together without marrying, to divorce more quickly, and to live as single people. In the US, crude divorce rates went from 3.5 per thousand of the population over 15 in 1950 to 6.3 per thousand in 1985; in England and Wales, from 0.9 to 4.0 per thousand over the same period.⁶⁵

From 1950, only 10 percent of European households had one individual; in 2000, this had grown to 30 percent of households in Great Britain, 40 percent in Sweden, and the lowest of the continent being 20 percent in Greece.⁶⁶ Likely, higher divorce rates enable both men and women to leave bad and unfulfilling relationships, and to pursue better sex and non-traditional family structures. It also intensifies atomization, isolation and fragmentation of social life.

Couples have few children, start having children later and stop earlier. Fertility has declined everywhere; between 1900 and 2000 from 5.0 children per woman in Germany to 1.3, 3.8 in the US to 2.0, 5.8 in India to 3.3, about 6 in Latin America to 2.7.⁶⁷

64. Ibid.

65. Göran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900–2000* (Routledge 2004), 190.

66. Stephanie Coontz, 'The World Historical Transformation of Marriage', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (2004), 974–979.

67. Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, 293.

Children are much more likely to be born outside of marriages. As a percentage of live births, extra-marital births have gone from 8.0 in the UK in 1960 to 39.5 in 2000, 5.3 in the US to 31.0, 11.6 in the former East Germany to 49.9 and 6.7 to 17.7 in former West Germany.⁶⁸ Lower fertility means more of life is spent outside of childrearing, outside the home, and outside the narrow confines of the nuclear family.

In addition to wage stagnation, another element of the prolonged capitalist crisis has contributed to the decline of the male-breadwinner family form, compounding these many factors: the commodification of reproductive labour. With declining profit rates in manufacturing and many other sectors, capitalist investment has increasingly sought new opportunities in consumer services. This has contributed to the significant growth of for-profit firms and very low-wage workers providing services previously done by unwaged housewives. Even many working-class people can drop their clothes off at laundromats, their children at day care centres, grab a meal at a fast food restaurant, and pay other workers to do their housecleaning. This has increased employment demand in feminized sectors, providing more work opportunities to working-class women and queers. Affluent families employ immigrant domestic workers to clean their homes and raise their children at rates not seen since the mid-19th century. By outsourcing reproductive labour to other waged services, people free up time for their more demanding work weeks, and reduce their reliance on unwaged labour in the home.

Collectively, all these changes have meant an improvement in all people's ability to pursue fulfilling relationships beyond the narrow expectations of family and community. These factors have likely been major contributors in the huge growth of people pursuing homosexual relationships, gender transitions, and complex non-traditional families. In many ways, these dramatic demographic shifts in how people pursue relationships have been a real, qualitative improvement in people's gender and sexual lives. Youth today come of age in a sexually freer world than their grandparents.

But these shifts also entail an intensification of dependency on the wage. The decline of the male-breadwinner working-class family form has shifted the experience of women and queers from dependency on the personal domination of a husband or father to

68. Ibid., 199.

dependency on the impersonal domination of the wage. They have escaped the tyranny of patriarchal homes, only to find themselves as queer homeless youth on the streets of major cities, as single mothers condemned to chronic poverty, or among the millions of queer people and women working in low-wage service industries, or as informal workers on the fringes of the wage economy. Everyone is forced to find and secure work, competing constantly with other proletarians, and subject to the gender and sexual discipline of employers and the work process. Just as the male-breadwinner family was enabled by a succession of victories of the workers' movement, prolonged economic crisis and the collapse of the workers' movement has condemned people to material deprivation, market dependency and alienated work. The new heterogeneous family structures are a symptom of desperation as much as they are of the practice of care, and in this market dependency everyone is subject to new forms of predation. A queer youth, freed from a violent relationship with their parents, may be subject to the new risks of street-based sex work; young mothers, opting not to marry their abusive boyfriends, may find themselves working long hours in retail service under sexually-harassing managers.

Amidst these economic trends, working-class people are much more likely to depend on fragmented, extended and heterogeneous kinship relations in ways that parallel the 19th century. Parents of all social classes divorce and remarry at high rates, producing so-called blended families of step-children. Mothers with incarcerated relatives, especially common among African Americans, may live and co-parent with their sister, their mother or best friend. Immigrants send back a substantial portion of their wages to family members in their country of origin. They may benefit from sending such remittances in the long term, hoping to retire in their rural communities with land or housing purchased by their families and later supported by their children, but such personal material benefits do not likely adequately account for the depth and persistence of migrant workers sending remittances. Same-sex families are increasingly common, with access to wage labour, reduced homophobic sanctions, and more accepting public opinion enabling same-sex couples to integrate with their respective class milieu. Same-sex couples are also more likely to be embedded in heterogeneous, queer networks of dependency that include

ex-lovers, step- and half-children, close friends, and other chosen-kin dependencies.

These are all, of course, forms of family. They are both adaptive responses to worsening economic conditions, strategies of reproduction and survival in meeting people's material and affective needs, and potential spaces of personal domination and violence. Their semi-chosen character—given that they are not quite as mandated by the weight of social expectation and naturalized blood ties, and present more exit options than their counterparts in previous eras—provides marginally more means of resisting heteronormative and patriarchal violence. Queer people and queer countercultures have much to teach everyone about more sane and decent ways to care for each other in less harmful ways. Yet these chosen forms of family are lived under capitalist conditions, constrained and torqued by the brutality of wage labor. Extended networks of caring friendships often break down in the face of economic constraints. In queer countercultures, for example, the common occurrences of people relocating for work or even having a child can undermine long-standing networks of caring friends. Such people's lives remain bisected by class and racial stratifications, and aspirations of mutual care rarely can navigate crises of severe drug use, prolonged unemployment, incarceration or mental illness. The aspirations of queer, feminist and black leftists to love and care for each other in the face of the brutality of this world cannot be realized in conditions of generalized market dependency. Today's queer community does not, and cannot, prefigure communism.

For those historically excluded from the workers' movement, the decline of family dependency contributes to the intensification of precarity and state violence; for the stable white working class, it has meant a massive realignment of gender and sexual relations compounded by economic instability. Here are some useful clues in understanding the growing male revanchism on the far right, the growth of post-1970s conservative religious movements centring the heterosexual family as the bedrock of social order, and the rage at feminists that is cultivated among atomized online men's networks. A housewife and a family wage job used to provide masculine dignity, a protected place where proletarians could act out sexual and gender fantasies and where men in particular could have their sexual and

affective needs met; a refuge from the trials of wage labour and an assurance that someone else would do the work of reproduction. Proletarian men and women fought for, won, and defended that family form across multiple generations, and now it is no longer available. Some have found a queer feminist politics that holds the promise of a far greater humanity. Some others turn to the misogynistic options offered by an embittered white male suburban class: fascist organizations, incel discussion boards, self-help misogynistic YouTube channels, the anti-feminist humor of social democratic podcasts, or politicians that celebrate themselves as open rapists and sexual harassers.

Throughout the history of capitalist development followed here, the family has been weaponized in an ideological attack on sectors of the working class. For Engels, this took the form of horror at a perceived sexual degeneration of the working class in crisis; for the workers' movement, it was to the advantage of the respectable male-breadwinner family to condemn its excluded antagonists among the lumpenproletariat, queers, and black working-class families. The bourgeoisie and its allies have always condemned families in poverty, linking a racialized hatred with a condemnation of poor people's strategies of reproduction in constrained circumstances, their perceived sexual license, and their gender non-normativity.

The cultural and ideological function of family as a social norm persists today, deployed to largely reactionary ends through a series of diverse political struggles. The outsized role of the family in the contemporary political imaginary is due to the persistence of precisely that which made the male-breadwinner family form so attractive as a basis for the workers' movement: the ideological power of the family as a claim to moral, social and cultural legitimacy amidst the social fragmentation, atomization and isolation of capitalism. The importance of the family as an imagined basis of social order and morality has several manifestations. It is a familiar feature of right-wing, neo-conservative politics, and is frequently deployed in religious fundamentalism of all sorts. The patriarchal nuclear family is the ideological bedrock of right-wing religious movements vision of social order, in their ongoing assaults on the gains of gay rights and women's rights. Religious conservatives share with many social scientists a belief that stable heterosexual couples are the basis for raising moral, socially-upstanding children. Social science continues to devote reams of

research to establishing how non-traditional parenting arrangements, particularly among poor and black people, are the cause of crime and many other social ills. Mainstream gay activists emphasize the stability and rectitude of their domestic arrangements as a central component of a politics reasonably termed "homonormative". All these manifestations — religious conservatives, social scientists and homonormative gays — share a focus on stable couplehood as a basis of parenting, and a thorough commitment to gender-normativity. These political currents assert families can be a conservative force. Given the dynamics of social atomization, dependency and property of family under capitalist conditions, there is some truth to these claims. The call to abolish the family is a confrontation with this ideological conservatism.

The housewife-based family form has been undermined by capitalist development itself. The demand to abolish the family is no longer straightforwardly targeting a particular, specific family form characteristic of a particular strategy of class reproduction. But nuclear families, as contradictory sites of violence and interdependence, still survive. The family persists today as the near exclusive institution for generational reproduction and as an adjunct to the precarity of wage labor for proletarian survival.

Communists today are again raising the call to abolish the family.⁶⁹ The specific material conditions of working-class reproduction today also make these calls distinct from previous eras. As working-class life is increasingly atomized, the call to abolish the family in the current moment is a confrontation with the privatization of social misery. The protracted economic crisis of stagnant wages, intensifying work regimes, and dismantled social wage infrastructures, coupled to the alienation and isolation of capitalist life, drive proletarians to seek out means of survival and emotional refuge. Fragmented romantic coupling,

69. A number of contemporary authors have taken up the abolition of the family with new critical enthusiasm. JJ Gleeson and KD Griffiths, in 'Kinderkommunismus: A Feminist Analysis of the 21st-Century Family and a Communist Proposal for its Abolition,' *Ritual*, 2015, offer one such proposal, proposing "the anti-dyadic crèche" as an ideal form of the 'counter-familial institution' to meet the social needs for generational reproduction, integrating all forms of education. Yet Gleeson and Griffiths under-specify the role of the state or wage labor in their 'counter-family' program.

Sophie Lewis' book on gestational surrogacy proposes a 'gestational commune' that generalizes non-proprietary care relations. Through the investigation of struggles of current gestational surrogate workers, Lewis distinguishes and separates genetic relations, the labor of gestation, and child-rearing, denaturalizing the unwaged labour of gestation and family reproduction. (Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against the Family*, Verso 2019.)

Madeline Lane-McKinley writes of shared practices of collective →

isolated parenting units, and attempts to rebuild some semblance of a nuclear family are the most likely forms of such retreat.

In contrast to the academic queer theorists of the 1980s and 1990s, new calls to abolish the family are all concerned with the revolutionary project of communism. They are each attempting to account, in varying ways, for a fundamental fragmentation of gender relations through the political and economic transformations of the family since the 1970s. They gesture towards the dissolution of the family as a reproductive unit through reproductive labor being assumed in non-market, collective institutions. They each seek out some means of restructuring the activity of generational reproduction. The demand to abolish the family can again offer a trajectory out of today's misery.

Afterward: Abolishing the Family and Communism

In a capitalist society, working-class reproduction depends on wage labor as mediated through the family. Proletarians generally must sell their labor power to capitalists in order to survive. Those who are unable to do so, including infants, rely on their familial ties with others engaging in the labor market. In addition to a familial access to the wage, children also rely on a considerable amount of reproductive labor. The vast majority of this reproductive labor has always been and continues to be unwaged. The family, particularly the heterosexual nuclear family, has served as the dominant and most stable mode of generational reproduction for proletarians under capitalism. Social democratic and socialist-identified states have, at times, expanded to take over significant parts of familial reproduction, but exclusively as a supplement to the primary dependency on the wage. At times and places, other systems of generational and daily reproduction have existed under capitalism, including orphanages, foster and adoptive care, single parent and extended family systems, and for those passing out of early childhood the systems of prisons, the military, and worker barracks. None of these institutions, however, has come close to fully

interdependence in her recent call for family abolition, pointing to the positive kernel of care to be preserved and transformed: 'How does the revolutionary horizon of the end of "the family" as a unit of private property mobilize us toward a fuller, less exploitive vision of care? This longing for collective caretaking must be hand-in-hand with any discourse against the family — otherwise doomed to logics of self-management and autonomy.' (Madelaine Lane-McKinley, 'The Idea of Children', *Blind Field Journal*, 2018).

replacing the family as a primary unit of generational reproduction. Today the expansion of waged and commodified reproductive labor has not yet extended into most of the labor of early child rearing, and still leaves much unwaged household and reproductive labor. The commodification of child rearing that has taken place still relies on familial ties to wage workers to pay for such care, shifting the register of familial dependency.

Gender and sexual freedom is fundamentally constrained under these capitalist conditions. Sex and sexuality become means of coercion and violence, rather than a source of human flourishing. The absence of gender and sexual freedom acts as a restriction on the free development, expression of well-being of all people. It prevents us from accessing a full gender expression and fulfilling sexual relations. The family provides people with the care and love they need, but at the price of personal domination. Within the family, children are subject to the arbitrary bigotry and domination of their parents along with their love and care, isolated in atomized housing units that limit interventions on behalf of children from outside the family unit. Children of the bourgeoisie are bound by the promise of inheritance and property; even with the limited means available to proletarians many depend on their families for support during bouts of unemployment or disability, or to provide unwaged yet financially necessary services like childcare. When old enough, proletarian children can leave home and achieve a measure of independence, but only through becoming bound to dependency on wage labor. Work itself is an elaborate regime of gender and sexual discipline on the lives of all proletarians, including enforced dress codes, the gendering of the labor process itself, affective labor in the service industry, workplace sexual violence, and above all the arbitrary bigotries of employers. In a society where capitalists dominate people's lives, gender freedom is impossible. Under certain conditions, proletarians can instead rely on the state for their survival outside of the family or wage labor, through welfare cash transfer benefits, state-provided housing and healthcare, or prisons. Yet all these institutions serve as systems of gender discipline, imposing the collective bigotries of the ruling class and its professional adjuncts on the lives of the poor.

This gender tyranny of proletarian dependency on the family, wage labor or the state, is particularly clear with non-passing trans

people. Trans people face high rates of violence within their homes by their parents or other familial caregivers. They experience high rates of employment discrimination, and many forms of harassment and violence within the workplace. For working-class trans women, this often results in exclusion from wage labor. When unemployed trans people turn to the state to aid in their survival, they face violence, denial of healthcare, and imposed gendered dress codes in homeless shelters, prisons or drug rehab programs, where gender conformity is key to the institutional notion of compliance. Though trans women have benefited from some limited social welfare provisions, the state is far from a reliable ally to gender non-conforming people.

Sexual and gender freedom necessarily means that how people choose to organize their romantic lives, kinship networks and domestic arrangements should have no consequence for people's standard of living and material well being. Gender freedom, therefore, relies on the widespread accessibility of means of survival and reproduction that do not rely on the family, wage labor, or the state. These means of survival include both the material features of reproduction — housing, food, hygiene, education — and the affective, interpersonal bonds of love and care people now primarily meet through family. Care under communism could be a crucial dimension of human freedom: care of mutual love and support; care of the positive labor of raising children and caring for the ill; care of erotic connection and pleasure; care of aiding each other in fulfilling the vast possibilities of humanity, expressed in countless ways, including through the forms of self-expression now called gender. Care in capitalist society is a commodified, subjugating, and alienated act; but in it is the kernel of a non-alienating interdependence and love. Positive freedoms are enabled by the foundation of universal material support, and a queer, feminist cultural transformation centering love and supporting our mutual self-development.

Unlike current countercultural efforts to form alternative families, the abolition of the family would be a generalized restructuring of the material conditions of social reproduction dependent on communication and the suppression of the economy. Communist units of love and domestic reproduction must replace the family for everyone, new institutions explored and constituted through the conditions of struggle. In contrast to some previous eras of family abolition as a demand,

I argue communist gender freedom necessitates the simultaneous abolition of wage labor and the state. Though I do not explore concrete models here, I suspect such communist domestic units may resemble some of the vision of Fourier: communes of a couple hundred people who pool reproductive labor and share in child-rearing, include some attention to sexual pleasure and fulfillment, and work to meet everyone's interpersonal and development needs without breaking chosen affective, romantic or parental bonds between individuals.⁷⁰

The positive supersession of the family is the preservation and emancipation of the genuine love and care proletarian people have found with each other in the midst of hardship: the fun and joy of eroticism; the intimacy of parenting and romance. This love and care, transformed and generalized, is what is to be preserved in the abolition of familial domination. Loosened from the rigid social roles of heteronormative gender and sexual identity, the material constraints of capitalism, and remade in the intensity of revolutionary struggle, the potential of love and care can be finally freed onto the world. The abolition of the family must be the positive creation of a society of generalized human care and queer love.

70. See ME O'Brien, 'Communizing Care', *Pinko* no. 1 (2019) for an elaboration of this vision.

THE PASSION OF COMMUNISM

Italian Invariance in the 1970s

Do not *all* uprisings, without exception, have their roots in *the wretched isolation of men from the community [Gemeinwesen]*? Does not *every* uprising necessarily presuppose isolation? Would the Revolution of 1789 have occurred without the wretched isolation of the French citizens from the community? It was intended precisely to abolish this isolation.

But the *community [Gemeinwesen]* from which the worker is *isolated* is a community of quite different reality and scope than the *political* community. The community from which *his own labour* separates him is *life* itself, physical and mental life, human morality [*Sittlichkeit*], human activity, human enjoyment, *human* being. *Human being* is the *true community [Gemeinwesen]* of mankind. [...]

A social revolution takes the standpoint of the *whole* because—even if it were to occur in only *one* factory district—it represents man's protest against a dehumanized life, because it starts out from the *standpoint* of a *separate real individual*, because the *community [Gemeinwesen]*, against whose separation from himself the individual reacts, is man's *true* community, *human* being.¹

1. Marx, 'Critical Notes on the Article: "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian"' *Vorwärts!* no. 63 August 1844. (MECW 3): 204–205, translation adapted.

INTRODUCTION

While Jacques Camatte has received recognition from the English-speaking world, few have commented on members of the larger circle who contributed to or developed the ideas of the journal *Invariance*, individuals such as Giorgio Cesarano, Gianni Carchia, Furio di Paola, and Carsten Juhl. This tradition, given the name “radical critique” by Cesarano, had its greatest impact in Italy in the period from 1968 through 1974, during which its adherents populated groups like Comotismo, Ludd, and Councilist Organisation. After Cesarano’s suicide and the self-dissolution of these factions, the tradition’s influence waned until the next wave of struggles were brought to an end in the late 70s. Then a period of reflection opened; balance-sheets were drawn, and “[Cesarano’s] works (especially *Apocalypse and Revolution* and *Survival Manual*) were read by many comrades, especially the young”.² In the later period, Antonio Negri wrote polemics against this “pessimistic” thought, while for others like Mario Mieli and Gianni Carchia, the *Invariance* analysis grounded their own investigations.³ It is this context that is most relevant to contemporary debates in the English language, in which a relatively homogeneous narrative dominates the last century of developments in Italian political thought, progressing neatly from Gramsci through Operaismo to Autonomia and finally the post-workerist theorists popularised during the anti-globalisation movement.

Crucial to examining this largely post-Bordigist and post-Situationist tradition is that it marks a distinct communist opposition both to insurrectionary militancy and workerism in Italy. While the former was rejected as a sacrificial ideology, the latter was criticised for positing the existence of a proletarian subject position — however sociologically updated as the “mass worker” or “multitude” — that could affirm its own constitutive project. For the post-*Invariance* tradition, on the contrary, the present contained “nothing human that could be stably posed... as an

2. Furio di Paola, ‘Dopo la dialettica’ in *Aut Aut* 165 (1978).

3. Camatte’s earliest writings from the 1960s were first published in Bordigist journals and, in addition to the single Italian edition of *Invariance* in 1968, his texts were often translated and re-published in Italy throughout the 1970s. Mieli’s recently retranslated *Elements of a Gay Critique* begins: ‘Contemporary gay movements have emerged in those countries in which capital has come to its real domination’, followed by a two page footnote explaining Camatte’s analysis thereof. With respect to Carchia, see the translated text ‘Glosses on Humanism’ below. Journals such as *Agaragar* and *L’erba voglio* initially continued the

alternative to capital”.⁴ Operaismo, on their analysis, failed to “pose that minimum Marxist objective: the negation of the proletariat”, and to understand the present historical task as “the negation of all the organised structures that restrict being to the cage of professions and economy”.⁵ Similarly, the radical acts of the young Metropolitan Indians⁶ and Autonomia did not signal the emergence of new subject positions, but were rather themselves the signs of a crisis of subjectivity and of a desire for communism that could only be satisfied by humanity’s destitution of a historically contingent form, capital.⁷ This Italian development of Camatte’s thought goes against what are perhaps the three central points of his English-language reception: (1) that he became an anarcho-primitivist advocate of the pre-capitalist community, (2) that he advocates for a withdrawal from capitalist relations, and (3) that he is an abstract humanist.⁸ Rather than offering a systematic reading of Camatte’s work that would aim to absolve him of these three readings, I examine how his work enabled the thinking of communisation as the destitution of capital’s form, developed an ethical but non-quietist understanding of the pro-revolutionary milieu in its relation to the real movement and, finally, offered a non-humanist concept of dehumanisation.

In this, Camatte and, to a greater extent, Cesarano take a longer look at the history of domination in a manner that is closer to the history of a civilisation comparable to Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This was not an abstract exercise, but a way of grasping, largely through their reading of texts by Marx such as the “Urtext of the Critique of Political Economy” and the *Grundrisse*, the specific historical process through which a very particular form had become autonomous. The aim of such an investigation was not to reject all technology and vestiges of modernity — “a total rejection of the historical product...

tradition in the early 70s, while later it was reviews such as *Insurrezione*, *Puzz* and especially *Maelstrom* that continued to work through its implications.

4. Jacques Camatte, ‘La révolte des étudiants Italiens: un autre moment de la crise de la représentation’ in *Invariance* Series III nos. 5-6 (1980).

5. *Ibid.*

6. The Metropolitan Indians were an offshoot of Autonomia that emerged in 1975, marked by an emphasis on large street confrontations. The name was inspired by the slogan ‘let’s leave the reservation’, by which was meant modern metropolitan existence.

7. Those who confuse Camatte’s life choices today for a position on what might be necessary for revolution overlook the resolute critique of activism on the part of the Bordigists: ‘I preserve intact my mentality: the men do not count, they do not represent anything, cannot have any influence; the facts determine the new situations. And when the situations are ripe, then the men emerge... I am very happy to live far from ridiculous and petty episodes of the so-called militant politics, from →

total retreat⁹—but to clarify precisely what the potential death of capital might mean through what we could today call the destitution of its essential forms. The overall argumentation of Camatte’s work throughout the 70s is thus neither a form of primitivism, which would seek to return to pre-modern communal forms, nor accelerationism, which would seek to overcome capitalism through a deepening of its contradiction-in-process, but precisely an anti-utopian theory that aims to restore the historical process from that reproductive fixed-point we call capitalism—a process that would develop, from fragmented potentials that exist today, the work of “millions of human beings who have laboured in obscurity for millennia... the immense process of becoming of millions of forces that are crystallised at any given moment”.¹⁰

It is with respect to the latter point that Camatte developed his concept of the *Gemeinwesen*, which must not be understood as the pre-modern community or even a new universal community of humanity. This concept should be grappled with as a response to his problematisation of humanity’s historical life and what it might mean that it had become blocked. In this, Camatte can be understood on a plane of consistency with the investigations of Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, Gilbert Simondon, and Andre Leroi-Gourhan. The only coherence to such a constellation—these non-humanists who nonetheless spent so much of their lives in the archives of humanity—would be the struggle to understand what it means for mankind to unfold its historical life given that its intellectual and practical capacities are not biological givens but discovered in whatever trans-generational medium contains and transmits the vital remnants of the past—whether images, utterances, technical forms or otherwise. They all understood that the avant-garde affirmation of the machine, indeed of modernity as such, could be compatible with the demand that

the mean chronicle, from the events day after day. Nothing of all that interests me’—Bordiga quoted in Arturo Peregalli and Sandro Saggiaro, *Amadeo Bordiga: La sconfitta e gli anni oscuri* (Edizioni Colibri 1998).

8. Point (1) is present in texts such as Tim Barker, ‘The Bleak Left’ *N+1* no. 28 (June 2017), (2) has been debated by Ray Brassier, ‘Wandering Abstraction’ in *Mute* (February 2014), and (3) has been argued by Theorie Communiste in François Danel, *Rupture dans la théorie de la révolution* (Senonevero 2003).

9. See Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, ‘Introduction’ in *The Accelerationist Reader* (Urbanomic, 2014). Even in the 1970s, Camatte concluded that, after the destruction of capital and labour as the material community, it will be possible to ‘take in charge the automated ensemble—the new inorganic being of man—that appears for the moment as capital’. Jacques Camatte, ‘Caractères du mouvement ouvrier français’ in *Invariance* Series II no. 10 (April 1971). Even in the case of Cesarano, who places a greater emphasis on a *longue durée* anthropology of machine domination, the final line

progress and modernisation be brought to a halt.¹¹ Situated between a confidence that “not even the dead are safe” and that “only a redeemed humanity obtains the fullness of its past”,¹² Camatte and Cesarano argued that the species, in its works and desires, had become really dominated, subjected to an inhuman spectacle by that imperative towards valorisation whose name is capital. For the circle surrounding *Invariance* came up against the following paradox that remains our own: the law of value dominates life yet somehow our dehumanised species must effect a rupture with the particular mediations of capital in order to reclaim its integral past and “surrender itself joyously to the true divisions and neverending confrontations of historical life”.¹³ To this end, it remains fruitful today to revisit Camatte and Cesarano’s *Gemeinwesen*.

AN OPERATION OF THE SPECIES, NOT THE PRO-REVOLUTIONARY

I read of a Rain-King in Africa to whom the people pray for rain when the rainy period comes. But surely that means they do not believe that he can make it rain, otherwise they would do it when the land is “a parched and arid desert.” [...] Or again: toward morning, when the sun is about to rise, rites of daybreak are celebrated by the people, but not during the night, when they simply burn lamps.¹⁴

Italian Invariance and the SI

In Italy, the reception of *Invariance* went hand-in-hand with the slow reception of the Situationists and council communism in the early 1970s. Even though the Situationist International was both founded and dissolved in Italy, Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* in

of *Apocalypse and Revolution* (translated below) calls for the ‘irreversible “domestication” of the machine, in all its possible manners of appearing’.

10. Jacques Camatte, *Bordiga et la passion du communisme* (Spartacus 1974).

11. Fyodorov argued that all of humanity should unite in rejecting progress by directing its attention towards the past through the common task of resurrecting the dead. This led, through Bogdonov and Tsiolkovsky, to the foundation of Russian Cosmism and the first practical results in astronautics. See Tsiolkovsky’s ‘Investigations of Outer Space by Rocket Devices’. ‘Progress is precisely the form of life in which the human race may come to taste the greatest sum of suffering while striving for the greatest sum of enjoyment... Although stagnation is death and regression no paradise, progress is truly hell, the truly human task is to save the victims of progress, to lead them out of hell’ Nikolai Fyodorov, *What Was Man Created For?* (Honeyglen 1990), 51.

12. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’ in *Selected Writings 4* (Harvard 2006), 390.

its entirety did not exist in a readable Italian translation until the late 70s.¹⁵ Thus Vaneigem's qualitative "art of living" and Debord's concept of the spectacle were initially received by readers such as Giorgio Cesarano and other young militants already under the influence of Camatte's largely Bordigist writings.¹⁶

Such theorists and the groups that they founded, like Comontismo discussed below, attempted to develop the concept of *Gemeinwesen*, which, following Camatte, they developed in terms of its dual sense as a particular community, on the one hand, and its more literal and potentially universal sense of common [*Gemein*] being [*wesen*] on the other.¹⁷ This concept, related to but distinct from that of species-being, or *Gattungswesen*, was to provide a unity to the Marxian corpus, explaining (1) the condition of possibility of alienation, (2) the definition of the classless society, and (3) the antinomies of that non-class, the only possible subject of communisation, that in negating itself would negate all classes. Camatte attempted to understand systematically what Negri dismissed as the "literary" asymmetry of Marx's work: that Marx developed a "theory of the subjectivity of capital, while... he did not develop a theory of the subjectivity of the working class".¹⁸ For Camatte, the structural unity of Marx's work was not antagonism but rather, as discussed below, capital's accession to the material community, on the one hand, and the classless society, on the other, thought by him through the universality of the *Gemeinwesen*. Marx's work was understood to move from the description of communism to the accomplishment of capital's real domination, from his early assertion that "Human being is the true *Gemeinwesen* of man" (1844 *Manuscripts*) to his later understanding that "Capital has become *human being*" (*Grundrisse*).

In Italy, then, the confusion of the spectacle with either a conspiracy or the mass media was avoided;

13. Guy Debord, *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of the Society of the Spectacle* (Chronos 1979), 24.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions* (Hackett 1993), 137.

15. And only after its ultimate translator 'found those responsible for this excess in their offices... hit them and... literally spat in their faces, for such is naturally the way good translators act when they meet bad ones'. See the Preface to the fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

16. The first and only Italian issue of the SI journal was published in July 1969. It contained a translation of 'The Proletariat as Subject and Representation' from *Society of the Spectacle*.

17. The word can be traced to an 18th century German translation of the Latin *Res publica*, a term whose own history moves from the public thing held in common to the Roman state, understood as that institution which manages the public interest. See 'Gemeinwesen' in Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Trier 2004).

Debord's analysis could be understood and, indeed, developed through Camatte's account of real subsumption as the alienation of the species from the *Gemeinwesen*.¹⁹ While Debord, as evidenced in an important letter from 1986, followed the development of these groups closely — and believed that, rather than the Italian SI, it was they who "did the most in Italy to import the spirit of [the French] May and notably among the workers" — he was a quick critic of "the theory of [the Italian group] 'Comontismo'" with its "aberrant tactical slogan of making oneself 'teppa' (equivalent of 'underworld' or 'bad guy')".²⁰ He summarises the group's trajectory through a dark joke based on a telling mistranslation: in a French appeal for solidarity with Italian political prisoners, the line "the most beautiful [that is, proletarian] youth die in jail" becomes "others [that is, pro-revolutionaries] spend *their youth* in prison", whereby a traditional description of capital's domination becomes an elegy for the wasted youth of the pro-revolutionary minority.²¹

Ludd, OC, Comontismo

Both Ludd and the Councilist Organization (OC) were formed and dissolved during the same brief interval between 1969 and 1971. Beginning with the SI journal's termination and the state-linked Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan, this period emerges at the end of the cycle of struggles paradigmatically linked to the Parisian May. Through an ironic inversion, it was the Ludd group that principally existed as a theoretical organ weighed down by "cultural baggage", while, through the contingencies of extended stays in jail, the innocuously named but heavily persecuted Councilist Organization (OC) developed an everyday practice and understanding of criminality.²² Looking towards the growth of populations excluded from the production process, the OC came to understand "the

18. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* (Autonome-dia 1984), 93. In an essay from 1981 Negri explicitly calls out the 'pessimistic' understanding of subsumption in 'catastrophic terms that one can even find in Marx', where subsumption is the 'social domination of capital as the disappearance of antagonism' and thus the 'harakiri of *Operismo*'. Antonio Negri, *Macchina Tempo* (Feltrinelli 1982), 164.

19. As Carchia affirms, explicitly linking the notion of real domination to that of spectacle, "The supersession of the physical instance of production, despite the persistence of the instance of value as the regulative law of social exchange has led — through the force of this antinomy — to [capital's] total domination of society as appearance" (Gianni Carchia, *La legittimazione dell'arte*).

20. Guy Debord, Letter to Semprun on March 28, 1986.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Comontismo, 'Note di preistoria contemporanea' in *Comontismo 1* (May, 1972), 9-10.

reality of the new forms of expression of the modern proletariat" in "the reality of a criminal and subversive practice of the everyday", but largely expressed itself in terms of councilist ideology. Ludd, on the other hand, was a national space for discussion, with membership across Turin, Genoa, Rome, Milan, and Trento, and with a prominent publishing house La Vecchia Talpa [the old mole], most notable for its critique of councilist ideology.²³

Active between 1972 and 1973, Comontismo represented the short-lived synthesis of Ludd's critique of councilism with the OC's analysis of the "modern proletariat's new forms of expression... in the criminal subversion of the everyday".²⁴ From their reading of *Invariance*, they posited the "sense of communism" as the "realisation of the *Gemeinwesen*", which was a "human essence that cannot be understood in an eschatological, metaphysical, or moral sense, but as the natural and social ground in opposition to the reified world of commodities in which all the alienated human senses have lost their capacity to sense that which is to come".²⁵ As discussed below, this is broadly consistent with Camatte's understanding thereof, which draws more thoroughly on philosophical discussions of humanity's participation in a common substance than it does on a sociological definition of the particular community.

Yet the name of the group already contains its ownmost antinomy: it is the "translation of *Gemeinwesen*, Com-ontos, of being". On the one hand, Comontismo was the "community of intent and action" constituted by "individuals that... place themselves outside of this society and against its mechanisms".²⁶ They were "qualitative and conscious individuals" with a "mode of life" such that "every partiality, every separation... tends dialectically to resolve itself".²⁷ On the other hand, Comontismo was "the most complete expression of the nascent 'human class' (historical heir to the revolutionary proletariat), negator of capital" that must "live, extend, radicalise and concretely organise the negative that the world of capital has inside itself". A particular group, then, that "finds its own finality in the realised community of human being, thus in the world of the qualitative,

23. For a more complete historical account of this period, see Miguel Amoros's account of the Italian Situationists alongside Francesco Santini's *Apocalypse and Survival*.

24. Comontismo, 'Note di preistoria contemporanea', 10.

25. Comontismo, 'Pre-eliminari sul Comontismo' (Genoa 1972).

26. Ibid.

27. Comontismo, 'Note di preistoria contemporanea'.

of what is authentic and properly liveable for man" that "will be the actualisation of the real human community". Comontismo itself was understood to be nothing but the "real movement that suppresses existing conditions" that would bring "the destruction of the fictitious community of capital and of the installation of the total community" through the "re-appropriation" of the *Gemeinwesen*.²⁸

Critique of the Racket and Civil War

Cesarano himself came to express one of the most powerful critiques of this tendency. He grasped that the Comontisti insurrectionaries, despite their rejection of councilism as a hypostasised form and their theoretical understanding of the contemporary conjuncture, remained stuck in a routine of the "nostalgic repetition of insurrectional creativity".²⁹ The Comontisti ideology of "teppism" was but "the obsolete style of the political militant" as there is not "any comportment or line of conduct that can be defined as revolutionary in itself... such a pure stylisation of conflictuality is like the 'realisation of a work of art'".³⁰ Following Vaneigem's *Treatise on Living for the Younger Generations*, Cesarano emphasised the ethical imperative to reject any neo-christian figure of the pro-revolutionary founded upon sacrifice and militancy. He sought to distinguish the spectacular civil war of the militant from the revolt of the "proletarian body of the species", evidenced by the very real and escalating manifestations of negativity at the time.³¹

By this, Cesarano did not mean to critique the intentions of the Comontisti, whose actions would otherwise appear inseparable from the more generalised insurrectionary situation that had developed only a year prior during the so-called Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969. On the contrary, he attempted to articulate a third path for the pro-revolutionary between militancy and quietism: the real movement is not to be found in the proliferation of forms of revolt already identified in the past, but located in the potential self-transcendence of every "form of politics which arises from even minimal conflict with the 'concrete' given".³² The Comontisti's illegalism "drown[ed their] own project of being in a simple and

28. Comontismo, 'Per la ultima internazionale'.

29. Giorgio Cesarano, *Apocalypse and Revolution*, §125. See translation below.

30. Ibid, §121.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

caricatural disobedience to the normative as such”.³³ Cesarano thus sought to conceive of a path towards revolt that passed first of all through the capitalised individual’s damaged subjectivity and the struggle for their needs and indeed happiness, a matter developed more rigorously in his final book *Survival Handbook*, which draws heavily on Lacan and the anti-psychiatric tradition.³⁴ Cesarano critiqued the Comontisti for blocking the emergence of the “true struggle” by presenting their own acts as exemplary, perpetrating the “infamous spectacle of civil war” that “continues to usurp the places, the modalities and time of revolution”.³⁵ The revolutionary process, argued Cesarano, “can never again take the exclusive traits of the civil war”, but rather must find the sense of a “disaggregation actively pursued”, only conceivable if in fact these impulses find expression at the level of the species.³⁶

According to Cesarano, then, what is crucial is not the auto-affirmation of a particular institution or party as standing in for the negative of the world, but the revolt of the species as remainder to the process of capitalist subsumption. Comontismo, a paradoxical “criminal gang—historical party—human community”, was the result of an exclusionary gang-form well-defined through its own criteria of militancy, posing as the human community at war with the inhuman who stood apart. Through the valorisation of criminality as such, they remained incapable of offering a critique of those subjectivities emerging from social disintegration—themselves above all—and thus functioned as a sort of Operaismo in negative.

THE SPECIES, THE COMMON, AND REAL DOMINATION

Expression is a hypothesis, an interpretation that comes to be justified by the primigenial mechanism of memory. Its product is conditioned by the persistence of and by its community with the extra-representational immediacy of something that “was” first and that will be again

33. Ibid, §127.

34. Indeed, while Cesarano himself still conceived the primacy of a more active struggle, it is no surprise to see how such a position could lead the pro-revolutionary group to conceive of its function as closer to group analysis than militancy, and why his work was influential among Italian feminists, see especially Lea Melandri and her journal *L'erba voglio*.

35. Giorgio Cesarano, *Cronaca di un ballo mascherato* (Varani 1983).

36. Giorgio Cesarano, *Lampi di Critica Radicale* (Mimesis 2005).

afterwards—even if in another form... Expression is the universal interpretive principle. Memory conserves something and manifests it: it is appropriate to call this the expression of something that was first.³⁷

37. Giorgio Colli, *Filosofia dell'espressione* (Adelphi Edizioni 1969), 21.

Gattungswesen and the Species

As *Invariance* stressed, the affirmation of the human that is necessary to the communist line is not a matter of hypostasising any past, present, or future community, but rather of standing in a particular continuity with the entire history of humanity while recognising a very real and ongoing *dehumanisation*. In this way, *Invariance* enabled a theoretical shift away from the too psychological and humanist discourse of alienation: rather than a purported reconciliation with a lost human essence, they advocated for the development of the species’ innumerable possibilities and forms of living—its *countless possible natures*.³⁸ This was to try and find another ground for the political, as the potentially antagonistic struggle over manners of living that would neither culminate in a clash of civilisations, nor a unified cosmopolitan society. This development is located in the way that Camatte, and Cesarano after him, attempted to think the relation between the species and the *Gemeinwesen*.

Invariance’s position must be distinguished from humanism as the presupposition of a fixed human essence, of a determinate figure of man etched in the sand, whether ahistorical or to be realised at history’s end. Humanism, the triumph of *Humanitas*, has never been concerned with reversing a very real *decadence of the human*. It is rather the belief in humanity as a self-sufficient species composed of individual *persons*, who hold on to thinking as their most prized possession since birth. The history of humanism is inseparable from that of society and capital alike. It follows that *longue durée* in the West from the ancient political communities through the Roman *societas generis humani* to the French *société civile*. From

38. The imperative to think from the vantage point of the species is in large part derived from the influence of Amadeo Bordiga, for whom it was not just the narrow confines of Italian civil society that mattered—the specificity of the Russian experience was as important as the history of decolonial struggles, which were as important as the most ancient ethnological record. ‘Communism is a *world view*’, said Bordiga to that provincial humanist Gramsci, ‘Marx deals with the relation between man and the earth. For us, man is the Species; for bourgeois gentlemen, man is the individual’. Amadeo Bordiga, ‘Specie umana e crosta terrestre’ *Il Programma Comunista* no. 6 (1952).

“living well” atop the slaves, to the spread of (Roman) citizenship against the barbarians, to the achieved universality of rights and the market with its own inhuman remainder relegated to slums and refugee camps. With each step one finds, on the one hand, the contingent history of those impersonal forces that, expropriating all particular communities, progressively produce that depoliticised population which will, in modern times, become dominated by the law of value; and, on the other, the exterminating logic of humanism’s biopolitical racism eradicating an outside that it refuses to recognise. It is within these successive definitions of humanity’s determinate essence, and the sequence of groups or national communities that have established themselves as the embodiment thereof, that we see how a determinate human essence has always been constituted alongside a genocidal division between *Homo humanus* and *Homo barbarus*.³⁹

In this long history, a logical problem of the totality mixes with a political reality of domination. For a paradox poses itself in thinking the possible unity of the human species which is neither defined by any particular essence nor as anything like a united community. Where the state and the market present at once the expropriation of particular communities and their reunification at a juridical level, Camatte and especially Cesarano instead attempt to think the ontological problem of a non-exclusive unity to the species. To explain this point — “the paradox that radical critique deepens and sets off from” — Cesarano cites a passage from Theodor Adorno which defines humanity as “that which excludes absolutely nothing”, for:

If humanity were a totality that no longer held within it any limiting principle, then it would also be free of the coercion that subjects all its members to such a principle and thereby would no longer be a totality... only with the decomposition of the principle of totality that establishes limits... would there be humanity and not its deceptive image.⁴⁰

39. In Camatte’s words: “there is a movement of unification, of reunification through the will to integrate all... but by exclusion, destruction of the others... This was manifested, for example, in the formation of the vast Persian empires, of the Syrians, the Greeks, the Romans, Chinese... but also the Nazi reich. Each time that such an empire was formed, there was the production of a definition of what the human should be (and therefore an elimination). Humans have ‘not known their possibilities’ and ‘remained sick in their ghettos that they claim to be human groups, to be humanity, defined by those distinguishing properties that allow them to exclude others’. Jacques Camatte, ‘Marx et le *Gemeinwesen*’ in *Invariance* Series III nos. 5-6 (1980). See translation below.

Humanity, for Camatte and Cesarano, is a collection without presupposition or condition of belonging, without spatial or temporal borders, that, cutting across all past and given social forms into the future, involves no possible exclusion of the modalities that human existence might take. In this way they sought to understand both the struggle of humanity against a particular historical form that has been globalised (“it is all of humanity perceived through time that is hostile to capital”⁴¹) and what the historical life of this species could be as its own constant “autopoetic” self-overcoming.⁴²

Yet, if the species is neither united by a determinate essence nor any particular social form, what non-religious or utopian sense could this common or generic being of the species possibly have? “Invariance varies”, Camatte claims, but “only as the affirmation of the human community’s becoming”.⁴³ The fabled invariance is affirmed as the *Gemeinwesen* which cannot be a “human nature” or a transhistorical anthropological invariant but rather the “corpus in which the diverse human generations can rediscover one another in perceiving their difference... the common being of humans in their becoming [and] a form that this common being can take”.⁴⁴

***Gemeinwesen* and the Common**

As the above quote indicates, *Gemeinwesen* is an ontological notion. In English, it is this dimension of Camatte’s works that has been lost in translation. Camatte’s reasoning remains unintelligible if, as seen in most English-language commentaries and indeed translations, *Gemeinwesen* is understood as a particular community.⁴⁵ For Camatte, communism is not the revindication of the human being, but rather of human *being*. For, according to him, particular communities “cannot simply live as a collection of human

40. Giorgio Cesarano, *Manuale di sopravvivenza*, 227. The quote is from Theodor Adorno, ‘Progress’ in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* (Stanford 2003), 128f.

41. Jacques Camatte, ‘Errance de l’humanité’, in *Invariance* Series II no. 3 (1973).

42. Cesarano, *Manuale di sopravvivenza*, 227.

43. Jacques Camatte, ‘Vers le communauté humain’ in *Invariance* Series III No. 3 (June 1978).

44. Ibid. The relation between common and species being (*Gemein-* and *Gattungswesen*) may be clarified by considering the etymological roots of the Latin *species*, derived from Greek *eidos*. ‘Special [or species] being is the being that is common or generic and this is something like the image or the face of humanity’. Giorgio Agamben, ‘Special being’ in *Profanations* (MIT 2005).

45. While ‘*Gemeinwesen*’ is left untranslated as a technical term in the French original and Italian translations of Camatte’s work, English-language translators have substituted ‘community’. This makes it impossible →

beings”,⁴⁶ there must be a pre-individual and impersonal common movement or substance. Particular communities, then, would exist as singular ways of individuating this substance. Camatte understands the pre-individual *Gemeinwesen* precisely as that medium in which particular communities past, present, and future unfold and communicate themselves, through their linguistic and technical production—or, at the limit, even conflict. The *Gemeinwesen* is nothing less than the generic mode of existence of human potential: the manner in which forms, paradigms and technical means of living persist—Marx’s “book of human powers”.⁴⁷ In the *Gemeinwesen*, “all the varied productions of the past—art, philosophy, science—are fragments. Elements of the vast despoliation of human beings as well as attempts to remedy it”.⁴⁸

In the history of philosophy, Camatte’s problem is most comprehensible in terms of the post-Averroësian tradition, which attempts to think the manner in which human thought takes place not as a matter of individual cognition, but rather through contact with a common intellect.⁴⁹ Camatte, drawing upon Bordiga and the seminal French anthropologist of technology André Leroi-Gourhan,⁵⁰ understands one of Marx’s essential insights to be what the latter calls “universal work” or “the universal character of every human being’s thought”.⁵¹ It is the “social brain” that is our own as much as that of the “species”, as “the summation of all the beings that encircle us and that preceded us”.⁵² Bordiga’s “Content of the Communist Program” affirmed the centrality of this line to Marxism:

In Marxism, production does not only conserve the single human animal but is a circuit for its reproduction. [...] Every brain does not pulse only with the sensations of its own life, but also those of its progenitors... [so] does everyone think also with the brain of the other,

to determine where Camatte is in fact employing the everyday French ‘communauté’ and where he is developing his own concept. For instance the title of his principal work, *Capital et Gemeinwesen*, appears in English as *Capital and Community*.

46. Camatte, ‘Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*’.

47. Indeed, Camatte’s argument is structurally similar to Gilbert Simondon’s account of the historical emergence of the ‘technical universe’, of how it became a separate and alienated sphere—technology—that, through the logic of progress, excluded past results from human use.

48. Camatte, ‘Errance de l’humanité’.

49. See Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (Columbia University Press 2019).

50. André Leroi-Gourhan was a seminal French anthropologist of the 20th century, who developed an empirically rigorous account of anthropogenesis (see his *Gesture and Speech*) and of humanity’s technical capacities. It is this anthropological tendency of Camatte’s thought that Cesarano in particular develops.

living together. [...] For us, true materialists, there is a collective brain, and the social human will be a development, unknown to the old generations, of the social brain. That one thinks with the heads of others is a positive fact, both ancient and contemporary.⁵³

For both thinkers, history is not to be understood as a process that progressively “swallows past possibilities”⁵⁴, but as an electrical field and site of tensions, a result of “the work of millions who have laboured in obscurity of millennia... the immense process of becoming of millions of forces”.⁵⁵ Even if, in Bordiga’s own words, today the “historical ‘field’ is a cesspool” where “person-molecules” pretend to be the subject of history, the truly historical will “fly all along its line of force”.⁵⁶ That line (and the notion of the *Gemeinwesen*) points towards a world in which the dead labour of the past would not dominate the present, which is not to suggest that praxis would be *sui generis* but always an unworking of what once was.

Here we glimpse the full sense of what it means that, on the one hand, the “human being... only is by superseding the given to which it can never be reduced”, and, on the other, that the *Gemeinwesen*, is “non-human”—that the human to be affirmed, the human that is the locus of the communist project, *has no nature*.⁵⁷ That is, the human is precisely located in this multiplicity of possible relations to, and forms of, its non-human exterior (the common), and not defined by an innate possession or faculty, such as its “rationality” or “creativity”.⁵⁸ Here we begin to see, on Camatte’s reasoning, the sense in which this dimension of historicity could be blocked by modern forms of domination—where capital could insert itself in separating human praxis from its works—just as much as how the pre-supposed communities of the past, regarding themselves as eternal, could mask the emergence of this dimension in its fullness.

51. Camatte, ‘Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*’.

52. Ibid.

53. Amadeo Bordiga, ‘The Original Content of the Communist Program’ *Il Programma Comunista* nos. 21 and 22 (1958).

54. Camatte, ‘Errance de l’humanité’.

55. Camatte, *Bordiga et la passion pour le communisme*.

56. Ibid.

57. Camatte, ‘Errance de l’humanité’.

58. I thus disagree with Brassier’s claim in ‘Wandering Abstraction’ that Camatte ‘hypostatizes a set of human expressive capacities that persist not only independently of capitalism but of every form of social organisation’. By defining the human in terms of its relation to the non-human corpus of the *Gemeinwesen* Marx precisely avoids this problem. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that Gianni Carchia, translated below, is more consistent on this point.

Camatte argues that the accession of humanity to the *Gemeinwesen* with the end of class society must be distinct from the pre-capitalist plurality of social substances or “anthropomorphised property” analysed by Marx in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Rather, it signals the end of the epochal dissemination of presupposed or reified ways of living, in reference to that “closure of prehistory” discussed by Marx.⁵⁹ The *Gemeinwesen* is neither a future global society nor a return to the pre-modern community, but rather the common substance that allows for the development of a sense of the political that would be non-identical to the illusions of bourgeois democracy. Here, once again, we find that the more we explore the concept of the *Gemeinwesen*, the more we understand the very real possibility – and, of course, *reality* – of dehumanisation, and the terrible difficulty of grasping the nature of that operation that could destitute the material ground of separation.

Domination and the Biological Revolution

We have seen how the concept of the *Gemeinwesen* was understood by Camatte as a relation between the universality of the species and the common, rather than as a valorisation of the pre-modern community. We now turn towards the manner in which this concept shifted Marxist discussions of subjection and revolt, primarily examining his turn away from the notion of the real or formal subsumption of the production process towards that of capital’s formal or real *domination*.

For Camatte, the concept of real domination emphasises a dimension of Marx’s thought that had been lost in the then new translations of texts such as “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” and the *Grundrisse*.⁶⁰ The German concept *Subsumtion*, especially as developed in Marx’s unpublished drafts and notebooks, has two components: the submission of the particular and the domination of the concept. In French and Italian, however, the term was initially

59. Marx ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’ (MECW 29), 263f.

60. The *Grundrisse* and the ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’ appeared in French and Italian in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Much of Camatte’s work throughout the 1960s was intended as an intervention in the reception of these works and indeed as criticism of their translations, especially those by his former Bordigist comrade Roger Dangeville. When Gianni Carchia and the other Italian translators of Camatte’s *Capital et Gemeinwesen* attempted to recover the appropriate citations from Marx they ‘arrived at the conclusion, for which we assume responsibility, that the

translated as the “submission” of labour to capital,⁶¹ placing the emphasis on the working class’ action rather than its domination by capital. As Camatte concludes, “we have always preferred to use the expression of real or formal domination (while understanding that that implies the submission of the proletariat) because the principal, dominant, subject is in fact capital. It isn’t for nothing that Marx wrote *Capital* and not *Proletariat*.”⁶² More importantly, Camatte sought to emphasise that the relation of subsumption is not just either an act of domination or submission, but a process by which capital “includes” or “appropriates to itself” the life process of the species as its own substance – and thus something on the order of an anthropological transformation.⁶³

The *Invariance* circle looked across the Marxian corpus to understand the development and eventual real domination of capital as the unity and completion of two movements: “the *expropriation of communities*, creating the proletariat” and “the *autonomisation of value*.”⁶⁴ Fundamental to such a reading is the chapter on pre-capitalist social forms in the *Grundrisse* which recounts “how [human] activity was externalised, autonomized and made into an oppressive power which dissolved communities... [and developed] classes.”⁶⁵ That humanity lives in relation to a *material community*, then, and not to either a *Gemeinwesen* or a plurality of particular communities, signifies that it has been totally reduced to living in relation to a form embodied in “the dead, crystallised element, the work of millions of human beings exteriorised in the form of fixed capital that founds the community.”⁶⁶ *Individuals*, argues Marx in the “Urtext”, have “given themselves reified being through their products” for whom “their *Gemeinwesen* itself appears as an external thing”, so that “on the one hand, [they are] not subsumed under any naturally evolved community and, on the other, they are not consciously communal individuals

translations by Bruno Maffi, Roger Dangeville, Mario Tronti, Galvano Della Volpe, Enzo Grillo, M.L. Boggeri, were politically motivated’ (Jacques Camatte, *Il capitale totale* (Dedalo libri 1976), 6). This resulted in a 1977 dual-language translation of the *Urtext* by Carchia with an important introduction by Camatte, ‘Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*’, that is translated below. Karl Marx, *Urtext: frammento del testo originario di ‘Per la critica dell’economia politica’* (Savona 1977).

61. Karl Marx, *Un chapitre inédit du Capital* (Paris 1971), translated by Roger Dangeville.

62. Jacques Camatte, ‘La phénomène de la valeur’ *Invariance* Series IV No. 5 (1986).

63. Camatte, *Capital et Gemeinwesen*, 113.

64. Jacques Camatte, ‘Bordiga et la révolution russe’ *Invariance* Series II No. 4 (1974).

65. Camatte, *Capital et Gemeinwesen*.

66. Camatte, ‘Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*’.

subsuming the *Gemeinwesen* under themselves".⁶⁷ In these key texts for Camatte—the "Urtext" and "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" as well as "Forms which Precede Capitalist Production"—we are able to look upon the historical production of the population as that living, vital material, certainly not liberated as social labour, but rather organised and managed, inscribed into the process of social reproduction and denied any but the most desperate capacities to resist.

Within Marx's own categories, this transition is tied to the passage from the primacy of absolute surplus value, generated through the direct extension of the working day, to that of relative surplus value, extracted through the devaluation of labour power by "revolution[ising] out and out the technical processes of labour and the composition of society".⁶⁸ From education to the state, there is a movement to "replac[e] all the preexisting social and natural presuppositions with its own particular forms of organisation which mediate the submission of the whole of physical and social life to its real needs of valorisation".⁶⁹ In this way, the transition is linked to humanity's increased dependence on the capitalist production process, both in terms of the production of necessary goods and the provision of work. The development of capitalism towards the stage of its real domination coincides with the production of a depoliticised population as a brute matter only present to be consumed by fixed capital for its reproduction. As Marx argued, "production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanised being... Its product is the self-conscious and self-acting [human] commodity".⁷⁰ Workers thereby become "capitalised" and consider themselves as capital that must bear fruit—*Homo oeconomicus*. We find after universal proletarianisation not a collective or socialised worker qua revolutionary subject, but a human being who "is despoiled and tends to be reduced to its *biological dimension*".⁷¹

It is this element of Camatte's work that contributed towards the most interesting aspects of his reception in Italy, especially as present

67. Marx, 'The Original Text of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' (MECW 29), 465.

68. Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (MECW 35), 511.

69. Jacques Camatte, 'Transition' in *Invariance* Series I no. 8 (1969).

70. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (MECW 3), 284.

71. Camatte, 'Transition'.

in the work of Giorgio Cesarano. Indeed, *Apocalypse and Revolution* can be considered as a systematisation of Camatte's writings of the time that deepens the anthropological dimension through a theory of anthropogenesis. *The Survival Handbook*, on the other hand, is a more original work that, drawing on Lacan and the anti-psychiatric tradition as much as on Adorno, attempts to think in a more decisive manner the "economy of interiority" and how "human beings who have internalised capital adapt to its life process".⁷² By turning to the latest results of psychoanalysis and empirical anthropology, Cesarano represents one attempt to move beyond the consciousness and representation-based theory of alienation one can still find in Camatte.

At the same time, drawing upon concepts derived from the pages of *Invariance* as much as his own experience, Cesarano developed a clear understanding of contemporary forms of revolt, which no longer appeared restricted to the traditional workplace. Even if there has been a mutation of the species, a universal proletarianisation that has defined the human as worker, this subsumption into capital can never be completed and there remains a heterogeneous mass: the "necessary pollution" that is the "corporality of the species... irreducible to the people of capital".⁷³ Fundamental to Cesarano's analysis is the ever-increasing devaluation through which, alongside surplus capital, surplus populations are produced as excluded from the production process and thus from capital's new humanity. In a 1971 pamphlet "1970: Danzica and Stettino as Detroit", Cesarano located the paradigmatic experience of 1968 not in the Parisian student-worker strikes of that year, but in the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that took place across the United States—understood as the most mature site of capital's real domination where the exclusionary process is most visible, "manifested in racial and national factors".⁷⁴

For Cesarano, the species, in the course of its everyday survival, finds that capital's fictitious *Gemeinwesen* can only be individualised in one manner, and that this "cannot comfort human beings and give them energy to support their situation, except for a suicidal energy".⁷⁵ The manifestations of this energy are to be found in various forms of seemingly mad and

72. Camatte, 'Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*'.

73. Cesarano, *Lampi di critica radicale*.

74. Giorgio Cesarano, *Danzica e Stettino come Detroit* (Genoa 1971).

75. Camatte, 'Marx and the *Gemeinwesen*'.

gratuitous violence that are the only human forms that can be given to the concrete destruction of humanity. Hence the increasingly desperate character they take whereby, against capitalist totalisation — “the survival of death in the non-life of all” — the real movement responds with “the organic totalisation of its own radical revolt against the death of all” at a level that “*all the bodies of the species know instinctively*”.⁷⁶ As Cesarano develops in his unfinished major work:

76. Cesarano, *Apocalypse and Revolution*.

Every time a ‘crazy’ man launches a violent protest against the prison in which he is held and declares that what exists does not exist or is false, the imagination is at work. This ‘every time’ is becoming ‘always’. In the increasing rates of crime, neurosis and insanity, in the increasingly more frequent collective explosions of ‘unmotivated’ rage, in insubordination... in the insidious absenteeism, we see an intermediate stage on the road that the imagination is taking... that will put an end to the capitalist utopia, to pre-history, and allow the commencement of history as an equilibrium of existence and being.⁷⁷

77. Giorgio Cesarano, *Critica dell’utopia capitale* (Colibri Edizioni 1993).

Cesarano was here able to develop a non-romantic understanding of the “biological revolution” that, against the Comontisti, certainly had no need for propagation or apology by pro-revolutionaries, who had succumbed to “the alibi of the ‘necessity of the struggle’”.⁷⁸ Rather, the struggles carried out by this heterogeneous remainder to subsumption, where “resistance” to any particular identity becomes a universal “fact of the species”, are meant to dispel the anguish of every present figure and social identity, every predication — *especially that of the militant*. Such acts and the enthusiasm increasingly found for them constitute the sublime sign of this seemingly universal and almost *biological* rejection of capital’s organisation of life — and thus of the utopian dimension of capital’s own development projects.

78. Ibid.

WHAT REMAINS

I have attempted to give a theoretical introduction to the *Invariance* circle’s contributions throughout the 1970s with an emphasis on their Italian reception. The latter problematisation of the contemporary conjuncture became the basis for the most critical positions in post-1977 Italy, in the period of reflection that opened after the eradication — whether by violence, imprisonment, penitentiism, or heroin — of the movements. This post-Bordigist perspective was important in such a context, not as an expression of communist melancholy, but in order to produce a space of critique from which it might be possible to rethink the political. This is most evident in Furio di Paola’s important article from 1978, “Dopo la dialettica”, which traces a line from Camatte, Cesarano and the tradition of “radical critique” through to then contemporary feminist practices. The latter groups, such as those surrounding Lea Melandri’s journal *L’erba voglio*, sought, through the critique of individual and group subjectivity, to dissipate “the old phantoms of the ‘political’ that continue to operate as the mystical paralysis of a social body that subsists only through the effective interventions of the technologies of capital’s domination”.⁷⁹

Fundamental is everything that is not said: all that was left to subsequent generations, especially our own. Crucially, three lines of inquiry remain open: (1) how to render concrete the ontological ground of capital’s real domination in the relation between subjectivity and the dialectical movement of history — *subjectivation*; (2) what, if any, is the place of the pro-revolutionary after the collapse of militancy, the party, and gauchism alike — that is, *does a specifically political vocation remain?*; and finally, (3) following Bordiga’s own “original content of the communist program”, what does it mean to destitute those particular historical forms, from property to money, that constitute us as capitalised individuals separated from the common?⁸⁰ How one answers these questions

79. Furio di Paola, ‘Dopo la dialettica’ in *Aut Aut* 165 (1978).

80. The concept of destitution may be traced to a translation of Walter Benjamin’s key concept of ‘Entsetzung’ in his ‘Critique of Violence’, wherein it crucially serves to articulate the subjectless suspension or destitution of law and the state as such, rather than a particular configuration thereof. While the concept has taken on a different meaning in contemporary French and Italian thinking, it is perhaps the most precise term to indicate the challenge, central to communisation theory, of deposing a form (such as law, the state, value, etc.), rather than a particular political order. Its use in this sense would follow Bordiga’s rejection of the term abolition (a ‘volitional act ... good for anarchists’). See Bordiga, ‘The Original Content of the Communist Program’.

determines how contemporary strands of communisation might be distinguished. It determines, as well, how one might avoid melancholic resignation in the face of the community of capital—as much as any impatient substitution for the unrealised human community, or hypo-statisation of apparent revolutionary processes.

—Cooper

“TRANSITION”

Jacques Camatte, *Revue Invariance* (1969)

The starting point for the critique of the existing society of capital has to be the restatement of the concepts of *formal* and *real domination* as the historical phases of capitalist development. All other periodisations of the process of the autonomisation of value, such as competitive, monopoly, state monopoly, bureaucratic etc. capitalism, leave the field of the theory of the proletariat, that is, the critique of political economy, to begin with the vocabulary of the practice of social-democracy or “Leninist” ideology, codified by Stalinism.

All this phraseology with which one pretends to explain “new” phenomena really only mystifies the passage of value to its complete autonomy, that is, the objectification of the abstract quantity in process in the concrete community.

Capital, as a social mode of production, accomplishes its real domination when it succeeds in replacing all the pre-existing social and natural presuppositions with its own particular *forms of organisation* which mediate the submission of the whole of physical and social life to its real needs of valorisation. The essence of the *Gemeinschaft* of capital is organisation.

Politics, as an instrument for mediating the despotism and capital, disappears in the phase of the real domination of capital. After having been fully used in the period of formal domination, it can be disposed of when capital, as total being, comes to organise rigidly the life and experience of its subordinates. The state, as the rigid and authoritarian manager of the expansion of the equivalent forms in social relation (“*Urtext*”), becomes an elastic instrument in the business sphere. Consequently, the state, or directly, “politics”, are less than ever the subject of

the economy and so “bosses” of capital. Today, more than ever, capital finds its own real strength in the inertia of the process which produces and reproduces its specific needs of valorization as human needs in general.

(The defeat of the May ’68 movement in France was the clearest manifestation of this “occult power of capital”.)

The economy reduces politics (the old art of organizing) to a pure and simple epiphenomenon of its own real process. It lets it survive as the museum of horrors such as parliament with all its farces, or else in the rancorous undergrowth of the small “extra-parliamentary” rackets, which are all identical regarding their formal or informal organisation, but compete obscenely with their “strategic” chatter.

The destiny of the other instruments of mediation or of ideology seems to be the same. They still enjoyed a certain apparent autonomy (philosophy, art, etc.) during the period of formal domination, as remainders of the previous epochs. All apparent distinction between ideology and the social mode of production is destroyed and, today, value that has achieved autonomy is its own ideology.

Just as the passage from absolute to relative surplus-value has, capital (its movement constantly tending to total expropriation) has divided all the social and technical connections of the work process that existed beforehand in order then to reunify them as intellectual powers of capital’s own valorisation; so today, in the passage of capital to an overall social power, aiding in the disintegration of the entire social fabric and all its mental connections with the past and their re-composition in a delirious unity, *organised* by the ever accelerating cycles of the

metamorphoses of capital, everything is reduced to degraded ingredients of the extra-ordinary synthesis of value that is self-valorising.

The real domination of capital therefore means that not only the tempo of life and the mental capacity of the proletariat are expropriated, but that circulation time now prevails over production time (on a spatial level). The society of capital creates an “unproductive” population on a large scale, i.e. it creates its own “life” in function of its own need: to fix them then in the sphere of circulation and the metamorphoses of accumulated surplus-value.

The cycle closes with an identity: all men’s time is *socially necessary time* for creation and circulation — realization of surplus-value. Everything can be measured by the hands of a clock.

“Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcass” (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*). The abstract quantity in process (value) constitutes itself as the social mode of production and of life (material community).

The theories of the workers’ movement have grasped this social process merely to mystify it. To give just one example: absolute subordination of the state and its insertion as a *particular* moment of the valorization process becomes the exact opposite, that is, a “state capitalism”, so capital can become not a social mode of production and of life, but a bureaucratic, democratic etc. *mode of management*.

Once they have arrived at this point of view, they have to make the revolution no longer the overthrow of one “existence” and the affirmation of another, but a political-statist process with the “organisation” of it as the key problem or, more, the panacea that resolves everything. Here again the degraded conception of the revolution no longer as a world relation of power between the proletariat and capital, but immediately as a question of “forms” or

“models” of organization — the passage is very short.

One cannot otherwise explain the preponderance of the categories mentioned above in the workers’ movement (state, bureaucratic capitalism etc.), which merely bracket the real being of capital so as to affirm the centrality of one of its epiphenomena theorised as the supreme phase, last phase etc.

On the contrary, one must remain on the ground of the critique of political economy (the critique of the existence of capital and the affirmation of communism) to understand the totality of social life in the period of its reduction to a *means* of the process of development of the autonomised productive forces.

The society of capital, in fact, appears superficially to be divided into fields that are apparently opposed and thus gives rise to the separate descriptions of them (sociology, economics, psychology etc.). The existence of all these “fields of research” only explains in mystifying the unified *absolute* value-created reality, the modern *sacrum*, characteristic of a process which goes from the decomposition of a pre-existing organic reality to the fixation of diverse elements which are then recomposed and put into use only by the growing social inertia, created by the opaque and despotic movement of the productive forces, forces which grow out of themselves and which necessitate the representation of the true movement of cohesion of the whole social totality.

That is why all “critical theory” wishing to found itself on raising up one or other “sector” ends up reducing itself to having neither subject nor object.

No subject to the extent that value as an abstract object in a material being (*Grundrisse*) avoids all immediate determination. One must say about this imperceptibility of the real tendencies of capital in the epoch of its absolute domination,

that the most obvious and dazzling manifestations of fetishism and mystification of the social relations created by its development is afforded us by the concept accepted by all the “innovating” theories, critical or apologetic, of “industrial society” and its appendix: “consumer society”.

This concept, an expression of a mystification perpetrated by capital in social relations, becomes possible insofar as the valorisation (thus the life needs of capital) increasingly dominates the labour process. Marx defined the labour process as the organic exchange between man and nature, purposeful activity turned to the creation of use values.

Capital tends to present its own general needs as exclusively and immediately identical to those of humanity to the extent that it creates an increasing identity between these two processes. In fact, given the real domination of its own existence, this mystification seems to be

“PROLETARIAT AND GEMEINWESEN”

Jacques Camatte, *Revue Invariance* (1968)

The publication of “On the Jewish Question” and of “For a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” responds not only to a necessity of fact. Indeed, one cannot find these texts at present, yet there is also a profound theoretical need for them: the critique of democracy and its definitive supersession by the proletariat — communism.

Nonetheless, if the antidemocratic aspect of these texts has often been highlighted, the essential question, that of the *Gemeinwesen* (community), has never been raised. Now, in “On the Jewish Question” as in “Critical Gloss in the Margins”, Marx considers this question, showing that the separation of the human

based rationally on the movement when *sociability*, conviviality, customs, language, desires, or needs, in a word, the social being of humans, have become nothing other than the valorisation requirement of capital, internal components of its own enlarged reproduction.

If capital dominates everything to the point of being able to identify itself with the social being, it seems, on this basis, to disappear.

This is the most glaring fetishism ever produced by exchange value in the history of its own autonomisation. A “neutral” category can arise from this, like that of industrial society. Thus all possible distinction between abstract labour which valorises capital (the proletariat) or which enables the total existence of its being (the middle classes) and “useful” human activity as it unfolded in pre-capitalist epochs can disappear (and in fact does disappear).

from its *Gemeinwesen* makes revolution inevitable — this is possible, as will later be made clear, only in response to an economic crisis that weakens the force of repression of the dominant class and provides the necessary energy to the oppressed class to attempt the insurrectional assault. Moreover, we find the affirmation that only human being is the true *Gemeinwesen* (community) of man. Now, who in this society could represent this *Gemeinwesen*? What is the class that in this society can claim the human title? It is the proletariat. This response given in “For the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right (Introduction)” shows at what point there exists a profound unity

between all of these texts. There is a unity because:

“The question of the community is the central question of the proletarian movement. In a synthetic mode, this can be presented as:

- a. Primitive human community
- b. Destruction of this through the development of two movements, that of value and that of the expropriation of human beings
- c. Formation of the material community with the fusion of two separate preceding movements: capital-value in process
- d. Scientific communism, the human community rediscovered, that integrates all of the acquisitions of the previous periods”

On the other hand, Marx shows that bourgeois society derived from a social revolution with a political soul destroys politics. This would seem to be a contradiction if one doesn't recall that the essential in capitalist society is to find the political means to dominate humans become slaves to capital. Politics is no longer the question of the relation of human beings amongst themselves, but uniquely the relation of humans with the material community, that is with capital of which the state is the representation.

To capital which has become the material oppressor of humans, one can only oppose the proletariat in as much as it—when constituted as a class—is what struggles for the triumph of a finally found human being: the social man of communist society.

Philosophy was the research into this being, it was the interpretation, continual accommodation to the exigencies of a being where it felt the necessity and the alienated given of this world. With the emergence of the proletariat, this theoretical research is resolved in practice. The proletariat realises philosophy in superseding it.

Radical emancipation was the only emancipation possible in Germany; yet it was the revolution on high that triumphed here. But Germany is still sick from this victory, this victory that made it participate on a social stage above that which it possessed in itself: communism.

Radical emancipation was also the solution for Russian society. The Russians were the theoretical contemporaries of the modern peoples; the Russian proletariat was the theoretical contemporary of the European workers' movement but it could not become its real contemporary unless, in the West, the proletariat had become itself the effective contemporary of what has long been veiled by society: communism.

The book of the Russian revolution was written before its history. Unfortunately, the Russian proletariat accomplished the romantic task of realising capitalism that the bourgeois class, at least in Russia, could not.

After this detour, as was also the case in China and various countries that gained their independence after the second world war, there reappears more powerfully the necessity of a radical revolution, of a revolution with a human title. Human society cannot survive unless it is transformed into a human *Gemeinwesen* (community). The proletariat has no romantic tasks to complete, but only its human work [*son oeuvre humaine, to ergon tou anthropou*].

“MARX AND GEMEINWESEN”

Jacques Camatte, *Revue Invariance* (1977)

It is in the *Urtext of the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1858) and in the *Grundrisse*, Marx's unfinished works and drafts, where the most is possible, where the system is open. It is a moment that stands in essential connection with the so-called philosophical works of his youth. This is not to suggest that Marx subsequently abandoned all contact with philosophy, on the contrary: the first book of *Capital* is fully comprehensible only if one knows, at least, what Aristotle wrote about form and matter in his *Metaphysics* as well as Hegel's logic. There is also of course an undeniable Spinozian resonance to be found in many pages of *Capital*. In the *Urtext*, Marx is attached to a young Hegel, a Hegel who he could not have known; this Marx who deeply investigated the *Gemeinwesen*, especially the Greek one, and that, beyond Hegel, he subterraneously connected to individuals such as Joachim da Fiore, Nicholas de Cusa, etc.

Autonomisation of exchange value, community, relation between the state and the general equivalent, definition of capital as value in process—these are the essential points confronted in the *Urtext*. They are not particular to it, of course, because they can also be found in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. However, in this text the study is more synthetic and the various elements are tackled simultaneously; they are salient, especially with respect to autonomisation and community. In the first volume of *Capital*, the exposition is more analytical.

Overall on the subject of the community, in the works published during his lifetime, Marx reasons as follows: the destruction of the old community due to the autonomisation of exchange value also

leads to the autonomisation of its various constituent elements (the individual, politics, religion, the state), which constitutes the starting point for a vast movement whose development the bourgeoisie profits off of. Yet, for Marx, it does not appear that the latter can in fact found another community. This question is addressed even less with respect to capital. Only the proletariat can, by destroying the latter—the last moment of the movement—becoming of value, of class society—found a new community, the human community.

However, in posthumous works such as the *Urtext* and the *Grundrisse* (and taking into account as well all those that are not yet published) we find that Marx poses the possibility that a community could be formed either through gold or capital. This is the fundamental interest of these texts. With them, one can demonstrate that gold is unable to provide the foundation for a community and the accession, on the contrary, of capital to the material community.

Thus, in Marx's complete works, there is a juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the individualisation of that movement through which capital constitutes itself as the material community and, on the other, an affirmation of the impossibility thereof, linked to a mad hope that the proletariat will, in time, rebel and destroy the capitalist mode of production (CMP). Yet, capital's community exists; this implies an abandonment of any classist theory and the understanding that an immense historical phase is over.

Marx's work on community has been left to the side. In Germany, theorists such as Weber and Tönnies do not refer at all to the various works we have just mentioned. In noting this we do not propose to

recompose a new Marx, but simply to note the extent to which reflection on community is a fundamental axis of all his work.

To understand the significance of this Marxian approach to social becoming, we must link the *Urtext* to the *Grundrisse* chapter "Die Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorgehen [The forms that precede capitalist production]." In this text, Marx studies the different historical periods that preceded capital's development, starting from the forms of community; an immense work, as attested by the various studies and notebooks that have been preserved on ethnology and the prehistoric period. Here again, it is not a question of wanting to organise differently what has been given to us, trying to place one chapter in relation to another. One must simply consider the various approaches of this study and grasp, despite what is lacking, in the direction that Marx indicated in his own reflexive effort. It is then that we realise that the *Urtext* is a privileged point of articulation for such an understanding.

The question then arises of how Marx could have presented the missing chapter on the state, one of the six that the *Critique of Political Economy* was meant to contain. It seems that, as with capital, Marx became aware of the difficulty of treating it in isolation, since the state can only be conceived from the community and, moreover, the future of the state blends intimately with that of value; at two historical moments it tends to constitute itself as a community: with gold, where it does not succeed, and with capital, where it does.

The question of the state is not posed in the same terms in his political works. As a result, two discourses coexist: 1. Exchange value achieves autonomy and through this movement creates the community, towards which end it subjugates the state; 2. The state is a product of the

class struggle: the ruling class erects the state in order to dominate the opposing class of society.

In the *Urtext*, there is a tendency towards a synthesis of these two discourses. However, Marx does not really confront the time and place of the birth of classes. This would have led him to relativize his schema of social evolution even more than he did during his discussion with the Russian populists. Classes are only manifested in the West because only there do we find the autonomisation of the individual. However, the state phenomenon is not peculiar to it. This is where the Marxian analysis is inadequate. In "Die Formen ..." Marx intuits certain realities when he approached the Inca society as a state within a communist society, but he does not sufficiently emphasise that the state is an abstraction of the community, that it is more or less autonomous, separated from the ancient social body linked to nature.

Research subsequent to Marx has sometimes revealed and especially specified the existence of states not yet separated from the community and nature. Thus, among the Sumerians, as Thorkild Jacobsen has shown, one finds "the cosmos as a state". The organisation of the cosmos dictates that of the community, defining hierarchy and therefore the state. It is a moment when the separation between interiority and exteriority has not yet been accomplished, is not yet over. *A posteriori*, we can say that it is a given type of community which implied such a relation to the cosmos that attributed to it a determining function, but it is also clear that such reasoning, in truth, is absolutely not valid for the moment when men and women of that community lived. For them, there was a communitarian whole.

Men and women had not yet abandoned the old representation-conception of the world of peoples who were not sedentary. The separation of all that they

form from the piece of land where they live had not yet come to be. We therefore cannot speak of state, class, religion, art, etc in such a case. It is we who, according to what has happened in recent centuries, abstract such elements in these communities.

With different determinations, we find a similar absence of separation in ancient Egypt. The state, however, had to some degree become autonomous.

In the case of China this separation was sketched, but was not in fact effected. What the Europeans called Emperor was in fact the "son of heaven" who received his mandate from the latter. Natural events could sometimes indicate that his mandate had been removed, which well conveys the particular relationship of this "emperor" to the cosmos and his function within it. In particular, by guaranteeing social order, he simultaneously guarantees a fundamental achievement: the separation of man from animality. When disorder reigns, there is a return to the latter. Thus the emperor governs the relationship between the cosmos and the social milieu.

Various other examples could be cited as special cases that cannot be unilinearly available because the process of autonomisation did not operate identically in the distinct communities. The study of African and Amerindian societies reveals all the possibilities. In *Society Against the State*, Pierre Clastres has highlighted the mechanisms there that prevented the autonomisation of power, hierarchy, state.

It is in Greece that we find separation and autonomisation, as well as where we find the state, individuals, and classes at the same time as separation from "mythical" thought, the birth of science, logic and, we will come back to it more in other works, therapeutics. The state is still a sensible expression of the ancient *Gemeinwesen*; the movement of value has not yet reached too great a development.

With the Roman Empire comes the need for a state that must dominate, be above, and control a host of communities, hence the attempt to resolve the issue through the dissolution of all communities in Romanity, with the concordant loss of diversity (a phenomenon already attempted with the Greeks, the Hellenisation of the barbarians). Christianity played a big role here. It is it that will realise the homogenisation or destruction, indeed the domestication, of human groups, after putting force in check; this is what happened to the Sardinians, for example.

During the Renaissance, the state emerged more clearly as the general equivalent state (see Marx in the *Urtext*), accelerating the passage from the verticality of value's movement to its horizontality. The end was no longer a god and therefore a temple but, as a result of the disappearance of sacred hoarding, value came to move in all horizontal directions; there was therefore the need for an element of regulation and control.

With the development of bourgeois society the class struggle became decisive, if only because the protagonists of the drama no longer reasoned according to a community or, if you will, they did so reduced to the limits of a class. It is at this moment when classes became really decisive, operational. We will have the various revolutions that, from the 16th century to the present day, mark the stages of the establishment of the CMP and, now, the community of capital. The state is considered an "artifice", an institution necessary to unite the various social elements; hence its importance, its possible autonomisation and the fact that it can become stronger than society (Marx). Now its importance is still considerable but it tends to be absorbed in the community of capital.

I have indicated elsewhere the movement through which the material

community is formed and its fundamental characteristics; material community because it is the dead, crystallised element, the work of millions of human beings exteriorised in the form of that fixed capital which founds the community. This is the essential moment in which capital replaces its presuppositions with its conditions of development, that of its accession to the community, but that still does not tell us everything about the community of capital. I have demonstrated elsewhere the important role played by circulating capital in the latter's realisation. However, it could not have been established, let alone reproduced, if the mentality of men and women had not been modified so that it corresponded to the new requirements of that form of life determined by capital. At first, class ideologies allow the different actors to represent with more or less adequacy their role in the life process of capital, even when they oppose it (as in the case of the limits to the working day), subsequently it becomes the movement of capital itself—capital posing as representation—that grounds the representations of human beings and guides them in their praxis. At this level, wanting to define what comes first and what second is to debate the chicken and the egg. What is undeniable is the seemingly indestructible force of representation. The becoming of what is in place appears eternal.

The irony is that it is precisely at this moment that historical materialism triumphs, posing as an adequate representation of the capitalist world, which is itself at a very distant stage from the one that engendered it!

The realisation of the community of capital and the end of the historical phase that began with the rise of exchange value is reflected in the appearance of new disciplines: systems theory (Bertalanffy), general semantics (Korzybski), "complexity theory" (Morin) and in the importance

of certain terms: structure, totality, organisation, system, code, etc. Hence the preponderance of semiotics: we must know the meaning of a system, that of its different parts; we must perceive its signifiers where man has no more meaning.

A world losing more and more of its references, its constraints ("everything is possible"; it should be noted in this connection that there is a certain contradiction between an evanescence of the central state as point of reference, seat of the general equivalent, and the need for a more or less centralised law enforcement agency) imposes the requirement of a science of information's meaning. Everything has been externalised, autonomized: men and women have before themselves the community of their own despoilment. It takes a code to understand what is happening and this code is the reduction of communication. It is no longer possible to speak in terms of antipathy or sympathy; beings are neutral particles of information recording and reference to this information. The ancient faith that was so important in earlier times has been replaced by credit, which is faith in a system in which man is still a reference, and then by inflation, which is the faith of capital in itself. Its acceptance brings humanity to an increasingly absurd life. Every human being will be nothing but an existent "thrown" into the community of capital and set in motion by its becoming. It is no longer a question of reasoning in terms of the mode of production in order to face current reality. There is no longer a capitalist mode of production, but the community of capital in which the state is ever more immersed.

More generally it can be said that there is a definite mode of production when production really becomes a problem because of material, technical and social difficulties. Capital produces everything, even what appears to be

outside the sphere of industrial production, and reduces human beings to the same situation of dependence on itself. It is accomplished alienation. Human beings have become totally different or, what amounts to the same thing, slaves have accepted the power of their master to such an extent that they have become its simulacra. In doing so, any dialectic of the concepts of productive forces and relations of production, as discussed by Marx in his 1857 Introduction, is over; on the other hand, production is no longer simply production for production's sake: it is now production for the reproduction of capital. It finds a subject and thereby loses its character as object.

"All the concepts of the dialectic that we have reached do not imply that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they constitute the members of a totality" (Introduction, 1857).

Especially those that were centred and articulated around human activity: labour-leisure, labour time-free time, value-surplus value; and even those that have freed themselves from it (profit-loss, etc.) have lost any operability. It is obviously the couple shortage-wealth, underpinned by the concept of need, that most clearly vanishes. When human beings are torn from their community, the realities that founded the concepts of need, scarcity, working time, etc. still arise, but to the extent that a community has been rebuilt where all the elements that had individualised, autonomised, have been resorbed as no more than the moments of articulation of the community of capital's becoming. These are the determinations of human behaviour once men and women have been detached from their community.

More generally, it signals the end of political economy, especially if one refers to Marx's affirmation that: "Real economy—savings—consists in saving

working time..." (*Grundrisse*). Yet, capital has captured duration and human time.

Economy in the sense of saving is only possible when time is autonomous and is counted; besides, Marx insists in *Capital* on the relation between the measurement of time and the development of the economy or the development of fixed capital; to economise, to save, can lead to a situation in which the individual will even save his life, once he has taken out life insurance and bought himself a tomb. This is a grotesque manner of indicating a reality: the economy is the dissimulation of our life.

For Marx, the economy of labour time is ultimately the essential point and almost determines human evolution. However, as he himself shows, it is only with the development of capital in the fifteenth century that this imperative really appears, engendering a secular struggle between capitalists and workers that will reach its paroxysm in England in the nineteenth century with the struggle for the limit of the working day—a real civil war that lasted 50 years (Marx). In other countries, it occurred later, yet carried out in other forms. The result is the structuring of the community of capital, the subjection of human beings to quantified time and the acceptance of fulfilling one's life in a rigid framework. We have arrived at capital's organisation of time and it is from there that the latter can produce the programming of all moments of human life. It is debited in time slots during which we must perform certain functions, certain vital processes. Better, there is now in virtue of this division a production which is appropriate to all the men and women crucified on these quanta of time: for the youth with its many subdivisions, for the adults, the elderly, for the dead (thanatology, for capital death is the absolute capitalisation of time, it is the homogeneous time that includes no opposition).

Capital is the accumulation of time; it reabsorbs it, absorbs it (one can have both modalities) and, as a result, it is posed for eternity. Marx addresses this question of eternity on the formal side. He speaks of *Unvergänglichkeit* expressing the idea of something imperishable, as well as the idea that we cannot move on to something else.

Eternity—the duration of value in its capital form—is only posited by production itself which is twofold: “reproduction as a commodity, reproduction as money and unity of these two processes of reproduction” (*Grundrisse*).

Developed from the point of view of substance, the eternity of capital also implies the evanescence of men, which is to say their weak durability as well as their insignificance. Capital takes time, what for Marx is the very element of human development, away from man. It creates a void in which time is abolished; the human loses an important reference; she can no longer recognise herself, perceive herself. It is congealed time that she faces.

This marks the end of economics as the science of wealth, whether understood as the accumulation of use values or the accumulation/hoarding of exchange value (money, capital). But it has been shown that with capital, it is no longer use values that are essential for man, but the movement of valorisation-capitalisation within which any difference between use value and exchange value has been abolished. The search for wealth has become the search for a privileged position within capital's life process in order to benefit from its material community.

This search for wealth was coupled with the fight against scarcity, but it really starts with the autonomisation of exchange value. “Primitive communities” did not know it, just as they did not know the obsessive fear of free time. The present lack would concern life itself, the greater

and greater deprivation of human beings... when they realise it, which is to say when they question capital's diktat, otherwise the latter seems to immediately fulfil them or at least it will in a not too distant future.

Economics as a science of trade also vanishes. I have shown elsewhere how capital tends to go beyond exchange and succeeds (*Grundrisse*). There is no more exchange but only attribution. Significantly, modern economists speak of economic flows.

There is another ground of the economy that loses its operability: the division of labor. This has often been compared between different modes of production. Yet, with capital it becomes a simple differentiation between capital's moments, a relation between the means of production and means of consumption. Finally, economics in the sense of management (as Xenophon already employed it), both private and public, also disappears; because management involves a managing subject and an object to manage. This is valid as long as men still have a force of intervention, but it is the rationality of capital that is now essential. Those who want to manage must simply recognise capital's movement. Insofar as they want to intervene, they can only temporarily upset the movement. They do not manage anymore, they record.

Some wanted to extend the categories of political economy to areas that were previously foreign to it, hence all the theories on libidinal economy (Lyotard) or desiring machines, where desire replaces need (Deleuze-Guattari). But how, from the moment when one grasps the incapacity of Marxist theory (its aporia, according to the new theoreticians) to understand new social phenomena, can one transpose the former into psychology, for example, and build a global theory on such a foundation? One can make a similar reproach to the authors of *Apocalypse*

and *Revolution* when they speak of an “economy of interiority”.

Insofar as a concept tends to invade domains which are originally foreign to it, it means the extension of the phenomenon that it represents and the loss of strict limits, of those rigid determinations which made it possible to characterise and define it. Economics comes to mean the organisation of something, of a whole or functional process; it indicates the mode according to which propositions are organised, of affirmations to establish a certain sense. Consider this sentence by Fresquet: “This is the economy of the gospel: Jesus freed man from his sin. Humanity has been redeemed by his love” (“Meaning and defence of sin”, in *Le Monde*, 6.3.1976).

Economics as a science of organisation of a certain geographical area tends to be supplanted by ecology given the problems of pollution and the scarcity of raw materials (but there is no shortage of human beings and thus always the possibility of ersatz!). The field of the economy expands until it no longer has a real consistency, the concept is diluted more and more. Land is envisioned as a total ecosystem that capital must exploit to an ever lesser extent through the intermediary of man.

One finds a very good expression in the definition that some economists give to economic science (one no longer speaks of political economy): the science of adaptation. This conception incorporates the old categories: wealth, exchange, price, utility, etc. It also allows him to give an account of “human nature”. The human being has an “infinite need” which stumbles on the “finitude of creation” (H. Guitton in his article “Economic Science” in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*), thus needs are innumerable while the means to satisfy them are limited; on the other hand, they may not be at the right time and in

the right place. However, economic development has increased availability, which raises at all levels the problem of knowing how to choose products, means of production, etc. The economic act would then be the very act of choosing. Hence the importance of calculation which replaces that simple judgment that was linked to the concept of value; and this act of choosing of course implies the adaptation of human beings to the economic system. Knowing how to choose is knowing how to adapt. Is this not simultaneously the creed of all futurists: we must adapt to the shock of the future which is that of capital escaping from any constraint, any reference, developing on its own account and striking full force the slower way of life of the species that engendered it?

We find here a convergence with ecology, which can be simply defined as the science of the conditions of existence and of interactions between living beings and environmental conditions—which is to say ecology is fundamentally a science of the adaptation of the individual and the species to its milieu. Economics is the science of adaptation to a specific environment, that of capital.

Political economy was the science of capital developing into its totality. In order to account for this, it not only inventoried the purely economic phenomena concerning exchange value, utility, capital, etc, but it more or less explicitly described how men internalise phenomena, becoming ever more compatible with... as a result of those clashes and struggles that made them abandon their ancient conceptions. With the realisation of the material community capital comes to exist as a world. The only thing left to do is to study how human beings who have internalised capital adapt to its life process: this is the task of economics.

Economics represented reflection on the phenomena that developed after

the autonomisation of exchange value and thus an attempt to intervene within them in order to reconcile them with the social relations already in place; it has always been more or less imbued with humanist ideals.

With the introduction of the capitalist mode of production, social movement and economic movement converge. The struggle of the proletariat within this mode of production has made it possible to structure this unity-unification. From then on, economics can no longer be anything but capital's discourse which, in acceding to the material community, renders the whole content of political economy obsolete.

Economics translates a certain behaviour by a part of the species that existed upon the earth. At the moment when this science loses its reality, it signifies that this behaviour tends towards its own abolition: it multiplies indefinitely (there is a drop in the birth rate in all the most capitalised countries), posing itself as ever more different from the rest of the living world, considering the earth as an object of exploitation, abandoning itself to technology and the exaltation of the productive forces, to progress.

One path of the species' evolution has been fully traveled. It follows that the self-perception of the behaviour that has been adopted as well as that reflection on it must end. Thus it is the end of philosophy which was, among other things, reflection on values, on value; it was a theoretical behaviour which created a hierarchy of the world of beings and things according to the exteriority-interiority dichotomy.

For Marx, economics was the science that allowed us to describe how "primitive communities" had been destroyed, to reveal the determinism of the evolution of different human societies, to explain the revolutions and, to the extent

that it was a critique of political economy, to individualise the contradictions of the CMP, which would lead to the proletarian revolution that would constitute the emancipation-liberation of a whole class of men and humanity itself. Yet, as we have seen, the dynamics of emancipation-liberation are those of capital. It is the great revolutionary and all the revolutions have benefited it. The series of revolutions is thus finished and concludes with the realisation of the community of capital. Human becoming can no longer be linked to revolution.

Thus ends the movement of externalisation-autonomisation and liberation-emancipation, which we have here analysed starting from the dissolution of "primitive communities" in the West. So, too, is the master-slave dialectic abolished, that representation of this movement, through the disappearance of classes. Even the movement of alienation disappears since, in the community of capital, one finds the juxtaposition of the being that has been stripped bare with that of which he has been alienated, the two reunited but as separate realities. Religion itself loses its function because it no longer serves to connect beings, a matter left to capital as representation. The latter, by more and more destroying human roots, destroys the memory of what religion preserved and that preserved it. All religions of salvation are based on remembrance. And how, indeed, can there be alienation when there is no memory of another state? The absurd limit of capital's movement is a human community without man, thereby exacerbating the automatic subject that Marx, after Ure and Owen, spoke of in *Capital*.

Consequently, the historical study of the development of the species over time since its emergence makes it possible to preserve or to recover a memory of a different state, certainly not to restore

such a past state, but to show that the eternalisation of capital has been realised only to the extent that our memory has been abolished. Without memory, there can be no human community.

One would think that the transition from one community to another, if it poses practical problems and causes multiple rifts, can at least be grasped and understood by men and women. Yet, and this is an essential contribution of the *Urtext*, Marx shows the extent to which the movement of exchange value that dissolves the old communities and tends to pose itself as a community distorts its own comprehension by human beings. What they believe to be determinant are in fact their relationships with one another, or the institutions they have set up on the basis of economic relations that they have not understood. Marx reveals the extent of this false historical consciousness. Thus the French bourgeois thought to limit or equalise wealth and did not realise that through their intervention they removed all obstacles to its free development in the form of capital.

In *The Holy Family*, Marx had already approached this "illusion" without giving it its real economic foundation.

This illusion manifested itself tragically when Saint-Just, on the day of his execution, pointed to a copy of the rights of man in the Conciergerie and declared: "I am the one who made that." This document rightly proclaimed the right of a man who is no longer the man of the ancient *Gemeinwesen* (community), any more than current industrial and economic relations could be those of ancient society.

They did not perceive that the externalised activity of men reached a proper autonomy over which they had no control. This false bourgeois conscience founds representative, parliamentary democracy: the belief that with institutions one can constitute the nation (a new community

that will grasp all economic and social processes); it also founded fascism (the Nazis wanted the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the community of the people!) which is itself a movement that, by its action, enabled the community of capital to establish itself.

With respect to political democracy, it is certainly true that it had the merit of limiting any overflowing of violence. Indeed—and this is the important argument that all the current Democrats and all those who, horrified by Nazism and Stalinism, consider it to be a lesser evil—it should be noted that in the countries where the old communities crumbled and where democracy could not be established, where there was no rule and no institution to curb the social phenomenon, there was no brake on violence. What was human, something that had been defined by the community that had collapsed, and where could one find a point of reference? Thus a host of atrocities were committed in the USSR as a result of the impossibility of establishing a parliamentary democracy and as a result of the failure of the world proletarian revolution. It was this violent outburst that was feared by various Russian revolutionaries, from Dostoevsky—which made him hate the revolution as Berdiaev reminds us on several occasions, especially in his book devoted to the author—to Lenin himself since, according to Victor Serge, he feared the generalised breakup of the class struggle which might happen following the example of the Czechoslovakian mutiny (see Year I of the Revolution).

The same horrors were repeated with folkloric variants in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In African countries, the trauma of the destruction of community is even deeper; the clash with the world of capital is in itself a generator of madness, in the sense of an absolute loss of reference and acute impossibility of being in a community.

This does not mean that Western Democracies have not committed any internal violence, no torture, no crime... certainly not. But they first operated outside Europe, in countries where they were not “hindered” by democratic laws. That is why the war of 1914–1918 and above all fascism that brought to Europe the methods that had been reserved for other countries sign the death sentence of political democracy.

The ever-widening disappearance of all ideals and all democratic rules meant that, in a decaying world, especially when the community of capital is refused, there is no longer any obstacle to violence. Hence the repeated and vain invocation of a return to political democracy and the various proposals for tinkering with and reinvigorating it. As if, after the tremendous bankruptcy of 1914 and 1933, it could be a bulwark against the tide of violence that swelled and began to sweep over the world... especially because it had only been an accommodation since its origin.

We find the same false consciousness among the French socialists: “From this follows the error of those socialists, especially the French socialists, who wanted to prove that socialism was the realisation of bourgeois ideas [...] and who tried to demonstrate that exchange value [...] was a system of socialism, freedom and equality for all; but which would have been falsified by money, capital, etc.” (*Ur-text*). The socialist world movement has had the same end as political democracy. This was all the more inevitable as it often came to be its true realisation.

But does not Marx himself ultimately consider that the development of the productive forces (neutral given) is distorted by the movement of capital? Is there not a false historical consciousness in wanting to found communism on the basis of a development of the very productive forces that allowed for the establishment of capital? Hence, of course,

in order to go against this derangement of the productive forces, the need for an intervention that will make it possible to regenerate its course, to clean up and heal it! Simultaneously, communism would be the true consciousness of the movement of production in action for millennia that had only been waiting for a favourable moment to manifest itself.

The same mistake is found in the thought that communism could develop on the basis of the reduction of the working day. In doing so, one still maintained a presupposition of capital (the quantification of time) and sought to use what capital had brought about; which is to say, that with the development of the productive forces a phenomenon was under way, but capital prevented its full development and even distorted it. Hence the need for an intervention of which I have already spoken. False consciousness is caught in the trap of immediate phenomenon linked to a will to intervene in order to make this phenomenon work in the direction of human interests. The human community cannot be built on time only, it is possible only through a constructed unity of humanity-nature that encompasses space and time.

Finally, when Marx wrote that no social form disappears until it has exhausted all the possibilities it contains (see *Preface to the Contribution of Political Economy*, 1859), he created fertile ground for the engendering of illusions. This includes the belief that there is a decadence of capital from the moment that a certain number of possibilities, which Marx recognised from the start, were achieved and that an intervention—that of the proletariat—is always predictable in a never-distant future. In reality if there is a decadence it is that of humanity!

False consciousness and recuperation are closely linked. The second being like the reduction of the first. If there is

recuperation it is due to an erroneous consciousness. Individuals consider a certain phenomenon to be effectively antagonistic to capital; yet, it later turns out to realise what it should have destroyed. And there we meet in another way capital’s anthropomorphosis. It is thanks to inadequate representations of the real movement, due to false consciousness, that capital continues to achieve its domination. It could be thought that this movement would continue only until that moment when capital would finally absorb a foreign substance and thereby explode or exhaust itself. This might be true for various institutions, which thus makes them inadequate and inoperative such that at the least shock they collapse (and revolution really was that moment when everything collapsed and where everyone escaped from the various institutions, roles, etc.), but capital seizes everything and, by anthropomorphising itself, only increases in potential because at the limit it can appear human. Similarly, one could think that this movement of recuperation could be the cause of an imbalance which would introduce a flaw in the community of capital. However, a serious danger accompanies this possibility: the total loss, the complete externalisation and thus the realised emptiness of human beings, resulting in a community without men.

All the more, one cannot come onto capital’s ground, forcing its becoming, as Baudrillard thinks: “the challenge that capital launches in its delirium, shamelessly liquidating the law of profit, surplus value, productive ends, structures of power, and still finding at the end of its process the profound immorality (but also seduction) of primitive rituals of destruction, such a challenge must be met with an even higher bid.” To rise to the challenge would be to abandon oneself to the complete escape of capital, so as

not to find ourselves again: the realisation of madness. In this passage, Baudrillard strikingly indicates the movement of inflation.

It is at the moment of the destruction of a community in place that false consciousness comes out most clearly; it is then that unbridled searches are made for its reconstitution in whatever more or less fantastic form. Some try to do this by partaking of the same, throwing themselves into a frenzied sexuality, others by indulging in mysticism, drugs, or music (the phenomenon of pop music).

In the second and third centuries of our era, an immense distress took hold of many men and women, following the collapse of the ancient cities (polis) in which they held recognised and concrete roles. There followed a collapse of the cosmopolitanism that the Roman Empire had engendered but which it could not realise, due to the extraordinary tensions that traversed it and the ignoble relations that then reigned. Hence the Gnostics and Manichaeans posed the problem not only of an exit from the world constituted by the Roman Empire, but of the cosmos. Among the Greeks, human society and cosmos were still in continuity, among the Romans this survived in a schematic fashion, hence the Gnostic theme of the evil cosmos.

The “Gnostic” path followed after—as RM Grant asserts in his *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*—the failure of the Jewish people’s attempts at self-liberation (Jesus Christ himself was understood as a failed emancipator), such that the prophets would be understood to announce the moment of liberation. It arises, in fact, as a result of the collapse of all apocalyptic hopes.

Much closer to us, the war of 1914–1918 was experienced as an apocalypse that had not been prophesied. Hence the fascination it exerted, at least in the

early days, on a great number of minds, especially in Germany where it tended to persist until the advent of Nazism (which had a deeply religious character), and we cannot say exactly to what extent it does not impregnate the whole era of the latter's domination. It was experienced as the manifestation of a lesser evil, like the final resolution of certain tensions that could no longer be tolerated and also experienced as a laceration from which another way could be seen.

Nowadays, in a palpable, fascinating, and tragic way, the failure of Marx's apocalyptic prophecy imposes itself on us all—the promised emancipation of humanity through the proletarian assault on the citadels of capital—whether because it collapsed, or did not show up for its historical rendezvous. The same is true of Bordiga's which, reordering Marx's prediction through the integration of the fate of all peoples of colour and set in motion by the tremors of the two world wars, predicted an apocalypse-revolution for our present years. The collapse of the communist revolution is the end of the community-party and the party-community.

On this basis we can better understand the vast confusion of our times linked to the loss of reference, the total permissiveness and the end of the communities born with the bourgeois revolution, nations, and their states. There is certainly a higher unity—the UN—but, just as under the Roman Empire, all cosmopolitanism is unachievable, since the very idea of a cosmos has been lost. Internationalism, in the nineteenth and especially during the mid-twentieth century, played the role of ancient and eighteenth century cosmopolitanism. In all three cases, one is effectively dealing with moments defined by the disintegration of particular communities. If proletarian internationalism has failed this is due in large part to the fact that it was unable to encompass diversity,

infested as it was with Eurocentrism and undermined by a badly disguised and chauvinistic nationalism. It is therefore logical if, once again in the West, the fashion of Orientalism prevails and we find echoes of the themes and practices put forth by the Gnostics and the various religious currents from the beginning of our era.

This moment we are experiencing is the end-exhaustion of a whole evolution of human beings. The pre-Gnostic period knew a movement in which the sacred and profane were connected and it was in virtue of these two elements that men and women revolted. With the triumph of Christianity, there is a secularisation and separation of the sacred from the profane: "render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's". This secularisation-profanation is responsible for the bourgeois revolutionary movement, first of all with the Reformation, then with the various revolutions until 1789 that carried out precisely such a profanation. On this plane, the proletarian movement does not constitute any discontinuity; the "sacred" element is definitively set aside and it is only posited that human beings must create another community. The impossibility of a "profane" movement to ensure the liberation of human beings reinforced the idea that the "salvation" of humanity could only be ensured by religious, sacred movements. Yet what have all the reactionary currents that have tried to preserve such a sacred element done, but participate in the tragedy of the development in course, by every time making a pact with the power in place? The solution is therefore neither on the side of the sacred nor on the side of the profane. The human community is outside of this world.

One can place the question of the community in relation to the problem of

knowing what is decisive in the evolution of human beings. Indeed, at the moment it is a "marginalist" theory that tends to prevail. It is to be those on the margins who will invent new behaviours and gradually impose them on the rest of the community. Like the economic theory of the same name, it favours certain elements: here, the elite! It demonstrates even more clearly the cut interpreted by the theory of the party-mass relationship. In both cases, there is a non-contemporaneity of human beings living at a given moment. The upheavals that affect the community can only be perceived by certain elements. Such privileged people would share their concerns with the others. Such a theorisation is the recognition of the destruction of any *Gemeinwesen* because here one only finds particularised beings in relation to one another and arranged side-by-side. However, insofar as the *Gemeinwesen* dimension persists even a little bit in human beings, they can really coexist even if their threshold of perception of phenomena is different.

Finally, to conclude on this aspect of the community as human group, let us point out that there are two determining modalities of the relationship between the individual and the community in the world: that of the West, where the individual has become independent, as has the state; and that of the East, where the community is despotic and the individual does not achieve autonomy. There are variants in Africa and in both Americas. However, now, with the accession of capital to the material community we find a convergence between West and East. The first has effected an intermediary movement in order to arrive at an identical, but much more powerful result. Thus it transforms, by replacing it, the ancient Asian despotic community.

We cannot be content to oppose community to the individual and to the

state as a solution to the current evils. Communism is not a simple affirmation of the community; it can no longer be characterised by common or collective property because this would be to preserve the presuppositions of capital itself: ownership and separation (to the extent that various socialist theorists advocated for an egalitarian distribution). In a word, it should not be considered in opposition to anything, because it is a question of exiting from any dialectic that would sooner or later bring back antagonism as a repressed moment. What is at stake is the being of men and women and their relationship to the totality of the living world implanted on our planet, which we could no longer conceive as appropriation, as Marx thought, but only as enjoyment.

Just as the human whole should no longer be divided in order to become a community, so the individual must no longer be divided in order to become individuality, thus we find an end of the cut between state-individuals, party-mass, spirit (brain)-body. To get out of this world one has to acquire a body tending towards a community, and thus to not lock oneself into an individual phenomenon, but to rediscover the dimension of the *Gemeinwesen*.

It is here that we find the fundamental theme of Marx's philosophical works: to explain the relationship between the individual and society and how to abolish their antagonism. More than a social being, man is a being who has the dimension of the *Gemeinwesen*, that is to say that every human being carries in herself, subjectivated, the *Gemeinwesen*. This is expressed in a very reductive way when we affirm the universal character of the thought of every human being.

Capital has realised its community not only as a social tie but also in the dimension of the *Gemeinwesen* because what constitutes the foundation

of thought and conduct (ethics), etc., is capital, thanks to its having become a representation exclusive of all others.

In the community of capital, humans are united by means of technology, the famous mass-media which are all the more necessary as human beings become more numerous. They do not manage to properly coexist, to become contemporaries, because they have been enclosed in their social, national, etc. limits.

All the elements that constitute the fundamental determination of the *Gemeinwesen* have been destroyed: so-called parapsychological potentialities such as telepathy as well as various types of languages such as that of the body; meanwhile, verbal language has become more and more impoverished, as it loses its universal dimension and is reduced to a code that reflects the community of capital.

Unitary communities as an integral community cannot live simply as a collection of human beings. It is necessary that between all there is a common thread, common substance, because they realise the human being and this is accessible only if each being realises in herself the *Gemeinwesen* being an irreducible element and simultaneously the mode that to the community to be realised in her, the mode she has to perceive in all its duration. This is where the difficulty that has emerged over thousands of years arises: men and women who do not know who they are, do not know what they can do, have locked themselves up in ghettos that they say are human groups, humanities, defined by distinctions that allowed others to be excluded. Thus, for the ancient Egyptians, foreigners were not human. They could be sacrificed to the gods. They were strangers because they did not live like them, determined that they were by another geography, another history, because they had developed other possibilities. Accession to the community

therefore implies a knowledge-recognition of all others, their acceptance in their diversity. Not an intellectual or spiritual gnosis but a total gnosis; knowledge must grasp the whole of being through the reunification of each being.

It is not a question of making evil disappear! The human species has also developed the possibilities of evil, often the most hideous and vilest that can be justified by any historical eschatology. Concretely this means that we cannot accept those who kill, torture, want to dominate others, etc. This refusal of the "path of evil" cannot be attained until the moment when, as Marx said in a terminology still imbued with economy: the greatest wealth for man is his fellow man.

The *Gemeinwesen* dimension can also be seen in what he called universal work, the social brain (an expression taken up by Bordiga), a social brain theorised in another form by Leroi-Gourhan in *Le geste et la parole*. We think with our own brain but also with that of the species as a summation of all the beings that surround us and have preceded us. This is why Bordiga's concept of the species is another statement of the *Gemeinwesen*.

Finally, the manner in which we are present in the world asserts itself in a kind of consciousness of being an individuality of the species and in the species. With an accession to the community, human beings will have finally found their world. Indeed, against other species that have an immediate relation between being and the world because they have a portion of the globe that is imparted to them (the famous ecological niche), man has none. Since the mutation that has thrown the biped that is to become man out of the forest, this being has been anxiously searching for a world in which she can be sure of her existence, of her reality. At the end of millennia, this quest must end by finally realising what it is in diversity of

species and in its connection to the living world; thus she will find her place in the continuum of life.

I say that the quest must end, and not that it will end because there is not a rigorous determinism that would lead to such an end, which would in fact justify the intermediate movement between the immediate community and the human community to come. No, history as a set of experiences lived by men and women can only be a fact; we can explain various futures, for example that of capital in a deterministic way, but we cannot infer a more global determinism that would concern us all, that of our realisation, finally, as human beings. When any human phenomenon occurs, it is *a posteriori* possible to find in previous events a determinism that led towards it implacably. Yet that would negate the various possibilities that have emerged and the fact that the species, currently insane, will have made the jump only in a constrained and forced manner. It is not said that this will be true; human disappearance in various forms can also be seen in the not distant future. That's why there is a must-be.

Various philosophers of history, and Marx in particular, have been reproached for having an eschatological and soteriological conception of history (the proletariat is the saviour that saves itself not as the proletariat but by becoming humanity); correlatively we can add that for the latter the "social cosmos" had a meaning (Engels added his "philosophy of nature" which was an attempt to give meaning to the cosmos in its totality). On the other hand, nowadays the "social cosmos" is considered as neutral, it does not have in itself any meaning, any sense, for example

that of becoming communism. Hence the loss of perspective and all certainty—a loss of history that cannot be compensated for by the perception of a soteriological fact buried in the social cosmos. In reality, there is only one meaning that can be individualised from the despotic community of capital: a becoming towards absurdity, to the destruction of humanity. This cannot comfort human beings and give them energy to support their situation, if not a suicidal energy. Hence the injunction: we must abandon this community and everything that it presupposes. It's the refusal of a millenary wandering.

Since the 1960s the community of capital has become increasingly intolerable to a large number of men and women, mostly young people. There has been a huge uprising of youth that is looking for the human community. It was accompanied by a host of phenomena that cannot be considered here, but which testify to breaks that are often fragmentary, but breaks with the community of capital all the same. These phenomena manifest a new sensibility that is able to perceive different alienations or injustices that had been carefully camouflaged by the various political rackets. This movement is now masked by a certain revitalisation of politics, but it is maturing in depth. Men and women must realise to what extent they can only tend to found the human community by breaking completely with the dynamics of this world and with the revolution / counter-revolution dialectic; from then on, we will break the lock that prevents creativity and inhibits the creation of a new way of life. The fear that plagues us will be abolished and we will enter our future.

EXCERPTS FROM "APOCALYPSE AND REVOLUTION"

Giorgio Cesarano, *Edizioni Dedalo* (1973)

I. Mortal Leap

"In a word: the revolution made progress, forged ahead, not by its immediate tragicomic achievements but, on the contrary, by the creation of a powerful, united counterrevolution, but the creation of an opponent in combat with whom the party of overthrow ripened into a really revolutionary party."

—K. Marx, *The Class Struggle in France from 1848 to 1850*

1.

In the last possible form of its "political" expression, the radical dialectic has already defined contemporary capital's conditions of existence as those in which capital, taken beyond its formal modes of domination thanks to the counter-revolution, presently realises, over the entire planet as over the species and the whole life of every human, the modalities of an integral colonisation of the existent. This we denote in terms of its "real domination".

"Capital, as a social mode of production, realises its real domination when it comes to replace all the social or natural presuppositions that existed before it, with its own specific forms of organisation, which mediate the submission of all physical and social life to its own needs. The essence of the *Gemeinschaft* of capital is therefore realised as organisation. In the phase of real domination, politics, as an instrument for the mediation of capital's despotism, disappears. After having used it extensively in its formal phase of domination, capital can liquidate politics when it comes, as total being [*essere totale*], to rigidly organise the life and experience of its subordinates. The rigid and

authoritarian status of the expansion of the form of equivalence in social relations (*Urtext*) becomes an elastic instrument of mediation in the sphere of business. As a consequence, the state and even 'politics' are less than ever the subject of the economy and therefore less and less capital's 'masters'. Today more than ever, capital finds its real strength in the inertia of the process that produces and reproduces its specific needs of valorisation as generally human needs" (Camatte, "Transitions").

2.

The transition process from the modes of capital's formal domination to the modes of its real domination has been entirely mediated, both in "liberal" capitalist countries and in "state" capitalist countries, by the counter-revolution. The latter has assumed this as its specific task and has totalised every "political" sense of it, definitively integrating politics with capital's modes of survival, thanks to which it is dominant. By recuperating and distorting the genuinely revolutionary drives expressed by the real movement during the first twenty years of the twentieth century, the counter-revolution objectively functioned as the mechanism of self-regulation that allowed the capitalist system to survive its own crises. It favoured and promoted the dislocation of fundamental contradictions inherent in the modes and relations of production, from the originally elementary level of productive organisation, to ever more complex and increasingly total levels. Presently, the economy dominates as much over every form of "life" organised on the planet, as over every survival of the forms in which organic life, reduced to mere "brute matter" of extractive nature or mere propellant of the social

machine, has been forced to reproduce itself as a mystified "life", the "natural" energy of the species.

3.

With the analyses of Marx and Engels, the radical dialectic inexorably defined the contradictions inherent in the modes and relations of production, indicating how capital's process of quantitative valorisation, with the irreversible growth of dead labour's domination over living labour, would have inevitably led capital—pushed, as a result of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, towards a forced increase of production—to a reckoning with its foundational limitation: having as the limit to its organic development those same productive forces that are at the root of its own organic process.

4.

In other words, capital nourishes in itself *ab initio* the logical vice—and the natural limit—of being a mode of production of the social machine which, while basing its own dynamics in process on the integration of the organic energies of the species to itself, is condemned to irreversibly fuel the increasingly autonomous growth of the machine itself. At the same time, it increasingly reduces the part of organic life integrated into the process, as the part of organic life integrated in the process is converted into an increasing accumulation of dead labour, thus the former is added, made machine, to the machine, contributing as much to its autonomisation as to its quantitative prevalence. "The increase of the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour is the necessary tendency of capital, as we have seen. The transformation of the means of labour into machinery is the realisation of this tendency. In machinery, objectified labour appears as the force that dominates living labour, not only by

appropriating it, but in the real production process itself; the relation of capital as value which appropriates value-creating activity is, in fixed capital existing as machinery, posited at the same time as the relation of the use value of capital to the use value of labour power; further, the value objectified in machinery appears as a presupposition against which the value-creating power of the individual labour capacity is an infinitesimal, vanishing magnitude" (Marx, *Grundrisse*).

5.

The law of value shows that profit can only come from surplus value and at the same time that surplus value can only be extracted from living labour. The organic composition of capital would short circuit its own process of valorisation in relatively short time if the process was concretely created within an immobile level of organisation, given once and for all, both quantitatively and qualitatively invariant. Yet the history of the last one hundred and fifty years shows that capital-being is not at all what it could appear to economists—and their vulgar critics—in the first decades of its development process: the essence of the will to organise civil society separated from the overall substance of civil society; the economic-political pressure exerted by an élite of entrepreneurial power, simply engaged in a struggle for supremacy—*bellum omnium contra omnes*—as much against the past modes of organisation of the society of labour, as, within itself, of the most ingenious and the most daring (the fastest to transform and to transform themselves) against the most torpid and conservative. On the one hand, this economic-political struggle produced evidence of capital's foundational contradictions, at a level of emergence not yet mediated and rationalised; on the other, as capital's capacity to articulate itself in an increasingly organised system,

increasingly homogeneous in its substantial modes of reproduction at higher levels of valorisation, so the real essence of capital has come increasingly to overlap with, until completely coinciding with, the species' global modes of evolution. Ever more and more, capital has integrated the real essence of the organisation of survival to all its levels of manifest activity.

6.

Capital's dominant modes of development—the laws of its procession—are today legible in terms of general systems theory (but torn from the scientist's philistine "neutrality"). Capital functions as an open system that has as its limit, due to the specific contradictions inherent in its development, a tendency to close (to become autonomous, with the alternative that follows: collapse or realise a "cyclic-static" economy, "steady state"), expelling from itself its own source of organic energy, human energy, and therefore founding the premises of its self-destruction. Yet in its history, this tendency has until now been accompanied by a capacity to evade its critical point of collapse by mediating its organic combination with its "naturing" energy at a higher level of integration, there where the process has been able to find new spaces for development—without yet having managed to expel such fundamental contradictions from itself. Thus far, it has only been possible to postpone the critical point of irreversible collapse through increasingly larger spatial and ever more meagre temporal dislocations. The history of capital shows how the process has been able to grow and become autonomous thanks to an automatism typical of self-regulating systems capable of expanding past, through integration and positive feedback, a situation that is virtually closed, virtually blocked by a critical limit, towards a superior structure

that is virtually open—without, however, eliminating its tendency to closure or its critical limit, postponing collapse until that point of saturation when it would have reached the limit of any further practicable transcendence: the point at which the material contradiction and its very source of energy are confronted with such a limit.

Given the terms of such a contradiction-in-process, the collision between, on the one hand, the growth of development and devaluation and, on the other hand, the expansion of surplus populations and generalised proletarianisation, would have long ago led capital to an irreversible collapse if it had not from time to time taken, when confronted with the immanence of its final crisis, a "qualitative leap". Precisely the latter has allowed capital to elude such crises, granting the system the possibility of transcending its immediate limit in order to accede, through mediation, to a higher level of organisation, relocating its developmental thrust as much as its inherent contradictions towards a "new" spatio-temporal dimension where the limit of the crisis will re-emerge, conveniently postponed.

7.

Capital's development cannot be read as the story of a self-identical process' "horizontal" expansion (like wildfire). Rather, it is the escalation of a specific and particular society's mode of being—that of "industrial society", born of the bourgeois revolution—from its lowest degree, as an economic-political struggle let loose between classes, to its maximum degree (measurable both in the quantitative terms of its planetary expansion and the qualitative terms of its "way of life"), as the global management of the species' fate—whether capital's problematic equilibrium with the biosphere's chances of survival or the equally unlikely balance of its own way of surviving *as the human species*

with the real substance of humanity as a species. Capital has therefore been able to continue to develop—although it has never ceased to drag along the contradictions that have undermined it since its origin—thanks to a double historical availability of spaces: both territorial, economic-political in a strict sense, and existential, the political economy of life in a broad sense. Nothing better demonstrates the history of capitalist political economy's planetary colonisation, as nothing else could demonstrate the history of the economic-political colonisation of human life, than the gradual process of capitalist valorisation that has continued to make ever more broad, profound and generalised acquisitions of new levels in the organisation of the existent; in which it has introduced, with increasing acceleration, both the modes and relations of value's production—as well as the unavoidable and unresolved contradictions that inhere in valorisation. The final period we are experiencing is the period in which, having completed this teleological work to colonise as much of the territorial system as the "human system", having filled any possible residual space, having exhausted the field of "qualitative leaps" practicable in the direction of productive development expressed in terms of exponential growth, capital has come to strike against its insurmountable limits—without any further dimension of transcendence toward higher levels of organisation. At this point, the inertial force of its own growth process is the critical limit against which it must struggle. A reversal is required: a sudden shift from a mode of development that is best expressed in terms of exponential growth to a zero-growth equilibrium.

This is what the cybernetic scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—and not only them—have just confessed, with all the false "detachment" and simulated "neutral

objectivity" that characterises false scientific conscience; they add nothing new, in regards to substance, to what the radical dialectic foretold, with Marx and Engels, over a century ago: capital's inevitable course, as a mode of economic-political production, towards an irreversible self-destructive crisis.

8.

Radical dialectics must not be content to find the cybernetic confirmation of its own foresight in the MIT scientists' report. The false detachment and the simulated neutral objectivity with which they arrange the gag of the "specialist" and present, with their hand on their heart and the face of Buster Keaton, to a capital already disposed to contract an account of its errors—this could only mislead those beautiful souls immediately predisposed, by affinity of false conscience, to any new falsity. Precisely because radical critique has always known the concrete ground of the inevitable showdown, it knows how to render an instant account of all fictions, unmask actors and *mise en scène*, and while reaffirming its natural competency—natural in as much as it is has been lived—in the state of things, denounces the reign of fiction for what it really is: that of the state, now that the state is understood as the autonomous domination of the economy over the realm of appearances. Dressed in the immaculate white coat of science, the MIT authors recite the part of conscientious scholars, resolved to no longer keep silent over burning truths, whatever the cost, and to show that they have cast off any service to the dominant ideologies in order to finally serve the naked truth: they speak as if in the confessional. Yet this coat has such a worn texture that it is immediately transparent as the old livery of the master sorcerer, the same of every extermination and of every extortion, of Auschwitz (salary of bone) as

of Hiroshima (the demographic solution); of bacteriological and defoliating assaults in war (the disinfestation of life) as of the therapeutically necrotized neurotic peace (the need to live as a mental illness). If the economy's reign seems to dispose itself to self-criticism, then it is time to believe that it is not the realm of the economy that has had its time, but criticism that has entered, as a regulatory mechanism, into the service of the economy. In the robotic hands of the robot-scientists, the critique of political economy is transmitted into self-critical economics: should radical thought then leave its hide to the taxidermist?

9.

More than ever, it is now necessary to remember with Marx that capital's valorisation process is one with the development process of both the means of production and of productive forces (a contradiction that is mediated only at the price of an ever-wider and ever-deeper colonisation of ever "new" quantitative and qualitative spaces). Further, if the proletariat is the natural antagonist of capital, it is determined by its own developmental dynamic from which it is essentially inseparable, whether as active or reserve labour power or as a reservoir of exclusion, until it comes to deny itself as a class and to overturn, by negating every class, the autonomous power of the economy over life. Yet the time in which capital exercised its domination in the exclusive sphere of political economy, the time of its formal domination, has come to an end, as have the conditions of disorganic and territorially fragmentary development that capital, transcending the limits of its first crises, has left behind (1914–1945).

Thanks to a mechanism of interaction and feedback that is significant in quite another sense than that outlined by the MIT authors, capital has been

able to guarantee itself, by mediating its contradictions through a homogenisation of world markets and the liquidation of a good part of the young proletariat during the two wars, a much stronger and more widespread power to integrate the natural human community (*Gemeinwesen*); indeed, it has managed to establish itself as the hegemonic mode—the only one concretely practiced—of producing and reproducing the natural human community on the planet. As the valorisation process has as its exclusive object the autonomous survival of value beyond the limits of its crises, it integrates into itself, into the organic composition of value, the survival of the species as a crisis in the life process. It is in this phase of the integration of capital-being with the being of the species (a formal integration, as we will see later, but one that is pragmatically operative) that the counter-revolution comes into play, as a mechanism of self-regulation in the direct service of capitalist rationalisation.

10.

Two intersecting but distinct series of mediations must be distinguished in the transition phase from the formal domination to the real domination of capital. In the first exclusively economic-political structure of capital (formal domination) there could not be a counter-revolution: the proletariat as a class incubated in itself the development of a thrust that directly negated, and that was therefore immediately revolutionary, the material conditions of its very existence. The proletariat as a mass, together with an elite of intellectual deserters from the dominant bourgeoisie (but not, as will be seen, of its enlightenment culture), concurred to develop a class consciousness destined to express through insurrection the rejection of the frontal exploitation of labour-power produced and treated as

a commodity, and to protest the frontal exclusion of the proletariat from the enjoyment of wealth, of which it was itself the conscious producer. It was in this stage that the proletariat lived its forced estrangement from a world of "values" (wealth as freedom from need, equality as the division of opulence, brotherhood as emancipation from the misery that generates hatred) that were themselves handed down from the bourgeois revolution, and that appear to have been realised, that is, enjoyed, by the sole dominant class, as the intolerable price of its own labour. The subject of valorisation (the proletariat) is represented to itself as excluded from the enjoyment of values: without criticising them, it claims them, proposing itself as the historical force destined to gather its inheritance, universalising it. It is at this stage that politics has already clouded the gaze of radical dialectics, hiding the millennial truth of the identity between culture and modes of oppression, denying the right / duty to recognise that culture's valorisation process is not the "heritage" of the human race. Rather, it is the most ancient, the most ancestral, "genetic" mode of production of the human community as a social machine, in which organic life is enslaved to the preservation and development of inorganic value: it is the very metal in whose timbre the voice of power vibrates, this power to which life is subjected in the "rational" effort to supply oneself as energy. The historical task of the radical dialectic, that of liberating the species from work, can only be fulfilled on the day when it is clear in everyone's mind what is already clear in the (negated) organic body of all: the necessity of the destruction of ideology's domination, the necessary liberation from the first and most unnatural of works: the sacrifice of free organic expression to the language of having to be slaves, the capture of "natural" reason in the service of alienated

"rationality", the sale of living sense to the process of eternalising dead sense.

11.

It is in this same phase that the radical dialectic, hostage to political "rationality", represented the revolutionary proletariat as a formal party: no longer the historical party, but rather the historicised party of the abolition of classes. The point of view of the totality, which allowed Marx and Engels to grasp in its real essence the valorisation process as the negation in process of life as a natural good, is already, in the hand-to-hand struggle of political rationality with the reason of the state (the state, under capital, is always the state of things, its reason always an armed body), the point of view of the totality broken into fragments of particular spheres. If one approaches such spheres by enlarging the specific details of the struggles in course, if one gains in political optics a levantine competence of tactics, they pay for this ever closer intimacy with the ways of the enemy by losing the distancing dimension of strategy, the total competence of the stakes. The more that the spontaneous intelligence of the rejection of every condition that introduces death into life bends to the needs of survival, even of the survival to fight, the more it is transformed into the spontaneous intelligence of the enemy. Tactics are always the "reasonable" face of the counter-revolution.

12.

The Russian revolutionary explosion, while apparently projecting onto the planetary scene the triumphant (and for the bourgeoisie terrifying) spectacle of a proletariat who had come to embody its liberated subjectivity, soon put on stage, *realiter*, in the now merely fictitious forms of the revolution in power, the recuperative and substantially restorative mediation of the powerful counter-revolution. Hunted

bloodily from below, essentially capitalist modes and relations of production fall bloodily over the deluded (but not all) heads of the revolutionary proletariat, reintroduced by decree from above. The pretext—and it is here that the dazzling power of the scientific “rationality” that mediates capital appears for the first time—is that of the need to conquer, through a long process of so-called socialist “transition”, the material bases for the realisation of communism. This is not the place to perpetuate the semi-secular anti-leninist polemic, nor does it make sense to ask ourselves once again what the feasible alternatives might be: the revolutionary struggle always lives the present as the battleground between a future project linked to the fate of the species and the sum of its past defeats, which have influence only in that they indicate the traps into which the species can no longer fall. Instead, this is the place to attest how this lesson of realism was learned and made its own by international capital, to its exclusive and automatic advantage: a lesson that allowed it not to fear applying force to this world, capable of destroying its essence, until it could successfully appear as the material mode of production of every human community. Capital learned from its crises to dispose of its past in order to revive its modes of production at higher, more integral, more totalising levels of organisation. It learned to mask its own faculty of transcription by covering it with formal, spectacular transformations. It learned above all to flow as a necessary water under any flag, to take as much the form as the substance of a basic and neutral way of being, so similar to life and nature as to be able to clothe itself in appearances. Mediated through clashes in which the maximum possible amount of proletarian blood ran, capital learned to transform itself into ways of being less specific than a class and increasingly

intrinsic to a people, thus overcoming a first degree (a first level or threshold of limits) of its connatural contradictions.

13.

From that moment on, the proletariat no longer exclusively represented, in the eyes of capital, labor-power to be produced and treated like a commodity, but rather it began to appear to capital as its own people to come—no longer in the form and substance of brute matter, a mere propellant to keep alive as long as it gives strength. Rather, in form, it became the living matter of capital’s own body (social body, discrete assistant of the social brain, embodied by capital made science); in substance, the natural propellant of a process of autonomisation in which the more “naturally” capital separates itself as if from a slag, the more it shows itself capable of integrating the species profoundly and in a capillary manner into the mechanisms of the valorising machine. The process of emancipating capital from the first critical level of its development (the first level of closure of the system within its limits, with the consequent inevitable “en masse”) then passes through the fictitious emancipation of its natural antagonist, the fictitious emancipation of the proletariat enlisted in the self-responsible subjectivity of the labour process. From that moment, while capital sees in the proletariat its future people—and perceives for itself the chance to mediate its own contradictions by integrating into its “spirit”, into its own surreptitiously socialised subjectivity, the very body of the species made its own body—the proletariat dazzled by the counterrevolution sees its own future in the development of capital, transforms its intolerance into a new patience, presenting itself the historical task of carrying out at its own expense, but voluntarily, the material bases for the realisation of a neo-christian capitalism: “socialist”.

14.

The fictitious and spectacular contrast between the two blocks, East and West—in both of them, through different formal realisations, capitalist development and counter-revolution are embodied by the same dazzled subject—has for decades polarised, while followed by flowing proletarian blood, the completely ideological imagination of revolutionary “thought”, holding back theory in a grotesque fight to enlist militants under different banners of the same process. The counter-revolution mimics all the clichés of dialectics, degraded to a comedy of errors. Meanwhile, the unsatisfied need to really live and the efforts of “virtuous” labour simmers under the ashes, in the bodies of a proletariat defeated more than just in their minds (or estranged or drugged by politics), ready to explode in a vital fire as, after eighty years of latency, in the first events of 1968.

But integration has been so deep, the chain so firm, that those who appear with torches in their hand are not those who, inserted and included, obtain through their brutalised hours a salary that allow them to continue the “work of living”: as always, the defectors of the dominant “spirit” move first along with those excluded from the assembly line, voluntary escapees and the forcibly proscribed. In Paris, as everywhere in Europe, students, misfits, hippies and punks; in the USA, the same together with the “race” of the excluded, the blacks of the ghettos, the ex-slaves “redeemed” from collector of cotton to collector of trash. Starting from a rejection of the horror of non-life, these two qualities of distinct “competences” soon fraternise, both driven by being external to the hardest heart of the process: voyeurs from above, these students of social engineering (in all the faculties they are taught the skill of directing beings made to be directed); voyeurs from below, those excluded from this waste society,

which consumes them. On the one hand, the “imagination” revolts before it is co-opted; on the other, a denuded vitality revolts after having been humiliated.

15.

On the one hand, politics takes onto itself the role of mediator of the process, questioning everything except the foundations that support it, working to preserve both the suicidal development of production as well as the model of life that is the real product here; on the other hand, the strategic (“scientific”) lucidity of capital sees more clearly in front of it the threshold of a new limit that only a mortal leap will allow it to overcome. The ever closer limit of its own planetary expansion obliges capital to invent a new world, just as it is about to “finish” this world. Wars, guerrillas, national liberation campaigns, electoral brawls for the election (or capital execution) of this or that super-star—all equally fungible and functional—overlap on the screens of the glass oracles, in those fragments that mix together at the same level this weekend’s massacres, whether those of the Indians or those due to DDT; parades displaying the new quality of life, debates on this quality of life, psychodramas on the loss of this quality. In the service of a politics that swaps the critique of everything with the victory of the Nothing, fictitious and real gears, unrecognisable from one another, drag into their mechanisms, together with the bodies of an ever more abundant proletariat, the shredded image of living a real struggle, the fated illusion of fighting for a matter of life or death, while death gains ground inadvertently in everyone’s daily survival.

16.

To the increasingly accelerated clashes against its classical contradictions, capital responds elastically by miming the cries of its people, claiming for itself the causes

of this growing despair, but inverted into a voice of promise and immanent hope. In its formal domination, capital took the proud and ferocious traits of a class that had conquered power through revolution: the bourgeoisie, when it was still alive, was not ashamed to defend its rightful privileges as it could appreciate them—even just a little bit—as the good of the earth and the taste for life, and therefore defended them without questioning itself, offering itself, despite the economic-political struggles, an image in which wealth justified the price of poverty. The transition to real domination, however, leads capital to produce a politics—the new image through which it smuggles itself—that is as much more elastic and co-opting as it is more formally disposed to question, to problematise. Yet the problems of the day, in the apparent forms of an openness to the demands and needs of the people, are always capital’s problems. The people are increasingly capital in person: the people who have the vote, the people who represent themselves, the people who have the “privilege” of the word, assume without realising it the role of a puppet that speaks with the voice and covers the hands of its ventriloquist.

17. Quantity is the exclusive reign of valorisation, which consists in this: in the production of apparent qualities upstream of which always lies a given quantity of labour. Since capital limited itself to praising the quality of its commodities, the necessary time has passed in order to capture all forms of life in the commodity form, so that today we can discuss a “quality of life”—where behind every produced “life” lies a given quantity of labour, of devalorised life. This is anthropomorphic capital’s new conquest: having colonised every trait of social coexistence for value, it must reassemble beyond the explosive

threshold of its organic vices in the organic composition of capital-life; to transcribe itself from the intoxicated kingdom of commodity-waste in exteriority to the realm of survival in inwardness, all the more degraded the more it is buried and raised to a new area of the market. A macabre archaeology is called to resurrect, in the living dead, the Phoenician soul of the adventurous businessmen; but under the constellations of the flood, the dead souls cannot but trade relics: the death of desire is the general equivalent that informs all the mints of the depressive “personality”. Let the dead valorise their “life”.

VIII. Real Dialectics

“If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse’s neck and head would be already gone.”

— F. Kafka, “The Wish to be an Indian”

119. The point of view of radical dialectics sublates politics through the same movement in which, defining the latter to be the exclusive instrument of the counter-revolution, it definitively separates itself from it.

120. If the radical dialectic has no “what is to be done” to sell on the competitive market of “alternative” ideologies, if it cannot slip into any theoretical precipitate without being disqualified as dialectics and as a qualitative point of view, it is because it knows the “concrete” as the dominant utopia’s *Champ de Mars*: it is here that

every act, realising itself in the context of organised unreality, leaves its position on the field and witnesses its own funeral glorification. But it is from here that the radical biological thrust, denying any validity—any authentic reality—to its fictitious realisations, shows itself its ability to endure beyond, to go beyond, and finally to establish itself beyond the counter-revolution. The affirmation of the biological revolution, or of qualitative subjectivity at the level of the species, can only be found where the counter-revolutionary utopia has burned all its stocks of false aims, all of its representations.

121. There is no behaviour or line of conduct that can define itself to be, as such, revolutionary. As soon as it is established as a mere stylisation of conflictuality, and therefore becomes a “work of art”, every behaviour, every line of conduct is to be placed in order of the incident as its particular accident.

122. The real movement is not a metaphysical entity, the panther of revolution lurking in an ineffable latency, but rather the very force with which revolutionary subjectivity continually exceeds (in a continuity that can only be grasped at the level of its

generalisation and of the universal) the forms of fictitious realisation, in which the organisation of non-essence [*inescenza*], that concrete pseudo-continuum, involves it without capturing but the ideological dregs, with or without the “dead” bodies of the dazzled.

123. In this sense, every form of politics which arises from even minimal conflict with the “concrete” given has in itself, inseparable from its destiny as counter-revolutionary recuperation and frustration in the fictitious, a potential push towards its own overcoming; that is, in the direction of the real movement understood as a dialectical process that guides essence to manifest itself as such beyond its partial negations.

124. From counter-revolutionary liberation movements such as those for nations, sexuality, women, students, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, drug addicts, workers, children, animals, employees and nature, can come, as in fact a day does not pass in which there does not arise, the hard-won awareness of the real stakes: the liberation of the species from ideology, the necessary overcoming of every separation, the conquest of the point of view of the totality.*

* Trans: The essential dialectic of 122 through 124 must be emphasised. Here, Cesarano critiques the limitations of existing ‘partial’ struggles at the same time as he places them as the only site of contestation. Rather than condemning them, he wants to emphasise their partiality. In *Chronicles of a Masked Ball*, this point is expressed as follows: ‘It is not a matter of *stripping* the *living* meaning from struggles that still remain prisoners of separation, but rather, by liberating them from their slavery to *dead* meaning, of

discovering what underlies them but cannot be expressed by them in its entirety and totality. The real movement is not the revolutionary army staked out and ready to pounce in ineffable latency; rather it is the living articulation, contained in the contradictions of the existing world and the deception of fictive struggles, of the eruption that transcends them without being destroyed by them, an eruption that is renewed and reinforced beyond the traps set up to capture it and hijack it.’

125.

Ultimately, the ideology of hooliganism [*teppismo*] and crime, if it actually exceeds the obsolete stylistic elements of militant politics, effects a recuperation on revolutionary subjectivity, convincing it that "criminal" and generically illegal behaviour are expressed at the level of individual choices, and instantly discharges any positive tension. As soon as one is satisfied with being the habitual transgressor of every norm, the "criminal" drowns his own project of being in a simple and caricatural disobedience to the normative as such, which therefore becomes, quite simply, the norm in negative: having in place of being. The compulsion to repetition is the miserably maniacal trait that degrades to routine, to nostalgic repetition, the actual insurrectional creativity of the coup.

126.

None of "being's options" listed above, and indeed none at all, escapes the design of what has been called a "mortal leap": every possible comportment has already been catalogued and filed in the cybernetic offices or the image production centres. If this is certain, the failure of neo-Enlightenment rationality is even more certain, the disaster of the capitalist utopia is even more certain, the one that has been summarised as the attempt to make political economy disappear by realising it in the "life" of each and of all: political economy, first-born inheritor of religious alienation.

127.

What will be revealed in the years to come as the manifest insolvency of capitalist utopia, in the apocalyptic and tragicomic spectacle of its landslide, which will shake every residual illusion from anyone who has not lost their capacity to understand in

the meantime. But the bankruptcy of this utopia—this dominant *hic et nunc*—does not in itself mean the immediate triumph of qualitative and liberated corporality. Precisely because anthropomorphised capital, through self-criticism, valorises the fictitious capital of its own becoming (an anticipated future in the economic-political utopias that capital-being subjects to the desperate project to ensure the survival of every subjectivity, in credit of life), devalorisation internally negates every particular utopia, "sublated" before being able to overcome itself as utopia, that is, before it could realise itself. And precisely as the being of the fictitious, capital, at the last stage of the autonomisation of dematerialised value, is not realised in particular utopias but rather in forms of its own general becoming (of its own utopia in process), forms that cannot be realised as substance due to the rapidity of the very process: the dynamic of the fictitious. It is in this process, and in the increasingly explosive contradiction between the domination of forms and the overcoming, in form, of their own substance, that qualitative subjectivity, the corporal substance of the species, sees its own revolutionary task fulfilled, its concrete destiny: that of realising the dialectic, pressing, with the will of the essence that clamours to be, the increasingly accelerated ruin of representations. The subjectivity of the species will separate itself only in the last ruins of political utopia. Before recognising itself as the subject of the biological revolution, the proletarian body of the species will have to free itself from all the hypotheses that communist ideologues throw on its future as the realisation of the human end, that *Gemeinschaft* in harmony with ecological codes, the latest and most coherent metamorphosis of fictitious capital into "invisibility", the mimesis of liberated life.

128.

The supreme consistency of the fictitious is that of showing itself, finally, to be perfect representation and therefore as the organisation of perfectly unreal appearances: that of ending in its definitive separation from the concrete, in its own sensitive disappearance (the fictitious is the essence of every religion). But only by manifesting itself as a substance imperious to the fictitious, therefore only by affirming itself as a subjectivity consubstantial to the organic movement of nature

"PROVOCATION"

Giorgio Cesarano, *Puzz* (1974)

The political squads of the police and the parties always want to know who we are. Since, on the contrary, we only recognise ourselves in the critique that clarifies what we are not and what we do not want; since we speak the language of those who live contradiction and non-identity; since we exist as a plural subject only on the condition of collectively experimenting our contradiction in process in the very form of its realization, at the same time as these forms are subjected to every sort of recuperation; the effort at identifying us according to a logic well-tested through two centuries of counterrevolution backfires laughably and ignobly on those who would like to imprison us in a formula, so as to deliver us that much more easily to the prison walls. "Provocateur" is the term that appears indistinguishably in the infectious prose of the regime's press, which forms a chorus with and thus unites in the same trench "democratic" journalism and the "militant" press. We accept the term, turning it on its head.

If "provocateurs" signifies men and women that do not accept the misery of

[*naturante*], to its global corporeality in process, can the species definitively emancipate itself from the domination of prosthesis, free itself from the fictitious and its religions. The biological revolution consists in the definitive inversion of the relationship that has seen, since prehistory, the corporeality of the species subject to the domination of the social machine; in the liberation of organic subjectivity; and in the irreversible "domestication" of the machine, in all its possible manners of appearing.

the political game; if it signifies informal nuclei that slip away from any schema of hierarchical rackets; if it names experiences irreducible to the precepts of "revolutionary" theory crushed by history and appropriated by the counterrevolution; if it distinguishes those who cannot put up with the interiorization of capital and who struggle against every form of self-valorisation; if it qualifies the development of a theory and a practice that refuse to be constituted as separate spheres of individual and collective life; if "provocateur" signifies all of this, today we are provocateurs! We are the provocateurs of that process of demystification that forces the police, politicians of the regime and leaders of the fictitious opposition's rackets, to unmask their substantial identity. Thus are they united against us publicly, employing the same techniques of snitching, terror, slander, using the same language and the same logic, resorting to the same wretchedness and the same trivial lies. We are the provocateurs of that process of sublation that induces sincere revolutionaries to break with their past and to

participate in the historical heights and radical tensions of the time. Who get out from the bottlenecks and of all the archaic and restrictive ideologies, in order to fuse themselves with that tendency towards the point of view of the totality that, alone, leads the critique of the actual forms of

capitalist domination to recognise the synthesis of every alienation fragmented and particular, the summa and the point of explosion of every past oppression that has already been overcome. We are and will be until the end, in sum, the provocateurs of the revolutionary process.

“GLOSSES ON HUMANISM”

Gianni Carchia, *L'erba voglio* (1977)

From the origin of bourgeois society and across the entire course of its existence, the emphasis on the human has been the price paid for the development and the autonomisation of exchange value, as well as the progressive reification of human relations. The more that capitalist dehumanisation—the ‘organic composition’ of society and individuals—has developed, so the more one begins to discover as the referent of whatever ideology—against the artificial, the fictitious and the despotic—the natural, genuine, and human. But if, according to bourgeois apologetics, the invariance of human nature was the obvious guarantee of the system of planetary exploitation, it was a fatal misunderstanding thereof that induced the proletarian movement to exalt, against capital and the injustices of the relations of production, labor and the mere development of productive forces, understood as the general equivalent of the subject and emancipated man. The same reprimand and warning that Marx offered in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* was insufficient—in virtue of the tenacious roots of the alternative theory that, while critical, was naturalist and positive—to illustrate to the proletariat the fact that, as is so clearly written in the critique of political economy, capital and labor are poles of a single relationship and must be accepted or rejected en bloc, not

through the exaltation of one or the other. While Hegel defined and glorified the development of the essence of capitalist society as a process in which substance becomes subject, his immediate adversaries, materialists and existentialists, looked to find the true and authentic subject in the ruin of capital’s ‘automatism’. This subject, illuminated by the Hegelian dialectic, would have developed through the process of alienation and, in the end, become again, sometimes mythically, substance, human nature, only no longer counterfeit and disfigured. The human is here understood as something subterranean, a substratum temporarily lost and rediscovered in the exteriorisation of every immediate, living relation, but destined, after the pain of alienation, after the odyssey of history as ‘prehistory’ or as ‘fallen’ ‘exteriority’, to reemerge and to triumph. From here one finds the blind abandon, as certain as it is desperate, to the force of objective reason, to progress, to history. The theory that revindicates the human, in the face of its alienation and capitalisation, could carry out such an affirmation, however, only by ignoring that such corruption, far from being in contrast to any historically revealed human essence, was neither more nor less than the result of its exaltation, the extension of its natural traits, exterminating and death bearing.

It is for this reason that, once grasped down to their foundation, the humanist and anti-humanist attitudes are not, in fact, alternatives, but immediately identical. If, by whatever bitter irony, the Stalinist rapprochement of the hazy idealism expressed by both Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and by radical communism is true, it is because in these dangerously idealist results, you do not find the impatience of the revolutionary gesture, but an insistence on the alienation and the obscurity of the human as the cardinal point of the critique of capitalism, a common point then—the critique of fetishism and a call for the ‘lived’—to phenomenology and existentialism. Nothing is more paradoxical than the call for a supersession of alienation pursued through the return to a human subject, to make such a subject—if it were possible—more proprietary as if it were not the case that, as with anti-humanism, the final union of capitalism and barbarism wasn’t inscribed in mechanisms of generalised self-preservation, in that universally human that cancels and exterminates all that which does not reflect it. Today, finally, it has certainly become clear that the humanist referent even in its most radical variants, is nothing but the expression, albeit turned on its head, of the ‘anthropomorphosis of capital’, of the ‘death of man’. Yet the anti-humanism theorised by dominant thought, above all through structuralism—which would like, with a profound albeit involuntary irony, to replace philosophy with the ‘human sciences’—is in fact, as the ‘mimesis of death’, always directed towards the triumph of self-preservation and the subject: humanism in disguise. Neither is it comforting that here the problem of a change in thought is always expressed—as in the case of the problems of ‘decision’, ‘choice’, and ‘will’—in ultimately subjective terms. To really think in a non-humanist manner does not

mean, anyway, to think in anti-humanist terms, always despotic, arbitrary, violent: in a word, humanist. One cannot get out from the dialectic, from the evil of such a brutal history, by simply changing the sign, ‘turning it on its head’: each determinate overturning is but another confirmation. To take one’s distance from the human, from the history of the possessive subject in which unreconciled nature is preserved unrecognised does not mean to give in to, identifying oneself with the aggressor, the dehumanisation in course, to the objectivity of a linear destiny that in hindsight is seen to have been pursued by impersonal subjects.

The critique of ideology, the confrontation between reality and its ideal premises, as well as the unmasking of false consciousness and false reconciliation are today—even in the extreme form assumed by ‘critical theory’—vain in face of late-capitalist society’s absolute integration of the yearning for true appearances and the human. Culture, critique, democracy—all only have sense outside of domination and reification. But if this integration has also demonstrated that the return to significance, fullness, use value—in a word, the human—is the alibi of barbarism and that it cannot be invoked without bad conscience, the consequence to be drawn from all of this is not any abandon to the truth of the facts, to an inhuman survival. The non-human, that which remains outside of the dialectic and of the false alternative between humanism and anti-humanism, that is perhaps the utopia of thought: something that is neither in the affirmation nor the violent death of the human and appearances, but rather in their suspense and dispersal. What could be the profile of a thought that was nourished on the non-human, on the trace of that which no longer exists or does not yet exist, of the no longer, not yet human, of that which in the human is not so cruelly

subjective and natural? While its prophecy—as a limit, inquietude, promise—fed all of idealism, from the doctrine of the intelligible in Kant to the self-consciousness of absolute spirit in Hegel, even to the reign of liberty in Marx, here it still only serves the function of reparations, compensation, reintegration. Established through the pain of appearance, self-recognition, history, the non-human did not seem to ever really be free, in idealism, from its guilty and evil roots: its fulfilment had all of the characteristics, only with an inverted sign, of its odyssey.

The non-human, the radically different, would be in contrast, perhaps, a moment of opening in the gesture of taking leave from the idealist dynamic, a goodbye to the exaltation of the human carried through to the point of explosion. It would be the renunciation of the substitution of the dead god with a human that, in losing the meaning of its identity, begins to overflow according to a consuming impulse as it empties and annexes every limit, every transcendence, every infinite. It would be the refutation of the subject of

rights, of needs, of production—thus the disposition to give oneself to that which is repressed and imprisoned within and outside of oneself, welcoming it in itself and thereby taking away all of its malignant, immediate urgency. It would be—as difference—that line where the impure mix of subject and object, characteristic of the realised dialectic at its end, is dissolved, separated. Thus the non-human would be neither fallen into the movement of history, nor the immobility of myth: rather it would be history's arrest; neither the extension of the subject, nor merely its annihilation: rather its fracture; neither the exaltation of consciousness nor the formless silence of the unconscious: rather irreducible voice. To disintegrate identity, to dismantle the totality: neither because its fragments—asymmetrical and formless forced to 'go outside themselves'—have returned as contradictions, momentary engines of the destiny of the world, nor because they have been abandoned to their own blind drift, easy targets once again for the judgment of the dialectic. Rather, because they are sustained in their own non-identity.

LETTER TO *LOTTA CONTINUA*

Marisa Fiumano, *Lotta Continua* (1978)

Assigned part; ineluctable destiny. To everyone their sex and their role. But can we not at least expose the theatricality, laugh at the farce? The political scene (there is no more correct way to say this!) is packed with actors and each believes that they coincide with their script, as if the mask exhausted the subject.

My political project is to exit the habits of the scene or to know at least that I am reciting and what, and to encounter those who are acting or who desire to act otherwise. Recognizing one's own phantasms is the measure with which I believe one should measure humanity.

Mårten Björk

LIFE AGAINST NATURE

The Goldberg Circle
and the Search for a Non-Catastrophic Politics

Two days after Christmas Eve in 1934, Walter Benjamin wrote from San Remo to his friend, the historian of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem, that he had:

fallen into the headquarters of the genuine Magic Jews. For [Oskar] Goldberg has taken up residence here, and he has delegated his disciple [Adolf] Caspary to the cafés, and *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* [The Reality of the Hebrews] to the local newspaper stand, while he himself—who knows?—probably spends his time conducting tests of his numerology in the casino. Needless to say, I haven't engaged in conversation with this flank.¹

By distancing himself from Goldberg and Caspary, Benjamin helped to marginalise the so-called Goldberg circle from the history of philosophy that he himself became part of, for better or for worse. This was a missed chance for what could have been a fascinating dialogue with a current that theorised the possibility of abandoning the world of capital through a form of biological revolution.

According to Caspary, the course of capitalism as an industrialised economy showed clearly that "[t]he way of life of the masses, within an economy that produces by means of machines, must be proletarian, since even today the machine and not the 'order' [*die 'Ordnung'*] maintains the relation of capital. If the way of life of the masses remains as it is now then that means: justice is impossible. The relation between justice and machines is a utopia".² For Caspary, the machine is more than a mere instrument consisting of different parts that—taken as a whole—uses mechanical power to make particular tasks easier to perform. As we will see, it is a social mechanism bound to a specifically capitalist mode of production, which even produces a kind of "machine utopia"—*Maschinenutopie*—that is the necessary and deeply mystifying

1. Walter Benjamin & Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* (Harvard University Press 1992), 148.

2. Adolf Caspary, *Die Maschinenutopie: Das Übereinstimmungs-moment der bürgerlichen und sozialistischen Ökonomie* (Verlag David 1927), 79–80. All translations from this book are the author's.

horizon for an existence that can envision neither an economy nor a life beyond the factory.³ Anticipating the arguments of important theorists of technology after him, Caspary argued that machinery is not politically neutral, but rather an apparatus of proletarianisation tied to the production of surplus labour. This did not imply a naive primitivism, rather it raised the question of whether or not there is a more productive tool for the survival of the species than the machinery of industrial capitalism, whose catastrophic consequences for the biosphere Caspary predicted.

In this essay I shall probe the work on capitalism and technology developed by the Goldberg circle during the Weimar period which, with its economic crises and political turmoil, many argue is reflected in our own period of farcical but dangerous nationalist movements and protectionist trade wars. In doing so I will show how for this current, the critique of capital not only implied a strategy of secession but also an investigation of myth, philosophy, and religion that ultimately sought to formulate the possibility of a new anthropogenesis.

INTRODUCTION

The historian of myth Oskar Goldberg (1885–1952), the legal and economic historian Adolf Caspary (1898–1953), and their philosopher friend Erich Unger (1887–1950) became famous during the Weimar Period for their books on anthropology, economy, and religion edited by David Verlag. Between 1925 and 1933 they organised a series of seminars under the name *Philosophische Gruppe* [the philosophical group]. The meetings in Berlin were frequented by Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, Karl Korsch, Robert Musil, Günther Stern (later Anders), Walter Benjamin and other prominent philosophers, poets, and revolutionaries. Today Goldberg and his circle are largely forgotten. Had it not been for Manfred Voigts's almost archaeological excavation of the work of Goldberg, Unger, and to a lesser extent Caspary, these three thinkers would probably still be unknown outside the circles of those specializing in either German Jewish thought or the avant-garde during the Weimar period.⁴

Bruce Rosenstock has recently published an important monograph on Goldberg that convincingly

3. *Ibid.*, 77.

4. Manfred Voigts, *Oskar Goldberg: Der mythische Experimentalwissenschaftler: Ein verdrängtes Kapitel jüdischer Geschichte* (Agora 1992).

presents him as a prominent member of the vitalist tradition, emphasising the psychophysical basis of human thought.⁵

I have examined Goldberg's notion of humanity as what I call an animal of the infinite and discussed how the liberation of our species from his perspective could never be a simple affirmation of this life since it had to alter humanity's biological and sociological shortcomings.⁶ The Goldberg circle sought a way out of the long march into the domains of class, state, and civilisation which humanity, according to them, not only has been entrapped in, but increasingly could be identified with.

It may be the economist Adolf Caspary and his 1927 examination of Karl Marx's concept of machinery that make this current especially worth returning to in our time of climate catastrophes and the overall decline of capital. Through Caspary's reading of Marx, his critique of the Polish Marxist Henryk Grossmann, and the Goldberg circle's close connection to the poet and photographer Simon Guttmann, one of the founders of KAPD (*Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*), the group interacted with several milieus of revolutionaries during the Weimar period.⁷

Benjamin participated in the seminars organised by the Goldberg circle due to his interest in Unger, whose book *Politik und Metaphysik* [Politics and Metaphysics] from 1921 he enthusiastically described as the "most significant piece of writing on politics in our time".⁸ He based his essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" on Unger's philosophical interpretation of Goldberg's exegesis of the *Torah*, used Unger's examination of the concept of compromise in "Critique of Violence" and in the fragment "Capitalism as Religion" enigmatically wrote: "Overcoming of capitalism through migration [Wanderung], Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*".⁹

Decades before Jacques Camatte wrote "This world we must leave" and began to theorise the emergence of a *Homo Gemeinwesen*,

5. Bruce Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination* (Indiana University 2017).

6. Märten Björk, *Life Outside Life: The Politics of Immortality, 1914–1945* (Gothenburg University 2018).

7. For Caspary's critique of Grossmann see Adolf Caspary, 'Grossmann, Henryk: Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems. Zugleich eine Krisentheorie', *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv*, 32 (2): 1930, 80–84.

8. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno (University of Chicago Press 1994), 172.

9. Walter Benjamin, 'Capitalism as Religion' in *Selected Writings: 1913–1926* (Belknap 1999), 288–291. Here: 290.

and long before Paolo Virno defended his theory of a proletarian exodus from the social factory, Goldberg, Unger, and Caspary sought a secession from capital's "field of activities [*Wirkungsbereich*]"¹⁰ In practice this withdrawal implied the struggle for a "non-catastrophic politics" adequate to the tasks needed for survival in a world that had been ravaged by the first industrialised world war and was moving towards new disasters.¹¹

Recognising them as theorists of a secession from capitalism helps explain the Goldberg circle's closeness to Guttman, who was enthralled by Goldberg's religious genius and saved his writings after his death in 1953.¹² Their hope for an anthropological transformation of the human species and their theoretical work on myth, philosophy, and religion may seem foreign to the nexus of intellectuals belonging to the KAPD. Yet one of the party's other founders, the author and economist Franz Jung, defended an explicitly biological theory of revolution. In *Die Technik des Glücks* [The Techniques of Happiness], published in two parts in 1921 and 1923, he elaborated a theory of "the stream of life", arguing that the individual exemplar of the human species had become separated from the totality of biological existence.¹³ Similar to the ideas of others in his circle, such as Ernst Fuhrmann and Raoul Hausmann, Jung wrote that "*property and capital are the compromise of life, the living consciousness of the isolated [des Vereinzelten]*" and posited that the struggle against capital even showed that "the last motoric power source of human life is not yet released" since capitalism was an obstacle to the evolution of humanity.¹⁴ Not unlike Russian revolutionaries who speculated on a biological transformation of the human species through social change, such as the bolshevik Alexander Bogdanov and the theologian Nikolai Fyodorov, Jung thought that revolution could alter the natural conditions of human life.¹⁵

10. Erich Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* (Königshausen & Neumann 1989), 148. All translations from this work are the author's. See also Jacques Camatte, 'This World We Must Leave' in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (Autonomedia 1995), 137–180.

11. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 7.

12. For an introduction to Guttman's life and work see: Nicholas Jacobs and Diethart Kerbs, 'Wilhelm Simon Guttman, 1891–1990: A Documentary Portrait', *German Life and Letters* vol. 62 no. 4 (2009), 401–414. It is Richard Whelan who describes Guttman's interest in Goldberg's numerological speculations. See Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: A Biography* (University of Nebraska Press 1985), 32.

13. Here I use the first volume: Franz Jung, *Die Technik des Glücks; psychologische Anleitungen in vier Übungsfolgen* (Der Malik Verlag 1921). All translations are the author's own.

14. *Ibid.*, 18 & 67.

In this context it is evident that the Goldberg circle is related to the left communist nexus and other avant-garde circles during the Weimar period that dabbled with biological ideas in a time when the discourses of race were becoming hegemonic. The group developed a new notion of life as an antidote to the politicisation of life that would culminate in the thanatopolitics of Nazism. Goldberg even used the *Torah* to depict the archaic Hebrew community of the five books of Moses as a missionary tribe that can be said to affirm what the Nazis called life unworthy of life, *Lebensunwertes Leben*, by living against the normalcy of nature that Nazism would exalt. We will see why this interest in ancient Judaism was—to use Camatte's description of ideas like these during the 1920s—not a mere "echo from the past".¹⁶ It was an intrinsic part of the group's attempt to initiate a debate on the necessity of a flight from the West in the time of Zionism, the general migration from the poverty, misery, and war in Europe.

The Goldberg circle was not oblivious to the blatant fact that the migration of the masses who abandoned the poverty of the old world did so in order to find jobs and survive as proletarians in a world market that made global migration possible. However, many of those who migrated also searched for ways to live outside the confines of the industrial system of capitalism, such as in phalansteries in the United States or the kibbutzim in Palestine. The Goldberg circle can be seen as a group strategising around the abandonment of capital or, to put it less dramatically, theorising a Jewish drop-out culture seeking to create alliances with the peoples living outside "the field of activities" of capital, in other words the industrialised countries of the West.

Today, the knowledge of how easily capital has subsumed its enemies leads even dependency theorists to argue for the impossibility of a delinking strategy. In this sense, any secession from capital may seem hopelessly naive. Not least because nowadays millions of the wretched of the earth are searching for a future in what is perhaps falsely deemed to be the core regions of capital. Still, Goldberg interpreted Caspary's reading of Marx as indicating that capitalism is less a totality subsuming everything in its midst than an anarchic, catastrophic system expelling workers from the immediate

15. See Boris Groys and Michael Hagemeister, eds., *Die Neue Menschheit – Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Suhrkamp 2005).

16. Camatte, 'Echoes of the Past' in *This World We Must Leave*, 181–250.

process of production and therefore producing its outside and slow demise. Thus, if, as it has been said, “subsumption cannot rigorously apply to historical periods per se, nor to anything beyond the immediate process of production” this is because capitalism has a centre, namely, the factory and the firm, and even more the industrial production these enterprises proscribe.¹⁷ Ten years after the Russian revolution, Caspary argued “the capitalist system is the necessary and adequate form of production with machinery, economically as well as politically. No revolution changes the imperialist politics of states or the proletarian way of life of the masses, since both are grounded in the coercion that the machine exerts”.¹⁸ Socialism and capitalism are from this perspective two facets of one and the same industrial world forming our species into a race of workers. Capitalism will never be able to produce a completely deindustrialised world; it will only generate the ruins of rust belts, the standardisation of economic life and the rise of new factories.

From this perspective, if a way out of capitalism is really being sought out, then the question of whether or not it is possible to move beyond what Joshua B. Freeman recently has called the Behemoth of industrialism is of utmost importance.¹⁹

Yet this question arises not only due to the fact that we are living in a world of species extinction and over-accumulation threatening life on the biosphere, but also because the world of capital has a distinct anthropological form. The Behemoth, Freeman writes, creates perhaps “not exactly a new man at one with the automatic machinery and industrial processes of the giant factory as envisioned, in their own ways, by Henry Ford, Alexei Gastev, and Antonio Gramsci. But a new man and a new woman nonetheless, with a time sense dictated by the needs of mass, coordinated activity and the rhythms of machinery”.²⁰ The Goldberg circle argued that this capitalist form of anthropogenesis had to be disrupted in order to make a way out imaginable. In fact they predicted that life under capitalism would be put into crisis by the catastrophic development of the machine world of capital itself.

17. Endnotes, ‘The History of Subsumption’, *Endnotes 2* (2010).

18. Caspary, *Die Maschinenutopie*, 83–84.

19. Joshua B. Freeman, *Behemoth: a History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (Norton 2018).

20. *Ibid.*, 319.

“The proletariat”, Goldberg wrote two years after the parliamentary victory of NSDAP, “is politically and biologically the weakest of classes”.²¹ This weakness does not mean that it is not rebellious or combative. It simply signifies that it is a supplement or surplus population, a *Zusatzbevölkerung*, “which lives due to the perfection and expansion of the machine, because only during the time of prosperous technical means of production more people can marry, more people can stay alive, and more people can be fed”.²² But this proletarianisation of humanity has a clear limit in the finite natural resources needed for the reproduction of the *noosphere* of capitalism that has spread over the earth’s crust. Goldberg asked: “What happens to the many, many millions of the technical surplus population when the machine catastrophe is here, when the factories stand still and the means of subsistence are withdrawn from the masses? In this case, these many millions will go under due to starvation since they are produced by technology’s increased leeway of life [*Lebenspielraum*]. We can predict how it will end: the raw material of the earth will end in the foreseeable future”.²³ A way out could only be revealed once the cycles of states and empires—with their pyramids, Chinese walls, Centre Pompidou, and Trump towers, or for that matter their Harrisburgs, Chernobyls, and Fukushimas—had been disrupted.

21. Oskar Goldberg, ‘Maimonides’ in *Zahl-engebäude, Ontologie, Maimonides und Aufsätze 1933 bis 1947*, edited by Manfred Voigts (Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 123–217. Here: 215.

22. *Ibid.*, 214.

23. *Ibid.*

THE FIVE THOUSAND YEAR WORLD SYSTEM

For a period of time, Benjamin nurtured the hope that Unger would be a principal collaborator to his proposed review, “Angelus Novus”, but avoided a serious discussion with him because of his suspicion of Goldberg. This hostility was probably cultivated by Benjamin’s loyalty to Scholem, who had an estranged if not jealous relation to Goldberg. Goldberg became known in German Jewish circles and amongst religious scholars for his numerological reading of the five books of Moses published in 1908.²⁴ Yet what made Goldberg more widely famous was his massive exegesis, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer: Einleitung in das System des Pentateuch*

24. Oskar Goldberg, *Die fünf Bücher Mosis: Ein Zahlengebäude: Die Feststellung einer einheitlich durchgeführten Zahlenschrift* (Liebmann 1908).

[The Reality of the Hebrews: Introduction to the System of the Pentateuch], published in 1925, which Scholem described as biological kabbalism and even as “the classical work of Jewish Satanism”.²⁵

Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer found prominent readers in Franz Rosenzweig and Thomas Mann, while Goldberg’s later work, such as his book on Maimonides, fascinated Carl Schmitt.²⁶ Mann used Goldberg’s interpretation of the *Torah* as an inspiration for his four-part novel *Joseph and his Brothers* and based his portrait of the Jewish fascist Dr. Chaim Breisacher in *Doctor Faustus* on Goldberg.²⁷ Breisacher dreamt of a return to the world of ancient Hebrewdom, and was used by Mann as a symbol for the dangerous archaism that according to him had made Nazism possible. One might question why Mann, who himself had flirted with militarism and German nationalism, felt the need to use a Jewish thinker to depict the rise of Nazism. Yet the critique of civilisation that Goldberg and his circle defended was a violent rejection not only of Fascism and Nazism but also of the world that – according to him – had spawned these movements.

In a manner reminiscent of world system theorists, such as the late André Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, who have argued that “the contemporary world has a history of at least 5,000 years”, the Goldberg circle viewed empires such as Akkadia, Babylon, Assyria, Neo-Babylonia, and the long history of different Egyptian civilisations as the root of the capitalist system and the disasters it entailed.²⁸ This view of the contemporary world system as intrinsically linked to older modes of production – though as we will see, in a dialectical reversion also fundamentally different through the development of industrial machinery – can be part of explaining the Goldberg circle’s oscillation between anthropology of myth and political critique. In the series of books by Goldberg, Unger, and Caspary that was published by David Verlag between 1921 and 1927 under the heading “Theory, attempts at a

25. Gershom Scholem, *Briefe, Band I 1914–1947* (CH Beck 1994), 230 and Oskar Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer: Einleitung in das System des Pentateuch* (Harrassowitz Verlag 2005). All translations from these book are the author’s.

26. On Schmitt’s reading of Goldberg see Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life*, xxv.

27. For a detailed account of the relation between Thomas Mann and Oskar Goldberg, see Christian Hülshörster, *Thomas Mann und Oskar Goldbergs ‘Wirklichkeit der Hebräer’* (Klostermann 1999). See also the chapter ‘Thomas Mann und Oskar Goldberg’ in Voigts, *Oskar Goldberg*, 235–270

28. Andre Gunder Frank & Barry K. Gills, ‘The 5,000 year world system: An interdisciplinary introduction’ in *The World System: Five hundred years or five thousand?* (Routledge 1996), 3–55. Here: 3.

philosophical politics”, the group presented its critical anthropology of the course of civilisation.

The immediate political context of the series of books was not only the First World War, the first industrialised war which both the social democratic and the right-wing parties had endorsed in Germany, but also the period of hyperinflation that had begun in 1918. In March 1923, the Weimar republic plunged into a deep economic crisis, foreshadowing the great collapse of world capitalism in 1929. The mark could no longer be saved, and inflation rose drastically. Retail businesses began to hoard their inventories and refuse payment made in paper marks. At first, the stores in Berlin and several other cities were only open two or three days a week, and then subsequently, all over Germany, only on an hourly basis, and stock remained insufficient. As German Jews, Goldberg, Unger, and Caspary understood that the economic crisis would imply a dangerous radicalisation of centuries-old traditions of antisemitism. Their series of books edited by David Verlag was also an intervention in the debate on Zionism and the struggle for a Jewish homeland, as well as more generally a depiction of what they saw as the looming crisis of what I, with Gunder Frank, will call the five thousand year-old world system.

The first book in the series, Unger’s *Politik und Metaphysik* appeared in 1921 and defended an exodus from the industrial system of capital which was portrayed as unable to solve the basic problem of energy and food production through means other than coercion, war, and imperialism. “The economy”, Unger argued, “is by far the most extensive and plausible factor of explanation for almost all political affairs, the key to each party’s every action, to every statement, however abstract it seems”.²⁹ A way out must be sought that abandons the capitalist “field of activities” in its entirety. Otherwise, both the left and the right, tied as they are to the state, will reproduce “the politics of catastrophe” that is the destiny of the industrialised capitalist economy looming towards economic, ecological and entropic catastrophes such as the sixth species extinction that we know of today.

Politik und Metaphysik was supposed to be followed by a study on the concept of the people written by Goldberg, *Das Volk: Über eine dynamische Struktur in soziologischen Einheiten und die Theorie ihrer Formel* [The People: On the Dynamic Structure in Sociological Units

29. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 10–11.

and the Theory of their Formula]. This study would perhaps have explained Unger's argument that one must differentiate communities organised around economic interests grounded in a modern state from collectives that find a root in the psychophysical life of humanity that often clashes with the economy, such as in the hunger riots he witnessed in Germany after the war.³⁰ Instead it took four years until Goldberg's magnum opus *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* was published. This was an exegetical attempt to differentiate the *Torah* from the rest of *Tanakh*, the Jewish bible, by arguing that the former belonged to a period of myth and metaphysics rooted in the tribal life of prehistoric tribes that the other books in the Jewish bible did not depict.

Emphasising that the *Torah* belonged to a polytheistic and mythological order of archaic tribes Goldberg sought to understand ancient Hebrewdom as a break with the Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires which, from the perspective of Gunder Frank, can be viewed not only as the origin of written history but of the current world system itself. This made it important for Goldberg to differentiate between peoples [*Völker*] namely, the non-state archaic peoples of the world, and the non-peoples of the states [*Staate*], who are identified with the sedentary city civilisations in the *Torah*. It is important to note that for Goldberg, these sedentary civilisations embed humanity in nature rather than separate our species from it. For just "as the people is an instrument of *sublation* [*Aufhebung*], the state is an institution for the *stabilisation* of 'nature' and also for maintaining of the natural laws of normality".³¹ Here, one must note, the Goldberg circle clearly showed that their criticism of the rise of civilisation did not entail the hope of a return to nature. In fact, similar to some radical feminist theorists such as Shulamith Firestone, the group came close to arguing that it was the normality of human nature, not least sexual difference, that had forced humanity into the course of class and coercion in the first place.³² Yet I must wait to discuss this sublation or *Aufhebung* of the normality of nature which made an economic and even biological abundance possible. Here it suffices to note that it was in this rather late secession from civilisation itself, initiated by the Hebrews, that the Goldberg circle found an example of a rebellious community that used rites

30. *Ibid.*, 47.

31. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 48.

32. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Verso 2015).

and taboos to alter biological life itself, which could inspire men and women to take up this withdrawal from the five thousand year-old world system. They did not seek an alternative in any primitive communism or what Marshall Sahlins has called an original affluent society, but in a rather recent withdrawal from the world of empires and states that we are still part of.³³ However, Goldberg argued that this secession must not only be a withdrawal from what humanity has become during the course of civilisation, but also from the life that made this history of coercion possible.

As problematic it may be, the Goldberg circle meant that the catastrophic politics of their times had to be understood in relation to what they saw as the normal course of human evolution. Our world has been evolving out of the banal and contingent effect of the violence inherent in nature itself, visible, for instance, in aging, death, and even the pain and danger of birth. In order to survive our species has become a creature that dwells in states, families, and other institutions that stabilise the catastrophic tendency of nature, which, through a long process of coercion, exploitation, and violence has coagulated as capitalism in modern times. From Goldberg's point of view, this stabilisation of nature through the state is not in any sense an eradication or sublation of natural phenomena such as aging, droughts, epidemics, the simple fact of biological death or for that matter sexual difference, but rather their equilibrium. With the advent of capitalism, it may seem like humanity has mastered nature, not least due to the abnormal population growth of our species that Caspary argued was a product of the development of the industrialised world. But this stabilisation of nature implies a violent pressure on the biosphere itself. This fact is visible in the proliferation of entropic processes driven by technological development, and more importantly for the Goldberg circle, the reduction of humanity to a species of proletarians entrapped in the industrialised world that workers are erecting all over the planet in order to survive as wage workers.

What Goldberg emphasised with his theory of the state as a stabilisation of nature, albeit in a manner many would deem as too general, was that every territorial state is tied to the natural resources that constitute the material basis of its economy. Thus, Unger's description of all modern political parties as interest groups dominated by the

33. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Aldine 1972).

imperatives of the economy had its ultimate historical condition in the rise of sedentary civilisation and the stabilisation of the catastrophic tendency of nature that accompanied it. From this perspective, growing states fighting for more accumulation are forced to exploit their natural resources, often resulting in environmental catastrophes. According to Goldberg, the stabilisation of nature as a resource for accumulation is the very decline to normality [*Verfall zur Normalität*] that the Hebrews sought to free themselves from by developing a new metabolic relation to nature through the customs, rites, and taboo systems depicted in the *Torah* and which severed them from the civilizations around them.

This bleak view on the course of human civilisation was the world historical background for Unger's intervention in the debate on Zionism, *Die staatenlose Bildung eines jüdischen Volkes: Vorrede zu einer gesetzgebenden Akademie* [The Stateless Formation of a Jewish People: Preface to a Legislative Academy], from 1925. On the basis of Goldberg's theory of the state as a stabilisation of nature and therefore a normalisation of its destructive character, Unger argued that it would be dangerous for the Jewish community to become part of the nation states that belong to the whole European world "which is nothing but an intermediate catastrophe".³⁴

He insisted that building such a state would subsume the Jews to the course of history that had entrapped many other peoples in its catastrophic form of life, and thereby sever the Jews' link to the prehistoric and archaic peoples and tribes of the world that also lacked territorial states: "The Jews should not overlook their singularly favourable position, namely, that since two thousand years they have materially been a people without history, the only one that can be free from being beaten by the fetters of the past and the reality of an empirical state existence that all other peoples have been beaten by".³⁵ Instead of building a state in the European sense, Unger proposed the construction of philosophical schools that would train Jews to develop a metaphysics for a stateless existence that should even seek alliances with the non-Western, archaic communities scattered around the world. This was a suggestion that Unger had already defended in *Politik und Metaphysik* but there these, what he called "metapolitical universities", were open for everyone

who sought to abandon the politics of catastrophe whose centre the Goldberg circle certainly found in the industrialised world.³⁶ In *Die staatenlose Bildung eines jüdischen Volkes* Unger was closer to Goldberg and emphasised the need to produce a new type of metapolitics for the Jewish community in order to habituate it to a life outside the European states.

This metapolitics, or what Unger also called metaphysics, was not a Gramscian insistence that, to use the words of a contemporary right-wing ideologue, "politics is downstream from culture". On the contrary, Unger was not afraid to reduce culture to economy.

He saw all modern cultures and religions as epiphenomena and superstructures to the economic base of society. Like John Maynard Keynes, he even defined economy as a biological problem. For, according to the great economist, economy is nothing but a "struggle for subsistence, [which] always has been hitherto the primary, most pressing problem of the human race — not only of the human race, but of the whole of the biological kingdom from the beginnings of life in its most primitive forms".³⁷ When the Goldberg circle referred to the economy, they were most often referring to the primary sector of economic activity; in other words, the extraction of raw materials through activities like mining and agriculture, which laid the basis for the biological survival of our species.³⁸

But, what Unger wanted to emphasise in *Politik und Metaphysik* was that just as it is possible to change the economic management of needs, the needs themselves can be altered. In the long course of human history this has been done many times before through systems of rites and taboos, such as those described in the *Torah*. This interest in the plasticity of needs is probably one of the reasons why the group never developed a theory of the inequality or coerciveness of the community of the *Torah*, although they attacked capitalism as fundamentally unjust and coercive. What was for them a more urgent task than a sociology of injustice in prehistoric tribes was an anthropological research ultimately revealing that different economies have implied radically different ways to understand reality due to the ways of life they entail. This necessary relation between altering the economy of needs, which for Unger can be identified with politics, and understand-

36. Ibid., 52.

37. John Maynard Keynes, 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren' [1930] in *Essays in Persuasion* (W. W. Norton 1963).

38. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 21.

34. Erich Unger, *Die Staatslose Bildung eines Jüdischen Volkes* (Verlag David 1922) 19–20.

35. Ibid., 31.

ing the structure of reality, which Unger identified with metaphysics, is ultimately what the group tried to theorise, and why he called his book *Politik und Metaphysik*.

What the Goldberg circle called metaphysics was nothing but the science of understanding the conditions of possibility of what is, in other words the economy of being itself, and therefore, dialectically, what could be. In this sense, the group meant that a metaphysics, as a science of possibility, was an indispensable means for all serious politics and therefore a form of life and not solely a thought system. Metaphysical understanding was related to instincts as well as thought and in the end a lived reality that for the Hebrews took the form of the system of needs on the outskirts of civilisation that the *Torah* depicts and which made their tribe wage a war against existing human nature. The harsh cultivation of daily life that the laws and rules of the *Torah* prescribed was according to Goldberg therefore related to a metaphysics that revealed the plasticity of human life and being itself.

In sharp contrast to ancient Greek politics and classical ontology, which traditionally begin with the question of the state and the philosophy of being, Goldberg argued in *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* that the metaphysics of the *Torah* was grounded on a modal ontology needed for survival in the desert: “The world, as the epitome of everything that is, is composed of a finite and an infinite part”.³⁹ The finite part — namely what we take to be physical nature — is constituted by time, space, and the law of causality, and this can be identified with the processes that the states stabilise and normalise as being as such. For, Goldberg underlined, “[i]n contradiction to Kant, space, time, and causality are not forms of intuition, but rather the constitutive forms of finite reality”.⁴⁰ They constitute the domain of finite nature where humanity normally grounds its life, whereas the infinite part of reality is the realm of possibility preceding the realm of finite space and time as a domain that contradicts the laws of classical logic and implies a conflict with what seems to be nature as such.

The *Torah* portrays the world, Goldberg argued, as fractured between what in contemporary cosmology is called the domain of *res extensae*, which for Goldberg is the natural domain of everything material, spatial, and temporal, and the domain of *res potentiae*, the eternal

39. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 1.

40. *Ibid.*, 3.

and infinite domain of everything that could be.⁴¹ This notion that reality is not only, to use the famous words of Donald Rumsfeld, constituted by “known knowns” or “known unknowns” but also more importantly, “unknown unknowns”, had immediate political consequences for Goldberg. It suggested an extreme openness of the cosmos itself, most visible in the faculty of imagination of that animal Unger called an unfinished creature, namely, the human whose mental and practical life indicated that the facticity of nature, what is at hand and given, is not an exhaustion of reality. From this perspective, the realm of the possible is vaster than the realm of nature and this ontology of possibility was for Goldberg the world historical discovery of the *Torah* and enacted in the life forms described in the five books of Moses as a practical metaphysics aiming to alter nature. This did not imply that Goldberg thought that everything was possible in nature and therefore in society which is solely a natural fact in time and space. But it meant that he identified the systems of taboos in the *Torah* as technologies that were used to change society and nature. By differentiating nature as a sphere of actuality from the domain of potentiality whose entities, such as the paradise or the classless society, forever may only be thought or desired, he attempted not only to show the difference between the actual and the possible or for that matter what may only be thought or desired. He sought to avoid equating reality with what is actualised in time and space by arguing that the possible comes before the actual and thereby he could insist that what we take to be real can be consciously contested since it does not exhaust the modality of reality that human imagination indicates. This is, in the end, what the *Torah* teaches: it points to a modal ontology of the human imagination.

Goldberg’s cosmological interpretation of the *Torah* as a modal ontology is directly related to a more general understanding of reality as something plastic and changeable that became popular during the Weimar period. For example, Franz Jung insisted on the importance of addressing the relativity of the laws of nature itself — “We talk of law, since we feel it *in* us and not over us, while we carry and live with it, that is we are co-creators of this law” — and even argued that death itself may be abolished.⁴² It was certainly similar ideas that made it urgent

41. See Stuart A. Kauffman, ‘Res Potentia and Res Extensa Linked, hence United, by Quantum Measurement’ in *Physics and Speculative Philosophy: Potentiality in Modern Science* (De Gruyter 2016), 47–52.

for the Goldberg circle to challenge what the philosopher Alexius Meinong had already in 1904 called 'the prejudice in favour of the actual', namely, mistaking what is with what is given in time and space.⁴³ This identification of the real with what is given and actual is for Goldberg something of the ontological superstructure for the five thousand year old world system that now, as it is entering its decline, makes way for new systems of metaphysics and their attendant forms of life.

It was in this sense Unger argued that for the human who seeks to abandon the reduction of reality to what is given "metaphysics is not a luxury and superstructure that is not vital in itself; it is his own indispensable method—both typical and decisive for life and death—for ensuring that he and those like him can live together".⁴⁴ Metaphysics is, as we have seen, not merely theoretical but a communal form of life; a praxis needed for survival in order to uphold a certain kind of collective existence. This is why metaphysics for the Goldberg circle was best exemplified by the tribal communities of the prehistoric world rather than by the philosophical schools of antiquity that defended different metaphysical systems and which, as Pierre Hadot has shown, aimed to alter individuals' lives and not only explain the structure of reality.⁴⁵ Thus, even if ancient philosophy certainly was a practice altering the life of the student who followed the philosophical masters in the different philosophical schools—such as Platonism or Stoicism—these schools belonged to the course of civilisation or what Goldberg called the order of fixation.

From a more Marxist perspective one could say that philosophy is based on the scission between physical and mental labour through the advent of slavery and the break with primitive communism. The dissolution of this archaic world gives rise to peoples of culture—*Kulturvölker*—that populate the five thousand year-old world system, where the separation between metaphysics and politics, which was inconceivable for tribal and prehistoric communities according to Unger, culminates in a view of life where the given is what is. In the end, metaphysics is myth, since myth for Goldberg is not a story but a structure of reality. This structure is indicated in the stories we call

42. Jung, *Die Technik des Glücks*, 119–120.

43. Alexius Meinong, *Über Gegenstandstheorie & Selbstdarstellung* (Felix Meiner Verlag 1988), 3.

44. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 28.

45. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy* (Belknap 2004).

myths since they often are pointing to the lives and views on the cosmos of different archaic tribes. Myths should according to Goldberg therefore be interpreted as indicating how different archaic life forms altered nature in order to survive. They show that mythology indicates the technology of a construction of a people with the power to sublimate reality and thereby produce a form of life.

Goldberg's understanding of myth as a lived and practical system of metaphysics was explained in 1926, when Unger's *Das Problem der mythischen Realität: Eine Einleitung in die Goldbergische Schrift "Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer"* [The Problem of the Mythical Reality: An Introduction to Goldberg's Essay 'The Reality of the Hebrews'], was published in the series edited by David Verlag.⁴⁶ Here, Unger examined Goldberg's ideas that the possible or the domain of *res potentiae* is the larger part of the real, whereas the order of the actual—*res extensae*—is only the surface of this vaster reality of potentiality. He discussed what was implied by the fact that the Hebrews described this world of potentiality as the *Elohim IHWH*—the God of all gods, the creator God—and how the *Torah* catalogues an extensive list of extreme disruptions of the normalcy of nature. Unger shows how Goldberg aimed to develop a secular anthropology of miracles and explain why the metaphysics of the *Torah* implied, in contrast to other mythical systems, a transformation of nature itself.

The *Torah* separated the *Elohim IHWH* from nature and contrasted these two entities as a perfect and an imperfect order. The creator deity is the eternal potentiality of everything that can be, an eternal life, whereas the world is a finite and imperfect instantiation of this eternal modality plagued with the problems of life such as sickness, aging, death, etc., simply because finite nature cannot, by definition, be eternal and thereby perfect in the sense that it cannot die.⁴⁷ Yet the *Torah* was a myth that sought to mutate nature so that that finite and imperfect life could move beyond itself and thereby initiate an economy and even a biology of abundance, surely close to what Marxists would call communism, a classless and stateless society, but which was even closer to Jung's ideas in *Die Technik des Glücks*

46. Erich Unger, *Das Problem der mythischen Realität: Eine Einleitung in die Goldbergische Schrift "Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer"* (David Verlag 1926). All translations are the author's own.

47. This implies a fascinating political theodicy which I have discussed. See Björk, 'The Animal of the Infinite: Oskar Goldberg and the Science of Evil' in *Life Outside Life*, 217–284.

of a biological transformation of life. The Hebrews wanted to free themselves from what has been called “the prison house of human nature” and perhaps demonstrated the truth of the thesis that “‘socialism’ is to change society, ‘communism’ is to change the human” since for the Goldberg circle there was not only a historical but also an anthropological dimension of revolution.⁴⁸ In other words, society has changed a lot during the development of the five thousand year old world system, but what must change is human nature, which makes a civilisational animal of the human.

It was in this sense, Unger argued, that anthropological research into human history may indicate that not even the natural limits of a given society can be seen as impossible to change. Different ways of life can transform the finite and scarce resources of an economy into something reminiscent of the abundance of life that the *Torah* posited as being itself. But today, it can only do so through a critique of the economic process in which, Unger insisted, “the state becomes nature”, that is to say through a concrete interruption of the stabilisation of nature so radical that it forces “not only the state’s nature, but also the psycho-physical nature beyond its current endpoint”.⁴⁹ Thus for the Goldberg circle, metaphysics was a communal form of life seeking to disrupt the stabilisation of nature through a sublation of what we consider to be normal. Now, in a time where no such forms of life exist since most human communities are part of the five thousand year-old world system, the task, according to the Goldberg circle, is to develop a philosophical politics that can revive such a form of life from the internal crisis this world is moving towards through the advent of industrial civilisation.

TWO FORMS OF TECHNOLOGY

By juxtaposing anthropological studies of ancient religion and tribal communities and critical examinations of modern capitalism, Goldberg aimed to develop a “contemporary transcendental reality-research” of human life.⁵⁰ The philosopher Margarete Susman, an early interpreter of Goldberg, has clarified that the transcendental here simply means

48. Mario Tronti, *Con le spalle al futuro – Per un altro dizionario politico* (Editori Riuniti 1992), 136.

49. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 27.

50. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 16.

“the general” or the common characteristics of an epoch in a Kantian sense.⁵¹ By differentiating between the general anthropological conditions of the world of the *Torah* and the polytheistic period of myth it belonged to and those of the five thousand year-old world system, in other words the period of fixation, Goldberg could wager that it was possible to read the *Torah* as a manual for the birth of a new political order.

Goldberg agreed with the French school of anthropology, perhaps best represented by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss – who helped Goldberg and Caspary to France after the *Machtübernahme* in Germany – that the basis of human social life may be found in archaic communities and ancient religion.⁵² However, against this school of sociology and anthropology that sought the invariance of human life, the Goldberg circle insisted on a crucial distinction between the *Gemeinwesen* of the archaic tribes and subsequent modes of human existence. Since they depicted different modes of life, Goldberg argued in *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* that the *Torah* had to be differentiated from the rest of the *Tanakh*. The five books of Moses depicted *Urjudentum* [ancient Judaism], “the doctrine which is contained in the oldest part of the Bible... The Bible is not an ideological unit. Its books extend over a period of 1,500 years”.⁵³ Thereby, if traditional theology belongs to the religion of faith and the rise of the religions of the fixated world, then *Urjudentum* belonged to the mythical epoch where humanity is differentiated into separate totemistic groups with distinct divinities and myths. These races or peoples, as Goldberg called them, implied different ways of working with nature, in other words, different ways of solving the banal problems of human life such as birth, death, the need for energy and food, and thereby they also produced different forms of mythical or metaphysical cosmologies. The tribes therefore demonstrated the intrinsic relation between metaphysics and politics.

During the archaic period of the *Torah*, Unger explained in *Das Problem der mythischen Realität*, there existed a myriad of tribes outside the vast orders of civilisations and “every people, every anthropological mode of being [anthropologische Art-Gemeinschaft] is a

51. Margarete Susman, ‘Vortrag über Oskar Goldberg’ in Goldberg, *Zahlengebäude, Ontologie, Maimonides und Aufsätze 1933 bis 1947*, 389–408. Here: 397.

52. On Caspary’s and Goldberg’s relation to Mauss see Marcel Fournier, *Marcel Mauss: A Biography* (Princeton University Press 2006), 355

53. Oskar Goldberg, ‘Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer’ in *Zahlengebäude, Ontologie, Maimonides und Aufsätze 1933 bis 1947*, 299–304. Here: 299.

connection, a concentration, a summation of powers that imply a new attack on the natural order, that is, on the meaning of the human itself".⁵⁴ Unger explained that Goldberg's real discovery in *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* was an anthropology that emphasised our ways of working with the nature that surrounds us and which we are part of. Humanity is a species that moulds nature through different technical means, and in this sense our species is by necessity a creature that uses apparatuses, instruments, and other tools in order to domesticate nature. Technology is our metabolic relation to nature and this — what Friedrich Engels would call — labour produces what the Goldberg circle described, in accord with a long German tradition, as the domain of spirit, *Geist*. But in sharp contrast to the Hegelian tradition, they saw spirit as something much more living and vivid in the prehistoric world of the archaic tribes than in the rise of civilisation which would produce a form of humanity that increasingly comes to see *Geist* as nothing more than a simple set of drives camouflaging our struggle for power and survival. To an extent Goldberg, Caspary, and Unger can be seen as part of this modern current of suspicion that unveiled the ideological basis of our culture since they saw civilisation as a repression of life itself. Yet, they differ from Freudian and Nietzschean interpretation of reality through their ontology of life and myth.

It is telling that in *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, spirit is identified as the source of biological life as such, in other words with the *Elohim IHWH*, and Goldberg postulates that the *Torah* finds an inner divide [*Kluft*], between the dimensions of life and matter in nature.⁵⁵ Life is "the transcendence of matter" which means that all living, biological organisms exist in an ecstatic state in the sense that even the most basic life forms have some way to register what is outside them.⁵⁶ The fruit fly, for example, does not know that in the taxonomy of specific human communities it belongs to the species of *Drosophilidae*, but it can grasp information from its surroundings and in different manners adapt, survive, and in a rudimentary sense know or at least feel that it is living. It is in this sense that life for Goldberg is the power of potentiality, visible in the attempts of every organic being to survive. When this potency is given human form it is

54. Unger, *Das Problem der mythischen Realität*, 38–39.

55. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 5.

56. *Ibid.*

harnessed as a kind of second nature, such as in the tools and instruments that humans use as their natural means of interacting with the rest of nature.

The Goldberg circle saw the human animal as radically unfit for an immediate life in a specific habitat of nature, and it was therefore forced to use what the philosopher Arnold Gehlen called culture (a word that Goldberg eschewed) in order to compensate for its lack of natural instincts.⁵⁷ Humans have, due to their lack of strong instincts, no immediate relation to a specific habitat and must survive by developing metabolic technologies and institutions such as tools used to kill animals and domesticate plants, mythic forms of life that regulate existence, or for that matter states stratified by class, race, and gender. But if this proved for Gehlen that the human was a being of lack [*Mängelwesen*] that compensates its absence of immediate instincts that make other animals naturally fit into their habitat, for Goldberg it indicated not lack but rather the absolute plasticity of not only human life, but being itself. It even made him argue in a speculative manner that the human belongs to the domain of infinite potentiality, *Geist*, rather than finite nature. This difference from other animals was most visible in humankind's use of technology, first simply the technology of tools and then increasingly the use of specifically capitalist technology. However, the history of human existence suggested that the human of the five thousand year-old world system — the species of fixation desperately seeking to use technology to stabilise nature in order to survive — had to be differentiated from the humans of archaic tribes, since their technologies had a different metabolic relation to nature.

In a study from 1930, *Wirklichkeit Mythos Erkenntnis* [Reality Myth Knowledge], Unger developed Goldberg's fundamental differentiation of human life according to their different modes of interaction with nature.⁵⁸ Today our species often modifies and interacts with the world around us — and ourselves — through advanced technological instruments, and it seems unavoidable that our species is becoming a kind of cyborg that has permanently altered the world with its industrial technomass. As Unger wrote, "[t]he technology which mankind has created entails an entire world beside the natural

57. Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (Athenäum-Verlag 1950), 9–20.

58. Erich Unger, *Wirklichkeit Mythos Erkenntnis* (Verlag R. Oldenbourg 1930), 69.

[world]... which admittedly operates with the forces of nature, but only in order to guide them in the direction that humans want".⁵⁹ Still, for Unger, even if this form of capitalist technology is "the most powerful instrument... for taming nature, [it] is still not the most radical [instrument] that humanity can undertake to this end".⁶⁰ The most radical instrument is myth, or what is also described as metaphysics. Now we can see that myth and metaphysics are technologies to construct a people seeking to alter the metabolic relation to nature itself. For such a people — we remember — does not stabilise but rather sublates nature through a process of negation often concretised in mythic and religious patterns of life, such as in taboos that cultivate how we hunt, eat, have sex, and so on. This is why other metabolic relations to nature, or other forms of attacking nature (as the Goldberg circle described this relation in order to express their unromantic view of nature) have been and indeed may still be anthropologically possible.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

ONWARD BARBARIANS

The foundation of Goldberg's theory of myth as a technology to construct a people with the aim of sublating nature can be found in the chapter of *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* aptly entitled "The equation: Peoples=Gods=Worlds". Here Goldberg argues that a people enacts the life of a deity, for in the *Torah*, the *Elohim* — the Hebrew plural form for gods but which is also used to describe one deity such as the *Elohim IHWH* — is not, as in other parts of the *Tanakh*, related to the notion of humankind, "but most intimately linked to the concept of the *people*, and... the god for the people has an eminently *biological* significance".⁶¹ The people is the collective life form of a tribe which cultivates a world that can be identified with its symbolic representations and ritual habits ordered by the rules and laws of their gods, *Elohim*. These divinities can, in turn, be identified as the biological centres, ancestry [*Abstammung*], or point of origin [*Abstammungszentrum*], of specific tribes and peoples. In other words, a god is the communal existence that ties the order of humans to what Goldberg called *Geist*, but only through mediation by a specific totem animal or plant that structures its metabolic relation to nature.

61. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 16.

In an article on totemism from 1927, Caspary explained how this totemistic theory of deities as the pattern for communal life is related to the openness of our species as beings of *Geist* in the sense that we can imitate different gods and therefore have distinct relations to the natural world (and therefore to ourselves as psychophysical beings part of nature): "They who come from a water-totem can live in water. For this is the special biological ability of the fish. But humankind has the capacity to develop all biological abilities — thus also this one".⁶² By accepting different totems and gods as their own deities, tribes of men and women alter and therefore sublimate their psychophysical and metabolic constitution in relation to the natural element — the *Abstammung* or *Abstammungszentrum* — that they are connected with through their deity.

62. Adolf Caspary, "Was ist Totem?" *Der Querschnitt* no. 7 vol. 3 (1927), 187–189. Here: 189

Obviously, the relation is also reversible: by living in a specific manner in a specific habitat the tribe can adopt an animal or plant as their deity. The deity is the praxis of the people, but this did not imply that the gods did not exist according to the Goldberg circle. It simply meant that the existence of gods is a form of real abstraction, a power that could ground men and women in a specific communal life through the rules of a specific totem or fetish, which is not that dissimilar from how a collective entity such as a city or a nation exists as something more than the praxis that constitutes it, since it is a totality with a life of its own. However, in sharp contrast to these later real abstractions, myths are a way to sublimate rather than stabilise human nature. Pointing to ethnological evidence showing that shamanic and totemistic rituals and myths often involve the donning of animal skins and performing dances in imitation of animals, Caspary argued that these rites can be interpreted as the channelling of the power of the gods into a specific way of existence. Since a god is nothing but a specific community's sublation of nature, it is equivalent to the community's way of life. This cultivation of a totemistic life in relation to a deity is therefore essentially a psychophysical technique since "[t]he core of totemism... consists in a relation of man to the animal — his totem" and this implies a transformation of life in relation to the animal or plant that the tribe imitates.⁶³ In other words, totemism is a technology used by tribes to acquire specifically those instincts which Gehlen thinks that human life lacks,

63. Ibid., 187.

but that may be needed to survive in a specific habitat. We could say it is a transformation of our species into something other than a *Mängelwesen* [being of lack] and thereby a way of sublating nature.

One can easily see that like later anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Goldberg circle described myth as a form of technology of the body that connects the tribe to the domain of *Geist* through the mediation of nature. Goldberg sought remnants of these kinds of techniques and his studies in medicine as a student even led him to Nepal where he conducted research for his dissertation on yogi practices and rituals, *Die abnormalen biologischen Vorgänge bei orientalischen Sekten* [The Abnormal Biological Processes in Orientalist Sects], such as the reduction of respiration and heart rates.⁶⁴ It is this sublation of nature, in other words the transformation of the psychophysical and metabolic constitution of human existence, which is increasingly lost in the period of fixation that, today, has its centre in the West due to the victory of European capitalism. Goldberg would without doubt agree with Lévi-Strauss that in regard to “the connection between the physical and the mental, the East and the Far East are several thousand years ahead [of Western civilisation]; they have produced the great theoretical and practical summae represented by Yoga in India, the Chinese “breath-techniques”, or the visceral control of the ancient Maoris”.⁶⁵ In a similar manner, Lévi-Strauss’ claim that the “West, for all its mastery of machines, exhibits evidence of only the most elementary understanding of the use and potential resources of that super-machine, the human body” echoes Goldberg’s critique that the five thousand year old world system has resulted in a loss of the mythological techniques that have been used to sublimate rather than stabilise nature.⁶⁶

Technology and myth are therefore different instruments, different ethnologies, different metaphysics, even – confusingly – different technologies producing diverging ways to work with humanity’s metabolic relation to nature. Traditional technology produces the *homo faber*, the animal which lives in the world of states of empires that – in hindsight – seemingly moves towards contemporary capitalism and its world of factories, whereas myth differentiates our species into

64. Unfortunately this dissertation is lost. See Voigts, *Oskar Goldberg*, 28–32 for more information about this period of Goldberg’s life.

65. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Unesco 1958), 27.

66. *Ibid.*

a myriad of psychophysical groups with different totems and what Goldberg called biological centres. In other words, technology is related to what Goldberg calls the state and its stabilisation of nature as an economic resource needed for survival, whereas myth is related to the people that alters the need of human economy in relation to a sublation of nature.

This is why from Goldberg’s perspective, the rise of the world of fixation implies an anthropological homogeneity, since without the communities of prehistoric tribes, there are no biological centres, no totem gods, and therefore no mythical peoples sublating rather than stabilising nature. Only a few years after Adolf Hitler’s electoral success Goldberg even wrote sarcastically: “Life is but a barren remainder, the contemporary groups of life are also rudimentary. What meaning do peoples and races have today? The truth is: none at all”.⁶⁷ All contemporary races and peoples are “born out of geopolitical and economic interests” rather than grounded in the ancestries of deities and gods, which constituted different mythological communities.⁶⁸ Humanity is certainly not unified but the competing nations and conflicting classes that divide our species are nurtured by the same abstract, economic interests that the decline to the normality found in wage labour and machine production entails.

Paradoxically, for Goldberg, race is the mythical and ethnological relation between a people and the deity which acts as its ancestry [*Abstammung*]. To belong to a race is to have one’s ancestry outside oneself. It is not, we have to remember, to stabilise nature through some form of *Kraft durch Freude* [Strength through joy], or socialist eugenics, but to disrupt life and make it fundamentally abnormal. It is evident that the Goldberg circle intervened in the political debate on race and biology during the Weimar period and after the rise of Nazism, since they blatantly rejected the existence of races during the fixated period. In Germany, before 1914, “racial hygiene had been decisively rejected by the Imperial administration as a violation of prevailing ethical codes and of personal liberty”.⁶⁹ However, it became institutionalised and accepted in academic and other public institutions during the Weimar Republic, not least due to the hard work of prominent scientists and visionaries like Ernst

67. Goldberg, ‘Die Bibelkritik’, 293.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Paul Weindling ‘Weimar eugenics: The Kaiser Wilhelm-Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Social Context’ →

Haeckel, the physician Wilhelm Schallmayer, the biologist and eugenicist Alfred Ploetz (founder of the Society for Race Hygiene, the first eugenics society in history).⁷⁰ All of them argued before the Weimar period for the necessity of a politics that secured the health of the nation, and indicated the importance of viewing the state as what the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, famous for coining the terms biopolitics and geopolitics, called a “form of life”.⁷¹

Schallmayer openly professed his belief in a biological politics [*biologische Politik*], in order to secure the hygiene and health of the people of the German Empire.⁷² He identified a conflict between supposed racial interest [*Rasseinteresse*] and social interest [*Sozialinteresse*].⁷³ At the same time, Schallmayer, who was a socialist, openly rejected Aryan ideologies as pseudo-scientific. It was therefore not only fascists or right-wing militants who spurred the eugenics movements and became heralds for the biopolitics of Nazism; some argued that eugenics could even be used for liberal or progressive aims by securing the health of a population.⁷⁴ Other more utopian scientists, such as the Lamarckian biologist and revolutionary socialist Paul Kammerer, developed a program of organic technology with the purpose of transforming human evolution itself. Together with the pacifist and sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid, Kammerer professed the need of a revolutionary *Menschen-Ökonomie* [people economy] altering the biological substrate of the proletariat.⁷⁵

It was in the context of this debate that the Goldberg circle intervened with their rejection of the need to cultivate the normality of nature, but also with their theory of myth, which had become an explicitly political concept due to Georges Sorel’s writings. Four years after the NSDAP had taken power in Germany, Goldberg attacked this revival of myth writing, apropos Sorel and Friedrich Nietzsche, that when

Annals of Science vol. 42 no. 3 (1985), 303–318. Here: 304.

70. Ibid.

71. See Rudolf Kjellén, *Staten som livsform* (Hugo Gebers Förlag 1916).

72. See the chapter ‘Biologische Politik’ in Wilhelm Schallmayer, *Beiträge zu einer Nationalbiologie* (Hermann Costenoble 1905), 65–150. All translations from this work are the author’s own.

73. Ibid., 67.

74. The polymath scientist J.B.S. Haldane, famous for his work on physiology, evolutionary biology and mathematics, was, for example, a herald of a biopolitical theory from a Marxist perspective, but he also understood the danger of eugenics. In his book, *Heredity and Politics* from 1938, which violently attacked the race politics of the Nazis as unscientific and irrational, he noticed for example that ‘the English National Council of Labour Women has recently passed a resolution in favour of the sterilization of defectives, and this operation is legal in Denmark and other countries considerably to the “left” of Britain in

they “call the peoples of an age marked by the absence of metaphysics... to intoxicate themselves to tragic heights, then it is not the old and true myth... it is rather the ‘Myth of the twentieth century’ which is destined to do little more than push the masses to pseudo-bacchanalian rage”.⁷⁶ Referring to the antisemitic propagandist Alfred Rosenberg’s *The Twentieth Century Mythos* from 1930, Goldberg made clear that the rise of Nazism—or for that matter the theories of Sorel and Nietzsche—were not in any sense a revival of a pre-modern, archaic, cultic world of the *Torah*, where what he called the old and true myth could be found, but technological *Kunstprodukte* [artificial products].⁷⁷ In fact, “the old and true myth” was, as we will see, much younger than the course of the fixated world that Nazism and other modern totalitarian movements belong to. What is important here is that when Golderberg attempted to study the different totemistic peoples who imitated the *Elohim*, he found they had nothing in common with Nietzsche, Sorel or Rosenberg’s theories.

Thus, while Mario Tronti showed *operaismo*’s deep debts to Sorel by insisting in *Con le spalle al futuro* [With the backs turned towards future] that “contrary to what everyone thinks, the fault [la colpa] of communism is the fault of modernity [del moderno] according to Nietzsche and Hölderlin: that of not being able to generate new gods”, Goldberg did not seek to conjure new deities.⁷⁸ He would certainly agree with Tronti that a critique of capital must be a critique of modernity—since capitalism is the modern world *tout court*—and he would also concur that the failure of communism was its failure to take a form that was different from modern, capitalist industrialism. But his theory of myth was a rejection ...of the world that not only made the philosophy of Nietzsche and the politics of Rosenberg and Sorel possible, but the very idea that gods could be generated as *Kunstprodukte*.

In this regard, the Goldberg circle was radically primitivistic. This

their politics’. Haldane criticised these and similar positions but professed his loyalty to a politics of heredity by arguing that the increase in our knowledge of biology and genetics may ‘fully justify the application to man of certain measures which have led to improvements in the quality of our domestic animals’. See J.B.S. Haldane, *Heredity and Politics* (Allen and Unwin 1938), 9.

75. See Paul Kammerer, *Lebensbeherrschung: Grundsteinlegung der organischen Technik* (Mönchische Bibliothek 1919) and *Höherentwicklung und Menschenökonomie: Grundlegung der Sozialbiologie* (Klinkhardt 1911).

76. Oskar Goldberg, ‘Die griechische Tragödie’ in *Zahlengebäude, Ontologie, Maimonides und Aufsätze 1933 bis 1947*, 267–286. Here: 285.

77. Ibid.

78. Tronti, *Con le spalle al futuro*, xiv.

is also why their theories of the sublation of the metabolic relation to nature had little in common with, for instance, Kammerer and Goldscheid's socialist Lamarckism which sought to use vaccines and similar technologies to defend the proletariat's biological *Meschenökonomie*. For them, socialism had to be a biological technology used to free the working class from the barbarism that capitalism entailed for the life of the exploited. This was visible through war but also, Kammerer and Goldscheid argued more controversially, through the supposed low quality of life produced by an uncontrolled heredity. In contrast, the work of the Goldberg circle did not move towards such eugenic fantasies, and neither did it entail the choice between socialism and barbarism with its implicit support for the rise of civilisation. Instead, in the last book published in the series edited by *David Verlag* in 1927, Caspary defended the need to locate the commonalities between socialism and capitalism in order to find a solution to the problem of capital somewhere else than in the progress of history.

In this book *Die Maschinenutopie: das Übereinstimmungsmoment der bürgerlichen und sozialistischen Ökonomie* [The Machine Utopia: The Point of Reconciliation between Bourgeois and Socialist Economies], Caspary argued that a proper reading of Marx had to come to the following conclusion: "without the machine the proletariat cannot live at all, and with it he can only live like a proletarian". Socialism and capitalism are simply two sides of the same process of industrialisation with all it entails: wars, proletarianisation, and imperialism due to its need to develop and reproduce its machine-based civilisation. It is this world that has to be abandoned if humanity is to be able to live as something other than a species differentiated in classes, nations, and states. In the same drastic manner, Camatte and Giorgio Cesarano later would argue, humanity stands before the choice between the withdrawal from the course of civilisation and the destruction of the species. At least in this sense, the work of the Goldberg circle pointed to a war cry later heard in the 1950's and which in a sense mediated the Abrahamic primitivism of Goldberg's group during the Weimar period and the hedonistic vitalisms of France 1968 and Italy 1977: "Onward barbarians!"⁷⁹ But, it is important to note, if this cry was directed to the "rough, pagan race" of the working class, Goldberg and his friends thought that it was necessary to take a different route.

79. Amadeo Bordiga, 'Avanti, barbari!' *Battaglia Comunista* no. 22 (1951).

They did not heed the political romanticism of leftist circles who have been neither particularly effective in combating capitalism nor correct in their prophecies of its coming end. From the perspective of Goldberg, Unger, and Caspary these currents are stuck with the problem of predicting what cannot be predicted, and the feeble attempts of trying to control what cannot be controlled. Humanity has lapsed into the course of civilisation and every way out has been defeated. Yet perhaps we can read the Goldberg circle as proposing that in such a situation their "transcendental research of reality", that is the research of the general anthropological and not only economical characteristics of a society, could help those who seek to transform the scarcity of life into a material abundance in order to find "the building blocks for a new humanity".⁸⁰ A metaphysical investigation of the transcendental—that is, general—conditions of human existence could help define what Caspary described as "the givenness character of society" [*der Gegebenheitscharakter der Gesellschaft*] in his rejection of both socialism and capitalism.⁸¹ His work indicated the need for a philosophical explanation of the structures that constitute the specific metaphysical and anthropological form of a society. The machine is one such structure, which not only shapes capitalism but life and the human imagination itself. By examining the machine as part of constructing "the given" of capital, Caspary also hinted that a reconfiguration of the machine world of capital would transform human life. Let us therefore see how for Goldberg, anthropology was not only a search for what humanity is today, but also how different segments of our species can separate themselves from the anthropological machine of capital.

80. Franz Jung, *Bausteine für einen neuen Menschen. Über Wilhelm Reich und Ernst Fuhrmann* (Edition Moderne 1982).

81. Caspary, *Die Maschinenutopie*, 95.

NO GOLDEN AGE, NO PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM

Partitioning human life out into a myriad of languages, life forms, and religions, and therefore into different totemistic orders during the mythical period was not a search for a lost paradise free from coercion and violence in any simple sense. The Goldberg circle certainly had a great admiration for prehistoric cultures that bordered on hatred

towards the West, but this did not imply a romantic view of archaic life. Unger remarked on the power relations that constituted the basic form of tribal hierarchy: "In the most primitive order of human community, the principle of hierarchy for the mode of organisation of society was only *physical* or primarily physical: the strongest in the tribe was the most powerful. That is objective and sensible".⁸²

Thus, if the group admired archaic peoples and even gave them a crucial role in their discussions of a potential secession from the world of capital, they did not argue, as contemporary anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski come close to doing, that archaic communities as they are in themselves can teach us something about how we can live outside the course of civilisation.⁸³ Nor did Goldberg portray nature as a realm of peace we should return to, such as Camatte and to a certain extent also Giorgio Agamben have done.⁸⁴ They knew that nature as what they called an imperfect order implies the violence to eat or to be eaten that is rightly lamented as a form of war.

If war and violence is certainly not a state of nature, as Thomas Hobbes argued in his apology for the state, then violence, killing and war are still part of human natural life since natural life according to Goldberg is inherently violent by being fundamentally finite and therefore prone to conflicts among the species that are part of it. And even though tribal war amongst so-called prehistoric peoples, as the anthropologist Pierre Clastres has argued in his critique of Hobbes, may be a way for tribes to curb the rise of the state and therefore destroy the accumulation of power, war is still war and therefore violence and coercion from the perspective of the Goldberg circle.⁸⁵

In fact, Clastres may be right that an inversion of the Hobbesian bond that "institutes itself between men to 'a common Power to keep them all in awe'" in order to save us from the state of violence in nature is found among pre-historic tribes who use war, torture, and violence to inhibit the accumulation of power—for example by torturing soldiers of one's own tribe in order to keep them subjugated to the community rather than making them leaders after a battle.⁸⁶ But

82. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 31.

83. Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World* (Polity 2017).

84. See Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e il Giardino* (Neri Pozza 2019).

85. See the essays in Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence* (Semiotext(e) 2010).

86. Pierre Clastres, 'Archeology of Violence: War in Primitive Societies' in *Ibid.* 237–277. Here: 240.

as Rosa Luxemburg had already argued in her important theory of the basis of civilisation, "The Dissolution of Primitive Communism", the equality of archaic people seldom extends beyond the tribal group.⁸⁷ Perhaps even more importantly in our times of identitarian communitarianism and rise of nationalist movements, she insisted that the equality guaranteed by war and violence through the destruction of the accumulation of power is easily disturbed by nothing but the same war and violence.

The hope for a repetition of a tribal culture of violence, recently professed by the French collective Jane Doe in the thought provoking essay "Éléments de Décivilisation" published on *Lundi Matin*, and by the anthropologist Peter Harrison in *The Freedom of Things*, is from the Goldberg circle's perspective sympathetic but insufficient.⁸⁸ This scenario leaves open the possibility that one tribal group could become so effective and merciless that it could use its conquest over other tribes in order to exploit them, perhaps as slaves. In this way, the division between mental and physical labour and in extension private property could re-emerge. The same violence that, according to this theory, for a period upheld the *Gemeinwesen* of tribal communities could therefore easily become the basis for an economy of slavery. This, according to Luxemburg, is actually what has happened: the war and violence that hindered the accumulation of power became itself the starting point for slavery and therefore class and civilisation.

Interestingly, one can interpret Goldberg's reading of the *Torah* as a similar attempt to explain the rise of the state. But for him, the question of an equality of tribes or a form of primitive communism was not a real problem. Goldberg was neither Marx nor Rousseau and neither was he Luxemburg nor Clastres. When it comes to the question of violence and coercion he had a completely unromantic view of what he called the mythical period. There was no shimmering equality in the world of tribes, nor was there by necessity any primitive communism. There were only modes of life that were harnessed against the normality of nature and, he argued, the experiments of

87. Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Dissolution of Primitive Communism: From the Ancient Germans, and the Incas to India, Russia, and Southern Africa, from *Introduction to Political Economy*' in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (Monthly Review 2004), 71–109.

88. See Jane Doe, 'Éléments de Décivilisation' *lundimatin* no. 183, March 22, 2019. Peter Harrison, *The Freedom of Things: An Ethnology of Control* (TSI Press 2017).

early Hebrewdom showed the possibility to alter nature in an even more radical way than totemism could engender.

If the famous anthropologist, religious scholar, and imperial apologist Sir James George Frazer, today seldom cited in the world of anthropology but a key figure during the 1920's, had argued that totemism was neither universal nor possible to discern in ancient Semitic religion but "an institution peculiar to the dark-complexioned and least civilised races of mankind", Goldberg included *Urjudentum* [ancient Judaism] in this order of archaic peoples.⁸⁹

However, he did separate the rituals and taboos of the *Torah* from the totemistic rites of other archaic peoples. From Goldberg's perspective, the *Torah* is an essentially anti-totemistic myth, a system of laws and rites that did not give the Hebrews the ability to imitate the way of living in a specific natural habitat, personified by a totem, in order to sublimate their existence as what with Gehlen can be called *Mängelwesen* [being of lack]. Rather, the *Torah* — he argued in a manner that for many would disqualify him as a neutral anthropologist — describes how the Hebrews aimed to tap into *Geist* itself. The *Torah* was the document of rituals that made the Hebrews able to live close to the God of all gods, the *Elohim IHWH*, who they thought was seeking to become present in the world, as the potentiality of life itself, namely, in the dimension of *Geist*. This is what the covenants between God and the Jewish tribe were about according to Goldberg.

This is why the Hebrews did not find their ancestry or biological centre outside themselves in a totem, but beyond the domain of nature as such. Here Goldberg identifies nature as the normalcy of hereditary biology and the political world which, according to his controversial claim, it belongs to. During the mythical period, that is before and in the beginning of the emergence of the five thousand year-old world system, it was easier to live outside the world of empires in the wilderness of the desert. Therefore from Goldberg's point of view it was a historical contingency that made Abram, a Chaldean who abandoned the Mesopotamian city Ur with his family, become Abraham, "the progenitor" and "the founder of a new community of life vigorously opposed to the ancestral biology" that Goldberg identified with the normalcy of nature.⁹⁰ In sharp contrast to other mythical communities,

89. James George Frazer, *Marriage and Worship in Early Societies: A Treatise on Totemism and Exogamy*, vol. IV (Cosimo Classics 2009), 14.

the Hebrews did not affirm *this life* or find their ancestry or biological centre outside themselves in a totem, but beyond the domain of nature as such in what they called the creator God, the *Elohim IHWH*. When Abraham abandoned his old community, he was "prepared to sacrifice all that comes with it. He adopts the circumcision, is ready to slay his son, and does far more by sacrificing his former *Elohim*".⁹¹ All this proves for Goldberg that Abraham is ready to act *against the normalcy of his own ancestry*, the Chaldean city of Ur, which had the ram as its totem. In doing so, Abraham initiated the sublation of nature that is foreign to the world of the state.

By sacrificing the heavenly ram instead of his son Isaac, Abraham does not only offer his own, original totemistic god. He also breaks the taboo of his original people and institutes a community which abolishes human sacrifice and seeks to sublimate nature. The circumcision symbolises how Abraham and his people wrested themselves free from all ancestral biology, including the transcendental biology of the totemistic peoples. For Goldberg, Abraham invites all humans to join his new people — a missionary tribe — and worship him who is "*in principle enemy to every order of nature*" — the God that confronts the gods of nature who can only entangle us in life as it is even if they can, as we have seen, sublimate a specific part of nature.⁹²

The story of the covenant in the *Torah* is therefore the story of a people seeking to leave the world of states and thereby to open all of humanity to a new form of anthropogenesis since the Hebrews, according to Goldberg, were a missionary tribe. This is not because "one needs Adam and Eve, but not revolution, for the creation of new man", as another forgotten philosopher of life from the Weimar period argued, but, because as the story of the *Torah* clearly reveals with all its cruelty, secession implies conflict.⁹³ At least in this sense, the problematic word revolution — seldom used by the Goldberg circle — could describe the disruption of capital that the group sought through a form of exodus.

By arguing that God did not in any sense elect Abraham, Goldberg claims that the theology of election is nowhere to be found in the *Torah*. It was Abraham who found a way to open a part of creation for the divine and thereby cultivate the Jewish life form that still today,

90. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 79.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*, 34.

93. Ernst Fuhrmann, 'Ergebnisse' in *Neue Wege* book 6 (Wilhelm Arnold, 1957), 3–155. Here: 164. All translations from this book are the author's.

Goldberg thought, has a relation to this ultimately failed attempt to leave the world of civilisation. Abraham was willing to adopt the task of God to liberate nature from the frailties and death of normal existence: "It is the special facet of the old Hebrew metaphysics that, despite its this-worldly nature, it is an action which is *hostile* to nature in the most radical sense, and whose principle of morality is: *contra naturam vivere, to proceed against nature*".⁹⁴ To proceed against nature is to proceed against the normalcy of a human nature that has become so fixated that it lays the basis for the machine world that Caspary attacked in *Die Maschinenutopie*. This normalcy has, in the end, humanity itself as its basis, or rather what the Argentinian philosopher Fabián Ludueña Romandini has recently called the cult of physis.⁹⁵

The cult of physis, from the Greek word for nature *phúsis*, is the metabolic and technological relation to nature that humanity ultimately is. Not even the totemistic communities can make this cult of physis abundant since nature, according to Goldberg, is imperfect, that is dangerous, finite and thus threatening all life with extinction. In a manner reminiscent of the biologist Peter Ward, who in 2009 defended his so-called Medea hypothesis which emphasises the inner destructiveness of the process of life, the Goldberg circle described the possibility of extinction as inherent in nature itself for "[w]hoever believes that there must be life on Earth is wrong".⁹⁶ By being a process that adapts to its surrounding environment, responds to stimuli from the outside world, reproduces itself metabolically, the group would concur with Ward that life is inherently "a slave to a process called evolution".⁹⁷ This "Darwinian life", as Ward calls it, is the only life we know of, and it is according to him so inherently destructive and unstable that "it is life that will cause the end of life itself, on this or any planet inhabited by Darwinian life, through perturbation and changes of either temperature, atmospheric gas composition, or elemental cycles to values inimical to life".⁹⁸ At the same time, Ward notes that humanity has "the odd distinction of being the only ones that either know or care" about this destructive character of life.⁹⁹

94. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 90.

95. Fabián Ludueña Romandini, *Arcana Imperii: Tratado metafísico-político* (Miño y Dávila 2018), 28.

96. Goldberg, 'Die Bibelkritik', 293.

97. See Peter Ward, *The Medea Hypothesis: Is Life on Earth Ultimately Self-Destructive?* (Princeton University Press 2009), xxi.

98. *Ibid.*, 35.

From the perspective of the Goldberg circle, the Hebrews tried to mobilise this odd distinction of caring about life as a life form, challenging the normalcy of human organisation by setting out to make a form of material abundance possible. This implied that the rituals and taboo system of the *Torah*, such as the description of that which is impure, *tumah*, and that which is pure, *taharah*, were seen by Goldberg as technologies to solve "the problem: how can one be freed from one's ancestry, from the biological functions, from sexuality... without this leading to the necessity of leaving the domain of the finite reality".¹⁰⁰ Goldberg wanted to show how the laws and rites in the *Torah* were real, but failed, instruments to create a humanity capable of liberating itself from biological functions, from death, and even from sexuality and birth. In this sense it seems obvious that the Goldberg circle's critique of nature and civilisation was a critique not only of gender but of sex itself, pushing us to accept the plasticity of biology.

We must remember that during the period of the *Torah*, giving birth was dangerous, and the fact that what traditional Jewish and Christian theology call the fall cursed Adam and Eve with birth and work reflects this violence of normal nature that continues and is stabilised in the life of the state and the family. Thus for Goldberg, the cycles of birth and death are also the trajectory of the civilisation that has culminated in the machine world which he saw as a menace to life itself. Here we can also note another similarity between modern anthropology, especially the work of Levi-Strauss, and the Goldberg circle, since they viewed the question of anthropology from the viewpoint of energy, the scarcity of resources, and the imperfect condition of life itself.

Behind anthropology, Levi-Strauss argued, there is an even more primordial *entropology* which shows how every human group's struggle against entropy is structured by its use and consummation of energy.¹⁰¹ It is this entropological origin of civilisation that the Hebrews challenged by tapping into a new source of energy, and this implies that the *Torah*, from Goldberg's perspective, is not in any sense a classical source for our civilisation, or the story that begins the emergence of modern subjectivity. The *Torah* simply reflects the ordinary human process of anthropogenesis that Abraham sought to

99. *Ibid.*, XV.

100. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 274.

101. Claude Levi-Strauss, *A World on the Wane* (Hutchinson 1962), 397.

escape by living against the normality of human nature. Goldberg was explicit that according to the Torah, the origin of this normal life, the stabilisation of nature through the gradual development of the state as an entropic machine is much older than Abraham. The state, as a catastrophic way of dealing with the problem of entropy inherent in all life, is “ancient, since it stands in the beginning of history. It is even older than the metaphysic itself. That shows the birth of Cain, at whose arrival Eve believes that she has birthed... an IHHW-human, whereas she in reality has received the ‘first born of fixation’, the ‘property’-human Cain”.¹⁰² From the point of view of this reading of the *Torah*, Cain, the first murderer, farmer, property owner, and city builder is the mythological description of what civilisation has made of the human, whereas Abel represents the Hebraic metaphysics that Abraham seeks to take upon himself as the creator of a tribe that breaks with what Goldberg calls the property owning humanity of the fixated age.¹⁰³

If the origin of the state according to the *Torah* is ancient, and even has its beginning in the emergence of the race of property owners, namely the humanity symbolised by the figure of Cain, it is evident that the five books of Moses do not depict a golden age for Goldberg, and neither are they a description of what Marxists would call primitive communism. What fascinated the Goldberg circle with the *Torah* was that it described a rather recent exception to the normal course of a human life which has been structured by private property to the extent that most attempts to build another economy have failed. It indicated that the anthropogenesis of our species is a political problem that has to be solved through a psychophysical and ultimately biological revolution. Ultimately, the five thousand year-old world system finds its origin in the constitution of our species as what in the *Torah* is identified with “the whole generation of ‘Cainites’, the farmers, technicians, and city builders” who surrounded the Abrahamic people with the civilisation that finally also subsumed this nomadic community and turned Judaism to what Goldberg called a world religion or a religion of humanity.¹⁰⁴ The task, according to the Goldberg circle, is to once again disrupt the normal course of civilisation and thereby harness what Tronti has called “*differenza umana*” [human difference].¹⁰⁵ Indeed, for them,

102. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 274.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid.

this disruption must be repeated in order for humanity to find a way out of the catastrophic politics of civilisation and the possible extinction it implies.

105. Tronti, *Con la Spalle al futuro*, 14.

HUMAN DIFFERENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF ANTHROPOGENESIS

What the Goldberg circle is ultimately trying to predict in their work is the problem of anthropogenesis as a conscious political task that not only separates our species from the material community of capital but aims to change the basis of capitalism’s entropic structure. In fact, when Goldberg, Unger, and Caspary predict schematically that humanity has three anthropological choices, they are trying to envision three different political modes of combating the entropy that disrupts every organisation of life with chaos and decline. It is important to note here that Goldberg viewed the concept of humanity with great suspicion and saw it as part of the civilised world of fixation, so humanity is here simply the name for specific groups and tendencies belonging to our species whose actions, Goldberg believed, could determine the future for humankind as such.

Firstly, humanity can live in relation to specific parts of nature, with all its finite creatures, in a totemistic manner, and become a species of peoples who have their ancestries outside themselves. This is certainly better than life in civilisation, according to the Goldberg circle, but it is not enough. The totemistic divinities are described in the *Torah* as archetypes of different biological behaviour that certainly modify and sublimate specific parts of normal nature but that cannot alter nature as such: “The archetype of normal biology goes... far back, it is established in the world structure: in this way, however, the normal ‘biological’ organism arises. Hence, there can be no true new creations based on biology”.¹⁰⁶ This is why the archaic life forms of prehistoric cultures were, ultimately, not only unable to solve the problem of scarcity but, as Luxemburg would argue, were too easily led into the path of coercion and violence that implies the emergence of the state as a stabilisation of the entropic tendency of nature. These communities are nothing but different cults of physis whose nature has to be sublated in order for life to continue.

106. Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, 285.

Secondly, humanity can, just as it has done, decline to the normality of property owners and city builders. It thereby ends the period of myth by becoming a race of *homo faber* that stabilises the entropic destruction of human life inherent in nature through the advent of capitalism as an industrialised system. This marks the beginning of the decline to normality that moves humanity to the peak everything situation that the Goldberg circle had already warned of in the 1920's.

Thirdly, humanity has the possibility of opening a new anthropogenesis, hinted at in the life form the Hebrews took on as they set out to sublimate the normal course of nature and produce a new human community. This would, Goldberg argues, entail a form of economic abundance needed in order for humanity to survive beyond the capitalist mode of production, which lays the ground for a coming "machine catastrophe". The hope of the Goldberg circle is ultimately that this new kind of existence withdrawing itself from the civilisational basis of capital would restructure the entropological constitution of human life through an abundance that, as a stubborn Marxist argued in 1957, would even promise "the eternal life of the species".¹⁰⁷

However, Caspary argued thirty years earlier in *Die Maschinenu-topie* that such an abundance would not be possible through the continuation and maintenance of the existing industrial civilisation — not even through a form of worker's management, that would, as some have recently argued, at best entail the "forming a workers' council on the deck of the Titanic. They would be self-managing a sinking ship".¹⁰⁸ Real material abundance could only be produced through a confrontation with the current existence of capitalist machinery as coagulated surplus value [*geronnener Mehrwert*], and therefore through a reconstruction of the modern factory world that has pushed the millennium-old world system to its entropic conclusion.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Goldberg, Caspary, and Unger differ from Gunder Frank and ultimately concur with Marx that something has fundamentally changed with the advent of the capitalist mode of production. It implies a real human difference that must be understood in its specifics.

107. Amadeo Bordiga, 'Il programma rivoluzionario della società comunista elimina ogni forma di proprietà del suolo, degli impianti di produzione e dei prodotti del lavoro' *Il Programma Comunista* nos. 16 and 17 (1958). All translations from this essay are the author's.

108. Endnotes, 'The Holding Pattern' *Endnotes 3* (2013).

109. Caspary, *Die Maschinenu-topie*, 15.

THE ADVENT OF THE BEHEMOTH

In a manner similar to some of the most interesting readings of Marx's *Capital*, Caspary argued in *Die Maschine-utopie* that capitalism is first of all an agrarian revolution; a process of industrialisation stratifying humanity into divergent and antagonistic classes; a Behemoth as much as a Leviathan whose "occupation of the world" certainly should be related to the West and therefore, Goldberg argued, to a form of "Europeanisation" of the planet.¹¹⁰ This Europeanisation, Caspary insisted, would entail the globalisation of class struggle since "the existence of a proletariat questions the current social order theoretically as well as practically" and, through the deepening of the contradictions of capital, "the *legal question* of the distribution of goods" will be transformed into "the *question of existence* for the current existing society".¹¹¹ The revolution is now at the horizon.

This hypothesis was founded on the experiences of the Russian revolution in 1917 and the uprisings in Germany around 1919. But contrary to the positions of the traditional left and the different segments of the workers' movement, Caspary stated in the opening sentence of *Die Maschinenu-topie*: "We only want to make one single fact known: that the mass misery of the proletariat is necessarily posited by means of production through machinery — but without the proletariat itself being able to dispense with the machine as a means of production".¹¹² This was an unambiguous declaration of the political programme of the Goldberg circle: collective ownership and planned production of the factory civilisation will not in themselves surpass the world of capital. What had to be questioned both practically and theoretically was "the point of reconciliation between bourgeois and socialist economy" — *das Übereinstimmungsmoment der bürgerlichen und sozialistischen Ökonomie* — and this was for Caspary nothing but the material infrastructure of capitalism and consequently, what he called (with Marx) machinery. The expansion of the modern machine system, in other words industrialisation, is inseparable from proletarian immiseration, radicalised entropic disorder, and class conflicts that move societies towards revolutions, wars, and other catastrophes.

110. See Silvain Piron, *L'Occupation du monde* (Zones Sensibles 2018) and Goldberg, *Maimonides*, 215.

111. Caspary, *Die Maschinenu-topie*, 5.

112. *Ibid.*

One must tread carefully when stating this, since a machine is not a tool [*Werkzeug*] for Caspary, a “means of production” used since “it saves time”.¹¹³ On the contrary, the machine is “not, like the tool, a simple means for the production, but also at the same time its *motor*”.¹¹⁴ It is an apparatus that is created together with and even for the world market. This is important, because the machine, as the physical motor of the specifically capitalist mode of production of surplus value, is not produced because it saves time but “since it can produce *more* products” than a tool in a specific period of time.¹¹⁵ “The machine”, Caspary clarifies “also saves time — for each single product that can be produced faster with machines than without them”, but that is “not its utility”.¹¹⁶ Its utility is to make an industrialised world market possible and thereby the time saved by the machines produce the need for new labour in order to uphold this factory system. Thus, Caspary continues: “If the demand remained the same, that is, if the production figure remained the same, the machine would not be profitable, because it saves too much time for the individual product. The machine produces so fast that in the case of constant demand, the production of the machine itself would take more time than the non-mechanical production of goods”.¹¹⁷ This implies (1) that the machine is impossible without a global infrastructure that has the market and the explicit goal of accumulation for accumulation’s sake as its condition of possibility, and (2) the machine is not built to make work easier for workers per se, even if this may be its indirect consequence, but in order to be the motor for the production of more and more commodities in a specific time period.

These two points are essential, since they imply that Caspary’s argument diverges in significant ways from those Marxists who primarily view the machine as an instrument that saves necessary labour through out the whole history of capital. Against this position, he writes that “the machine is produced economically as surplus value, that is, the production of machines does not have the character of ‘necessary’ but surplus labour. The machine did not emerge due to the pressure to save necessary labour, it emerged because the army of free workers that was not used for the necessary labour [for the reproduction of the goods needed for survival of the proletariat as such],

113. *Ibid.*, 72.

114. *Ibid.*, 71.

115. *Ibid.*, 72.

116. *Ibid.*

117. *Ibid.*

was at free disposal” and therefore could be hired to build machines and operate them.¹¹⁸ This is why the machine is an instrument for an economy based on surplus labour that cannot continue to exist exactly as a machine, i.e. as a motor rather than simple means for capitalist production, without necessarily reproducing the division of labour that characterises capitalism and that is produced through primitive accumulation of capital.

With the rise of capitalism, all existing workers and all existing means of productions are liberated from their shackles and turned to wage labour or capital, and at this stage of the primitive accumulation there are not many machines and machine-like complexes such as modern factories. But, as Robert Brenner has shown, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was made possible due to a form of agrarian capitalism in which, Caspary argues, a surplus population in relation to the older mode of production could arise. Workers could now be employed not only to produce food and similar commodities needed for immediate survival, that is for the reproduction of necessary labour, but for the production of machines.¹¹⁹

This, Caspary continues, entails three things for the development of industrialised capitalism:

(1) The extraction of surplus value is made possible without specifically capitalist machinery, since it is produced through primitive accumulation; for instance through the production of absolute surplus value, i.e. long days of work on the field with the help of pre-capitalist tools. Capitalism was therefore first of all a form of agrarian capitalism primarily composed of landlords, free tenant farmers and wage labourers. This, in turn, implies (2) that the wage is reduced to the societal cost of what is needed to reproduce the life of the worker so that there can be a difference between necessary and surplus labour in the process of production in order for surplus value to be possible. Thus, (3) Caspary continues, “with the primitive accumulation of capital, surplus value is already posited: for the first machine is ‘coagulated surplus value’, i.e., since the first machine can only be built if the total labour power in society (the proletariat *class*) can produce more than is needed for its own preservation”.¹²⁰

The enclosures that made land private and that forced people to find employment on the growing market of

118. *Ibid.*, 71

119. *Ibid.*, 13

120. *Ibid.*, 15

jobs in order to survive made it possible to employ workers for the production of machines. There was enough food to produce a relative surplus population in relation to the workers needed for the reproduction of the life of the proletariat. This division between proletarians producing consumer goods [*Verbrauchsgüter-Proletarier*] and proletarians producing machines [*Maschinen-Proletarier*] structures the life of capitalism as the production of surplus labour and, through the population rise, of more workers. This is the advent of the Behemoth and the reason why capitalism has become an industrialised world. It is this world that the Goldberg circle wanted to abandon through a secession so radical it would make room for what with Tronti can be called a new human difference through an economy beyond the order of machines. But is this possible or even desirable today when human life is entrapped in its own civilisational development to the point that every attempt to dismantle it seems to imply extreme political and economical threats to human existence? Can one perhaps read Caspary as not arguing that technology itself is the problem? Maybe he is indicating that what must be solved is the transformation of technology to a machine complex, namely, to the motor of a production based on the difference between necessary labour and surplus labour, so that a deindustrialised world can be unleashed from the bosom of our hyper-industrialised capitalism?

TO LIVE CIVILISATION TO ITS END

At the end of *Die Maschinenutopie*, Caspary defends the importance of understanding “the givenness character of society”, that is what characterises a society as a specific, given society.¹²¹

He relates this examination to the economy and main- 121. *Ibid.*, 95.
tains once again that the foundation of the modern capitalist economy is not profit or value production per se, since this was also characteristic of the agrarian capitalism that precedes the modern capitalist production, which is born with machinery as “coagulated surplus value”. The basic structure of capital, and its socialisation as a planned economy in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, is rather the industrialised Behemoth that the capitalist mode of production process entails. Correspondingly, in 1927 Caspary argued against the Marxists who thought industrialisation

would lead to communism: “The way of life of the masses, within an economy that produces by means of machines, must be proletarian” and the “relation between justice and machines is a utopia”.¹²² But why is such a relation utopian? Doesn’t the expansion and social character of the machine precisely 122. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
as “coagulated surplus value” liberate living labour from the production process and thereby indicate the possibility for economic abundance and a liberation of humanity from unnecessary drudgery and work?

No, Caspary argues, for “technology cannot replace human labour power gratuitously: machines must—by however few people—be operated, the material for the machines must always be produced... the machine never digs the raw material itself, this must also be brought to the most differentiated machine complex”.¹²³ The general tendency of capitalist ma- 123. *Ibid.*, 25.
chinery as “coagulated surplus value” is according to Caspary not first of all to save labour time, that is to diminish necessary labour, but rather to relocate the saving of labour time in the production process where machines have been introduced to another part, for example to the miners who gather the materials needed for the production of the machines. Machines must be produced and reproduced by workers and this implies work, and thereby machines not only posit the possibility of an economy based on surplus labour. They also reproduce the necessity of the labour that reproduces the machines that, in some production processes makes labour superfluous, but which as instruments for capital reproduces an economy based on surplus labour. For even if the workers producing and reproducing machines may be numerically fewer than before, i.e. not only the construction of engines for cars may need fewer workers due to automation, but the production and mining of the minerals needed for this automation may, for different reasons, employ fewer workers, still, the machine is the physical motor for the existing market and exchange relations just as they are the condition of possibility for production through machinery.

Now we have to remember the difference between a tool and machine: both certainly save time in the work process, but according to Caspary the machine is the physical instrument needed to reproduce a market based on surplus labour. It is in this sense that the machine

cannot be viewed as an instrument that simply reduces necessary labour and thereby produce the possibility for economic abundance: this is the machine utopia that has to be demystified. Obviously, the automation of industry by way of machines such as the conveyor belt or different kind of robots, or the development of modern capitalist machinery needed for the transportation of commodities, such as the engines needed for airplanes, cars, and trains, help produce commodities faster and faster in a specific time period for a specific production process, thereby making proletarians redundant in specific industries and sectors of the economy. But, Caspary contends, this same development that creates a surplus class also reproduces the basis of the economy, accumulation for accumulation's sake, as well as creates the need for new work in new industries and sectors of the economy. Thus, even if it cannot be denied that the general tendency of modern capitalism is the production of what has been called an enormous abject population in favelas and deindustrialised regions of the world, this surplus population will for a long time exist alongside an industrial class entrapped in the factory civilisation of capital.¹²⁴ In this prognosis, Caspary seems to be right, since while the surplus population is growing worldwide, the data from the International Labour Organization shows, for instance, that 29 percent of the global workforce worked in the industrial sector in 2010, significantly higher than the figure from 1994 of only 22 percent.¹²⁵ The Behemoth of contemporary industrial capital is certainly declining since more workers nowadays are employed in services than in the industries, but the industrialised world is still a fact, not at least through the industrialisation of the service sector, and will according to Caspary be a fact as long as capitalism exists since capital entails a civilisation of factories and machines.

When Caspary makes this basic point in *Die Maschinenutopie*, namely, that a machine is an apparatus for the reproduction and expansion of surplus labour rather than only a mechanism that reduces necessary labour, he comes close to the argument of one of the most interesting contemporary theorists of technology: Alf Hornborg. For decades, Hornborg has defended a thermodynamic understanding of what he calls "machine fetishism", which he differentiates from simple "commodity fetishism", by seeking to reveal that "[i]ndustrial machines

are social phenomena. These inorganic structures propelled by mineral fuels and substituting for human work *could not be maintained* but for a specific structure of human exchange".¹²⁶

"The machine", Caspary wrote as early as 1927, can "only be produced when the goods are not produced for needs but for the market" and therefore "when the market is not dependent on the individual, but when the individual is dependent on the market". This is of crucial importance according to Hornborg, since it indicates that machines are not in any sense productive in themselves. They are only productive if they are put to work in an expanding economic process that necessitates accumulation for the sake of accumulation.

Thus, Hornborg can help us explain Caspary's thesis that machines are not simply mechanical tools primarily diminishing necessary labour but motors for a production based on surplus labour. The banal mystification of this process, the denial of the fact that machinery is first and foremost the physical infrastructure of a social relation that reproduces the need for more surplus labour, produced by the global stratification of the production process itself, implies for Caspary the generalisation of "machine utopias" amongst capitalist ideologues as well as socialist intellectuals. These utopias, and according to Caspary they were utopias in the most banal sense, namely, fantastic descriptions of something fundamentally unreal, are based on what Hornborg would call a fetishistic view of machines that does not register the web of power relations they not only are embedded in but which they also necessarily reproduce.

For Caspary, in 1927, the belief that the industrialisation of the Soviet Union would push humanity out of the exploitation of wage labour was perhaps the best example of such a machine utopia. But our contemporary world's fantastic theories that an acceleration of the productive forces would move us beyond capital reproduces according to Caspary the same form of utopianism.

From this perspective, the global proletariat that loses time and therefore life by being entrapped in the world of factories, mines, and sweatshops—or for that matter seeks jobs in these complexes—cannot exist as a proletariat without the continuation of the use of capitalist machinery and the energy resources it requires in order to be

126. Alf Hornborg, 'Machine Fetishism, Value, and the Image of Unlimited Good: Towards a Thermodynamics of Imperialism' in *Man: New Series*, vol. 27 no. 1 (1992), 1–18. Here: 13.

124. Endnotes, 'An Identical Abject Subject?' *Endnotes 4* (2015).

125. Freeman, *Behemoth*, xiii.

maintained. As Hornborg argues, not only is it “well known that the quantities of energy dissipated per person vary enormously between individuals of different countries and classes”. These differences “are generated and reproduced through the joint operation of the world market and globalized technologies”.¹²⁷

The consumption — whether proletarian or bourgeois — of the commodities of this world market, and the production process that makes it possible, stratifies the proletariat into distinct segments of *Verbrauchsgüter* and *Maschinen-Proletarier*. Not seldom these groups can have contradicting interests due to the differences in, for example, the use of energy. This is why it is not only essential to relate what has been called “the history of separation” to the industrialisation of the world. One must also, Caspary argues, view proletarian and capitalist consumption as a way to reproduce the machine-induced differentiation of the proletariat. This process has, at least until now, made international solidarity problematic and easily forced socialist states into imperialist projects such as wars or forced industrialisation.¹²⁸

This is why machinery, for Caspary, is not “the means of production” that satisfies existing needs but “the *motor* of production” that posits capital by producing new needs adapted to the capitalist economy. Machinery is the sheer infrastructure of the capitalist mode of production that produces not for the sake of needs but for the accumulation of profit. However, by doing so machinery produces a humanity whose needs are related to the continuation of capitalism as a machine civilisation. Caspary writes “in this way, the machine — which has arisen as a surplus product [*Mehrprodukt*] above and beyond necessary labour — becomes the means of production necessary for life. If indeed the machine does not serve to satisfy existing and necessary societal needs but rather implies their amplification; if the machine is not determined to be used in a specific economic sector but rather to develop a new economic sector, if the machine does not follow the need that it satisfies, but rather precedes it — then it only fulfils its essential determination in the cases when it produces needs whose satisfaction are necessary, but which cannot be satisfied without the machine”.¹²⁹ Here we find another crucial difference between the tool and the machine: the tool is

127. Alf Hornborg, *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press 2019), 124.

128. Endnotes, ‘A History of Separation’ *Endnotes* 4 (2015).

129. Caspary, *Die Maschinenutopie*, 74–75.

produced to satisfy a pre-existing need, such as making labour easier, whereas the machine produces more and more needs that can only be satisfied through the continuation of the use of machinery — the need to take a cheap flight did not exist before the airplane was used for tourism for instance — and it is in this sense that the machine according to Caspary produces a distinct form of life with specifically capitalist needs. This development also explains, according to Caspary, why “both the capitalist and the proletariat have an economic interest in the machine: it produces either their profit or their means of existence”.¹³⁰ The proletariat as a proletarian, that is as a class enforced to sell its labour in order to survive, and the capitalist as a capitalist, that is as an owner of capital, have immediate interests in the continuation of the capitalist machine complex since this is the infrastructure that guarantees the survival of the poor and the luxury of the rich.

If this diagnosis is true, then it is not strange that the development of capital according to the Goldberg circle did not move towards a messianic negation of the negation. There is for them no real movement laying the basis of a society free from exploitation through the development of machinery. This is the machine utopia of Marxism that must be demystified so that the social question can be delinked from the infrastructure of capital that capitalism according to Caspary should be identified with. It was in relation to these discussions that Unger already in 1921 had argued that the “assault against the ‘capitalist system’ is forever in vain *at the site of its validity*. Capitalism is the most powerful and unfathomable of all systems, and can integrate every objection in the *domain* of its *power-to-be* [*In-Kraft-seins*]. To raise anything against capitalism, it is first of all imperative *to go outside its field of activities* [*Wirkungsbereich*] because inside it can answer all counteraction”.¹³¹ The field of activities of capital was the machine world Caspary examined and the logic behind Unger’s idea of a secession from the capitalist system through mass migration — *Völkerwanderung* — was based on the wager that the forced proletarianisation that the factories implied could produce a need for an exodus of all those urging for a life beyond the factory. This may, as I have already argued, seem far-fetched today in our world of planetary industrialism and global markets where a job seems to be the only way to survive. But at

130. *Ibid.*

131. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, 48.

the same time, this theory of flight was also based on the suggestion that the fundamental yet inner exteriority to capital, namely, the living labour that must be subsumed as work in order for capital to be accumulated, would increasingly be expelled from the world of factories due to the development of the productive forces. For, as we have seen, even if machines constantly produce the need for new labour in mining, extraction of fossil fuel, and so on, they also produce unemployment and precarity, today visible in the rust belts of the world, through the production processes they revolutionise. This was the double process of capitalist development that Caspary examined, subsumption and expulsion of labour, and both facets of this process would imply catastrophes that could produce a need for a life outside the Behemoth of the industrialised world and the surplus population it creates.

The Goldberg circle came close to describing a situation in which the proletariat had to confront its own condition as a surplus population [*Zusatzbevölkerung*], a class whose survival as a class was tied to the continuation of the machine world of capitalism, since the catastrophic politics of the capitalist system would clash with the interests of the workers as biological beings.¹³²

Commenting on *Die Maschinenutopie*, Goldberg stated in 1935 “to foresee the end of the modern machine system, one does not need to wait for the few hundred years that important reserves of raw material—coal, petroleum, etc—still suffice”.¹³³ It is enough to witness that “the costs of mining raw material are becoming so expensive that their extraction will become economically impossible—long before the raw materials are literally finished”.¹³⁴

We know today that this has not happened, since for instance shale oil extraction has kept the price of oil low, but the development of these kinds of technologies could, from the perspective of the Goldberg circle, only strengthen their thesis that there is no machine based solution to capitalism’s social question, since the continued use of fossils would increase the catastrophic tendency in nature that capital unleashed. The group argued that the looming machine catastrophe would show that the psychophysical condition of the human being did not coincide with the social function it was given as a worker, citizen, consumer, and so on. Beyond and outside the *noosphere* of the capitalist production and consumption lies the primordial world of

biological nature, which shows itself in every hunger riot, in every struggle for a better life and, more essential for the Goldberg circle, in the flight over every border. Thus, if there is a way out of capital this is because the trajectory of the productive forces implies an exhaustion of the finite natural resources needed not only to sustain the machine-based civilisation’s production of profits, but also life as we know it. Such an exhaustion, which Goldberg wrongly thought was imminent, would pitch the Behemoth against the state to the point at which there is, as it has been alleged, “no functioning Leviathan”.¹³⁵ In such a situation, where the state is in a deep crisis and the metabolic and irreparable rift between humanity and the rest of nature will divide the life of the proletariat itself, a secession would not only be possible, but necessary from Goldberg’s perspective. But if Unger is right that in order “to raise anything against capitalism it is first of all necessary to go outside its field of activities” one must ask what these fields of activities are in order to envision the Goldberg circle’s exodus out of this world

The activists in the left communist party close to the Goldberg circle, the KAPD, who argued that a secession of capital had to begin from the knowledge of workers, certainly thought that this field of activities was nothing but industrial work. Only the workers had the practical know-how that could make the factory, which Caspary saw as capital’s domain of operativity, inoperative. But to make something defunct is one thing, it is quite another to produce a form of life that would push humanity beyond the classes that stratify it. From the Goldberg circle’s perspective, the self-management of the machine civilisation would have been as impossible as its planned management proved to be. But there is still the *differenza umana*, which not only reveals that there are other ways for our species to exist than as a class of proletarians and capitalists or for that matter as a conglomerate of prehistoric tribes. A serious anthropology of the present exposes much more subtle distinctions and can perhaps even disclose how machines could, with the jargon of Caspary, be turned to tools through some kind of process of delinking worlds, spheres, and lives from the community of capital. For this to be possible, the Goldberg circle insisted, proletarians, separated from each other due to their immediate interests in the continuation of the machine civilisation of

135. Fredy Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* (Black & Red 1983), 143.

132. Goldberg, *Maimonides*, 214.

133. *Ibid.*

134. *Ibid.*

capital, have to move beyond every machine utopia and, even more importantly, find a point of unity beyond their need to exist as what they are today: workers, citizens, members of specific religions or cultures, and so on.

New needs and desires for change have to be created on the basis of needs and desires specific to the anthropological form of the proletariat, namely, the workers inhabiting the factory world Caspary sought to decipher. According to the Goldberg circle, such a feat was possible because of the radical plasticity of human life itself. This is why Caspary enigmatically claimed that even if there is no prospect of building a just society on the world of existing machines, and at the same time no possibility of returning to an agrarian idyll (a primitivistic option the Goldberg circle explicitly refused), there *“is the power of organic life*. But this power is not accessible to contemporary humanity [*der gegenwärtigen Menschheit*] in a conscious way, it belongs to the capricious nature that has been withdrawn from

humanity”.¹³⁶ What contemporary humanity has no access to is a conscious cultivation of our natural, psychophysical needs and desires into a process of

sublation and negation, rather than into the simple stabilisation of the subjectivities we are today. While this need to ground economy on life itself may seem like their most speculative position, it in fact reveals that the Goldberg circle was part of the politicisation of life during the Weimar period which, as we know, Nazism triumphed over. In the period both before and after the German revolution of 1919 social change was seen by many on both the left and the right as a biological revolution. In order to understand the quote above on the power of organic life we have to remember that history, for the Goldberg circle, was the history of different anthropological forms and therefore different ways of cultivating the needs of human life. This is less fanciful than it may seem since it simply implies that different organisations, such as what Marxists call parties, may cultivate existing needs and even produce new ones.

It was by stressing the plasticity of human needs that Goldberg thought—probably vainly—that the particular community described in the *Torah*, grounded on the power of organic life or what he called *Geist*, could reveal a universal task to the millions who were or would become stateless and propertyless: the possibility of a life

136. Caspary, *Die Maschinenutopie*, 101.

beyond class and capital. In a manner that is reminiscent of an Italian Marxist who in the 1950’s wrote that a classless and stateless society would bring humanity close “to what ancient religions, stuttering of humanity, with an ingenious and vital babble called the world of the spirit”,¹³⁷ the Goldberg circle examined to what extent particular forms of human community could express the political and biological potential of a species whose evolution reveals its absolute inability to become identical with one specific kind of natural or social world.

The paradoxical construction of a particular political community that would express this organic openness of a species without a specific natural habitat is the basis of the work of the Goldberg circle, and indicates what for them was the most fundamental problem: what kind of anthropological form would be able to produce such a community? Behind every anthropology there is an even more primordial entropology, and therefore an economic order that explains how we can live, either as a species that stabilises the entropic tendency of nature or sublates it. This, it seems safe to say, will probably not imply the construction of a people incarnating *Geist* itself. But it may give some parts of our species fragmented into classes the power to live civilisation to its end, so that human life may—if not move beyond the five thousand year-old civilisation of class, sex, race, and other misfortunes—at least weaken its power over the living as well as the dead.

What may change, according to the Goldberg circle, is the metabolic relation to nature. Goldberg, Caspary, and Unger hoped that such a transformation could cultivate communities powerful enough if not to exit but at least indicate a future rejection of capital’s field of activities; a contemporary example of this could be the global youth movement, Fridays for Future, that Greta Thunberg has spurred or the Gilets Jaunes in France which, according to the sociologist Anne Steiner, was characterised by the production of new needs.¹³⁸ Whatever such a movement is, it must ask the difficult question of whether or not there is a possible new use of what Caspary called machines as tools that does not exactly unleash an inherent tendency in capitalism, but rather organises its decline,

137. Amadeo Bordiga, ‘Sorda ad alti messaggi la civiltà dei quiz’ // *Programma Comunista* no. 1 (1956). Author’s translation.

138. Anne Steiner, ‘La seule réaction syndicale à la hauteur des événements serait un appel à la grève générale illimitée’ *Le Media Presse*, 14 Jan 2019.

so that the power of organic life can move beyond the catastrophic politics of the Behemoth.

In the context of malfunctioning Leviathans and declining Behemoths, capital might give way to a truly deindustrialised world where the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom could be rethought and re-enacted in a new sublation of nature. Such a world would only be possible through a new economical, technological, and political imagination that, in the vein of Goldberg and Unger, searched for the possibility to cultivate the organic needs of those clashing against the five thousand year old-civilisation that no longer has any need for them or, for that matter, desperately seeks to integrate them in the firms and factories of capital. Not in order to live outside this world—this was already impossible for Goldberg, Caspary, and Unger—but perhaps to indicate the need for a way out by transforming machines to tools. This could imply the creation of organisations not unlike the philosophical schools that the circle wanted to build in order to examine new ways to think about the history of our species and the possibilities of life and technology.

These academies could perhaps generate a joint perspective beyond simple minded radicalism by bringing together those perspectives that contain the technological know-how needed to alter our entropological relation to nature, but which currently reproduce the machine utopia of capital, with those currents that criticise every attempt at the self-administration of the industrialised world, but which have no real answers on how we can find a way to leave that world behind. Together these two perspectives might reveal the necessity for a non-catastrophic politics that would, as Unger said, wed metaphysics and politics into a community generalising the need to move beyond the catastrophes of the current world system while at the same time developing the practical means for the pursuit of such a path. This search for a “non-catastrophic politics” would certainly not be able to dismantle the infrastructure of our machine civilisation as such, such a primitivistic fantasy would imply a catastrophe in itself. Yet perhaps it could produce those techniques of happiness that Franz Jung had sought and which the Goldberg circle hoped could spawn a new anthropogenesis.

Jeanne Neton

NOTES FROM THE CHEMO ROOM

Today I remembered why I wanted to write about this. I was sitting in the chemo room, as I have done regularly for the past year. It has eight armchairs, each with a small stool in front, on which you can rest your feet while diverse liquids are fed into your veins. Each day, all sorts of women come to sit on those chairs, some on a weekly basis, some less regularly. Most are over fifty, but some like me are younger—in their mid-thirties or so; once I even came across a teenager. All have, or have had, breast cancer. Most are from the former GDR, and speak with a strong proletarian Berlin accent. They don't seem to mind my broken German though. And in this area of East Berlin—Weitlingkiez—which was once famous for its right-wing subculture, they don't seem to mind a foreigner amongst them (at least, a French one—how they would react if I was Turkish or black I honestly don't know). The thing is, being one of the youngest, they often treat me with a slight maternal affection and—with my green woolly hat when I had no hair, and with my punky haircut now it is growing out—I seem to amuse them a fair bit.

Today the room is quite empty, and the woman in front of me, in her sixties, after the usual small talk, looks at me with large, curious eyes. She asks: “you know, last time you said you had this op, you know, where they took out your boobs, but that you could keep your nipples, you said, like this *transdingsbums* [trans-thingummy] op, right?” I can't refrain from smiling. “Well”, she announces proudly, “last week there was a programme on TV, a programme about these trans-thingummy people. So I watched it and you know, well, it doesn't look that bad, you know, with the nipples. I thought maybe, maybe I could do it like that too”.

She made my day.

She was actually the third woman this week who asked me about my decision to have a mastectomy without reconstruction after I was told my breast cancer was genetic and could therefore come back at any time.¹ All of them knew they were going to have a mastectomy themselves in the next few months and all were somehow fascinated by my story. Not that I

1. I am affected by a mutation in the BRCA2 gene, which—like BRCA1 mutations—results in greatly increased risk of getting breast and ovarian cancers.

think they will all, if any, make the same choice. One of them told me she couldn't imagine living without breasts; that without them her body would not be her body. Still, the idea of having implants bothered her: she had heard many stories of something going wrong with them — they might sit too high, too low, or have different shapes; sometimes they get rejected by your body. "Frankly", she said, "I wish I could be like you and I would not care; that would be so easy!"

But I am curious as well. I want to know what's going on in her head when she thinks of her breasts — or of their absence — so I can understand better what came into my head six months ago, when I had to take my own decision. And I want to understand what fascinates them about my choice. The third woman I met this week, in the chemo room where she had almost fainted a minute before, gave me some hints of an answer.

She too will have a mastectomy in a few months but tells me she doesn't feel ready to think about it, now she's so weak from the chemotherapy. Still, when she thinks about reconstruction, it doesn't feel right. The word itself feels wrong; she doesn't know why. And she's afraid it wouldn't be her body anymore, with those huge implants, those fake breasts which don't feel anything. She's afraid they'll feel alien and she'll hate them. But she saw pictures of women without reconstruction on the internet and she can't imagine that either.

I can understand that. These two wide horizontal scars in the middle of each breast — I couldn't imagine having them either. I'm not yet sure why, so I want her to tell me what's so frightening about this image; what did she think about when she saw it? "It's like an erasure", she says, "like with a pen, when you cross out an error. And this fold in the middle that remains, it looks like... for me it doesn't look human". I know what she means. I know it doesn't have to be this way; that some women make this choice without regrets, but somehow I felt the same. All the doctors I met — who all happened to be women — assumed I wanted a reconstruction. One of them, when I asked how my chest would look if I didn't have implants, told me "it will look like this!", putting both her hands horizontally in front of each breast, with a slightly disgusted look on her face. "No woman would want that!" She immediately realised she had said something stupid, looked at me worriedly and corrected herself: "at least they don't usually".

But the thing is, since I was a child, I have wondered if I am really a woman — or a man for that matter. Both gender roles disgusted me in their own way, and, while I would not have considered a transgender op before, the idea of having two big fake breasts implanted in my body felt completely nuts. But this crossing-out, this horizontal scar — that scared me too. It reminded me of the Buñuel film, *Un Chien Andalou*, with that central scene when we see a close-up of an eye getting sliced across the middle with a razor. I always had to look away at that point. The thing is, when you opt for reconstruction, doctors give you all sorts of options. They often like to joke that you can even get bigger boobs if you want to. But when you refuse implants they give you only one choice: the cut, the crossing-out. If you don't want reconstruction it's because you don't care about how you look, right? But things are not so simple. And I see this in the eyes of those three women.

But I feel the fascination for my case comes from somewhere else. I told them I had to fight to get the op that I had come to realise was the right one for me — without reconstruction, keeping the nipples, with a cut under the breast. And that fascinated them because it meant you didn't need to accept the limited range of options doctors give you: you can first think about what you want and then impose your decision on them. Even when you're sick, weak, depressed, it makes a difference to realise you don't have to accept some kind of standard solution that feels wrong deep inside; that you can fight and make an active choice — even in the shittiest situation.²

For me the "fight" was basically: I started crying. One week before my op, I got the chance to meet — for the first time — the surgeon who was to operate on me. I had prepared my arguments, but I still felt weak: after six months of chemotherapy I was afraid I would not find the energy to make my point without breaking down. Fortunately my partner was sitting next to me, and I knew he would help me if I was too weak to talk. But to start with, the surgeon — a woman in her thirties — just did not let me speak. She just assumed

2. There isn't any good or bad choice per se when it comes to things such as whether to have a mastectomy or not, to have reconstruction or not, or how you want your body to look in general. Having the option of a reliable, healthy and satisfying reconstruction is as important as being able to choose how you want your breasts to look without implants. This is a very personal decision: all assumptions, gendered or not, about how bodies should look are potentially dangerous. Two of us in *Endnotes* are currently writing a longer, theoretical and experiential article about the normative pressure imposed on bodies assigned the female gender — in relation to both their appearance and function.

I wanted a reconstruction. So, as a good doctor, she started to explain to me all the risks of such a procedure. It could be that the implants get rejected by the body. They are foreign bodies after all, one should be prepared for that eventuality. If this happens, one might have to operate a second, or even third time. And if the body rejects silicone, we might have to consider implanting some of my own fat, which might be problematic as I am too skinny for this now, but after a few months without chemotherapy, that might become an option. Then there is the problem of capsular fibrosis. It is a possible response of the immune system to implants, and while it isn't dangerous, it can hurt. And in some cases implants may be linked to the development of lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system, even if this is very rare. After ten minutes I managed to interrupt her, in a voice I tried to make sound resolute: "Actually I wanted to tell you, I don't want a reconstruction". Her whole body looked like she'd had a small electric shock. "But I would like to keep my nipples, and I was thinking, if this is possible for transgender mastectomies, why would it not be possible for me?" She remained silent for a second. She looked at me with a strange expression on her face, as if she was wondering how to react and had no clue. Then she erupted: "No, you can't do that, with transgender mastectomies, we don't take all of the breast tissues, because, think about it, men have breasts too"—she looked at my partner, who actually has the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen—"but in your case, because of your gene mutation, we need to remove all tissues, so it will make a HOLE; it will look HORRIBLE, you just DON'T WANT THAT".

Then I started crying. Or rather, I tried to say something, and my voice broke down. I could not believe I had the choice between these weird silicone boobs and looking like an alien with two big holes on my chest. No tear came out of my eyes, but each time I tried to articulate a word, my voice broke, first dropping as I tried to control it, then hitting new heights as I lost control. That changed the situation completely. She took her phone and called her boss. "I have a patient here, a gene mutation, she wants a mastectomy but doesn't want reconstruction, and she wants to keep her nipples, like—she said with a slightly ironic voice—a transgender op". Here I could feel for the first time the irritation in her voice. I was proving a difficult case; some kind of difficult child—but she was going to be patient. After all, I might

just be losing my mind—and who wouldn't in my case. She was silent for a moment, listening to her boss's answer, which I couldn't hear, before announcing: "She's coming down". I held my breath. I caught my boyfriend's eyes; he looked as shocked as me.

There was a long silence before the chief surgeon entered the room. She was older than her colleague, maybe fifty or so. She looked pretty amused, and a bit curious, and asked me to repeat my request. She paused a little, then said: "Why not!" She had done transgender ops before, and there was no reason we couldn't use the same technique. But she wanted to know: do I want nipples pointing to the front like most women, or to the side like most men? I looked at her, baffled. She asked if my partner could show us his breasts and sure—he looked delighted to be able to help. "You see, men's nipples normally turn outwards, while women's nipples tend to look forwards". Me and my boyfriend looked at each other, speechless. We had been obsessed with breasts for weeks now, but we had never noticed that detail. I looked back at the doctor, confused. What did I actually want? But then I told her: "I actually don't care, as long as I can keep my nipples". Still I appreciated this new bit of information. "It will be flat but it won't make a hole, and if you go to the gym regularly you might even build some nice muscles there", she said in a smile—before disappearing without warning, like you can afford to do if you are the boss. Her colleague, or rather subordinate, was left pretty embarrassed and clearly annoyed by what had just happened.³

I was over the moon. I was imagining myself with some kind of body-builder breasts, and that made me both on an emotional level, and deep inside—somehow on a sexual level—happy. The doctor made me sign some kind of declaration that this op was really what I wanted, and while she finished the papers we left the room, both as if on drugs.

That was six months ago. Now I sit in my armchair alone, getting my second-to-last cancer therapy. I'm slow today and my fellow patients have finished their liquids before me. I think again about the conversation

3. It's still not completely clear to me why these two doctors had such different reactions to my request. One factor might be that the older, as a chief surgeon, was freer to consider 'unorthodox' solutions, while the younger—who had recently taken up that position—felt she had to stay on safe territory. But there may have been an emotional component as well: how these two doctors felt about their own bodies, their own gender, may have affected what they could imagine as desirable for others. In any case, as it turned out, they both operated on me at the same time: one took the left breast, the other one the right. And I have to admit, even if I found it hard to believe at first: the younger surgeon did a better job.

I just had, the "*transdingsbums*" story, and I can't help laughing out loud.⁴ I feel happy, happy about my flat breasts and short, punky hair; happy that this nightmare will soon be over, and happy about all the encounters I had in the chemo room.

4. As we discussed in *Endnotes* how to translate this word into English we discovered that '*dingsbums*' is one of the few words in German that can take all three genders.