

Never Work!

Karen Elliot

When Guy Debord of the Situationist International (SI) graffitied the slogan “Never Work!” onto the walls of a Parisian street in 1953, he struck a blow in solidarity with the radical current of left communism which locates the wage-labour relation as the central pillar of capitalist relations and therefore the prime locus of attack. It is, of course, a banality that we need to work in order to produce for our basic needs. But what is at question here is the nature of that work, for whom, and to what end? Useful work? Or useless toil? As Raoul Vaneigem of the SI argued, every appeal for productivity comes from above: “It is not from ‘productivity’ that a full life is to be expected, it is not ‘productivity’ that will produce an enthusiastic response to economic needs.” Never mind. The aim of capital is not to produce useful products, or fully-rounded citizens; the chief aim is to augment capital through an increase in profit in a perpetual system of self-valorisation. The means of this valorisation is that peculiar form of commodity: labour-power. Labour power, in contrast to fixed capital (the means of production), creates *surplus wealth for capital* over and beyond the immediate needs of the worker. This is the ABC of capitalist ‘growth’. The drive to productivity and the concomitant tendency to force down wages and conditions at every opportunity is thus clear from capital’s perspective.

That work should be valorised universally comes then as no surprise. The recent welfare reform proposals of the former Work and Pensions Secretary, James Purnell, maintain that work is *the* best route out of poverty. As George Monbiot has recently commented, the political value of any project that claims to produce jobs, especially in times of recession, is given hyperbolic status. Yet, as Monbiot goes on to argue, “the employment figures attached to large projects tend to be codswallop”; the promise of jobs is routinely used “to justify anything and everything”. Jobs, even when they do arrive, are far from guarantors against poverty. As Louis Wacquant in his recent study of advanced marginality has argued, it is a “delusion” to think that bringing people back into the labour market will durably reduce poverty: “[t]his is because the wage-labour relation itself has become a source of built-in insecurity and social instability at the bottom of the revamped class structure”. Wacquant cites Wal-Mart, the largest US employer, as a prime example of endemic “working poverty”. Wal-Mart pays its “sales associates”, the most common company position, \$13,861 (nearly \$1,000 dollars under the federal ‘poverty line’ for a family of three); one half of its employees are not covered by the company’s medical plan. This ensures that thousands of Wal-Mart’s staff must resort to welfare to meet their basic needs on a normative basis (welfare which is effectively a state subsidy to disguise Wal-Mart’s pathetic wages).

As the – ever so faint – spectre of Keynes re-emerges, Wacquant warns against undue faith in national, social-democratic measures of reflation for alleviating entrenched poverty: “[i]t is high time for us to forsake the untenable assumption that a large majority of the adults of advanced society can or will see their basic needs met by lifelong formal employment (or by the permanent employment of members of their households) in the commodified economy”. Wacquant also casts doubt on the ability of the traditional trade unions to deal with the new conditions of urban marginality which effectively cut off large sections of advanced urban populations from macroeconomic trends: “... the trade unions are strikingly ill-suited to tackle issues that arise and spill beyond the conventional spheres of regulated wage work”. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri recently re-iterated this point: “... the old trade unions are not able to represent the unemployed,

the poor, or even the mobile and flexible post-Fordist workers with short-term contracts. ... the old unions are divided according to the various products and tasks defined in the heyday of production ... these traditional divisions (or even newly defined divisions) no longer make sense and merely serve as an obstacle.” Moreover, the trades unions’ narrow focus on issues relating to the workplace has meant their renunciation of wider political demands, and deepened their isolation from broader social movements.

Evidently, the drive to productivity and the valorisation of work is to be expected from the point of view of capital. However, the question is how have social-democratic institutions, nominally of the Left, come to be complicit in the subjugation of labour through the mantra of productivity? After all, socialism is not capitalism and the refusal of the wage-labour relation and the struggle against alienation must be at the heart of all those theories which seek an exit from capitalism.

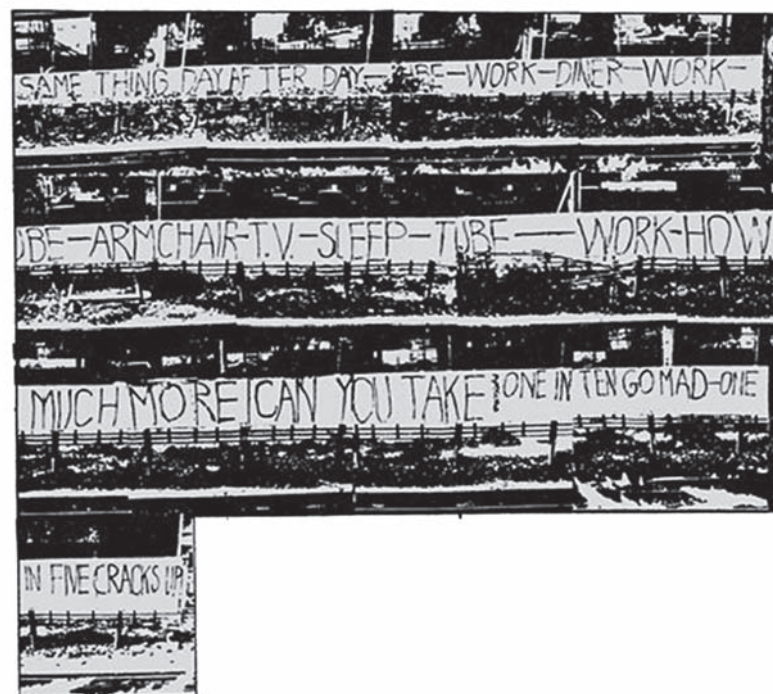
The Advent of the Industrial Christ

“... every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Benjamin’s most significant disagreement with social democracy was with its technocratic conformism which construed production as beneficial to workers *per se*: “[n]othing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current ... from there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological process constituted a political achievement”. For Benjamin, the Gotha Programme (which gathered together the two main wings of the German socialist movement in 1875) merely resurrected the Protestant work ethic in secular form by narrowly defining labour as the source of all wealth and all culture. Indeed, the Social Democrat, Josef Dietzgen, echoed Lamartine, the French writer, poet and politician, who had earlier proclaimed the “advent of the industrial Christ” by declaring: “[t]he saviour of modern times is called work”. Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democrat turned war patriot, meanwhile declared that socialism “means working hard”. Benjamin thought this reverence of work without reference to its alienating effects was fallacy and confusion. It amounted to a vulgar conception of labour and its proceeds that privileged distribution over production while downplaying the fact that labour-power was still bought and sold in the marketplace like any other commodity.

Benjamin’s critique of Social Democracy drew from Marx’s evaluation of the Gotha Programme’s resolutions. For Marx, it was a profound mistake to put the principal stress on distribution; on the potential of a ‘fair’ distribution of the products of labour through ‘equal rights’, as long as distribution remained a concomitant feature of the exploitative mode of production itself. In Marx’s analysis, this half-hearted form of socialism merely borrowed from technocratic forms of bourgeois political economy by treating distribution as totally independent of production. This ideological manoeuvre was made possible by disavowing the real relations of production under capitalism which rested then, as they do now (albeit in historically contingent forms), on the ownership and control of the means of production and the exploitation of labour-power for surplus value (profit). The ideological cleavage of distribution from production by the German socialist movement meant that the presentation of socialism would tend to rest thereafter on the minimal question of distribution rather than the



maximal one of production: of reform rather than revolution. In 1875, Marx could already comment: “[a]fter the real relation has long been made clear, why retrogress again?”. The question remains a potent one.

The Law of Wages

“Seemingly normal facts: that an individual has nothing to sell but his labour power, that he must sell it to an enterprise to be able to live, that everything is a commodity, that social relations revolve around exchange, are the result of a long and violent process.”

Gilles Dauve, *The Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*

The basis of capitalism and wage-labour lie in pre-capitalist forms of primitive accumulation, defined by Marx as “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production”. This transformation in the structure of servitude, from feudal to capitalist exploitation, was no simple progression through homogenous empty time. The expropriation of the immediate producers was accomplished, as Marx observed, with “merciless Vandalism”, and inscribed in the annals of history in “letters of blood and fire”. It is enough to cite the exploitation of gold and silver of the Americas through slavery; the “entombment” of the aboriginal population of Australia in mining operations; and the turning of Africa “into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins” to intimate the “rosy dawn” of primitive accumulation in colonial settings. Closer to home, the Enclosures of England and the Clearances of Scotland are the chief British markers of those violent rounds of primitive accumulation, where “great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence and hurled as free and ‘unattached’ proletarians on the labour market”.¹

The capitalist system *presupposes* the separation of labourers from all property by which they can realise their labour. Once divorced from the means of production, the producer is immediately transformed into a *wage-labourer* and their means of subsistence and production transformed into accumulated capital. This then reproduces the original separation on a continually expanding scale: “[i]t cannot be otherwise in a mode of production in which the labourer exists to satisfy the needs of the self-expansion of existing values, instead of, on the contrary, material wealth existing to satisfy the needs of development on the part of the labourer”.² Wealth generated from past, ‘dead’ labour (accumulated in the form of machines, factories, new technologies of production) is set in motion by ‘living’ labour to accumulate more value, which is then invested in new branches, new machinery. New technologies reduce necessary labour power and contribute to a reserve army of labour which holds the pretensions of the prevailing labour force in check: “[t]he greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater

is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital develop also the labour power at its disposal".³

Higher productivity on the part of the worker leads inversely to higher unemployment and higher pauperisation rather than higher wages: "[t]he higher the productiveness of labour, the greater is the pressure of the labourers on the means of production, the more precarious, therefore becomes their condition of existence".⁴

This inexorable fact of capitalism was what led Marx to argue for its supersession, not merely its amelioration through social-democratic means. Reform under capitalism can only ever be partial and piecemeal under

a system whose *raison d'être* is the extraction of surplus value from labour by the owners of capital. This essential system of 'squeezing' is why the workplace has traditionally been the scene of "a constant silent war, of a perpetual struggle, of pressure and counter-pressure".⁵ The iron law of value precludes a diminution in the degree of exploitation of labour and a rise in the price of wages that might seriously undermine the continual reproduction, on an ever-enlarging scale, of the relations of capital.

Distribution or Production: Reform or Revolution

The means of this 'perpetual struggle' between labour and capital has of course been the subject of major discussion, and rifts, within the Left. Crucially, the debate between Eduard

Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg at the end of the 19th century marks a key juncture in the antagonistic relationship between social democratic and revolutionary thought within socialism. Bernstein, Engel's literary executor and one of the most influential figures within reformist Marxism, argued in a series of articles under the title *The Problems of Socialism* (1897–98) that the 'final goal' of socialism would be achieved through capitalism, not through capitalism's destruction. As rights were gradually won by workers, he argued, their cause for grievance would be diminished

and consequently so would the foundation and necessity of revolution. For Bernstein, capitalism had overcome its crisis-prone tendencies of boom and bust: the 'anarchy' of the market, he argued, was being re-constituted by the formation of new mechanisms within capitalism and by social-democratic measures for higher wages. These tendencies proved to Bernstein that the capitalist order was capable of reform through legal and parliamentary means.

Bernstein's ideas were of major significance for the future of the international labour movement. At the turn of the century, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), of which Bernstein was a member, was the largest socialist organisation in the world. His arguments represented the first time that 'opportunist' currents within the movement were given open theoretical expression. Yet for Luxemburg, Bernstein's theory posited the *opposition* of the two moments of the labour movement by emphasising 'minimum' aims (immediate parliamentary reforms) over 'maximum' aims (the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism). It tended to "counsel the renunciation of the social transformation, the final goal of Social Democracy, and, inversely, to make social reforms, which are the *means* of the class struggle, into its *end*". Luxemburg was not a *priori* opposed to social

democracy; instead, counter to Bernstein, she argued that there was an "indissoluble tie" between social reforms and revolution, but that the struggle for reforms was only the *means*, the social revolution the *goal*.

By treating the mode of exchange as independent of the mode of production, Bernstein had fallen into "one of the fundamental errors of bourgeois vulgar economics":

"Vulgar economy, too, tries to find the antidote against the ills of capitalism in the phenomena of capitalism itself. Like Bernstein, it believes in the *possibility* of regulating the capitalist economy. And, still in the manner of Bernstein, it arrives in time at the desire to *palliate* the contradictions of capitalism, that is, at the belief in the possibility of patching up the sores of capitalism. In other words, it ends up with a reactionary and not a revolutionary program, and thus in a utopia."

For Luxemburg, Bernstein's theories led not to the realisation of a new *socialist world*, but to the reform of *capitalism* – not to the elimination of capitalism, but to the desire for the *attenuation* of the *abuses* of capitalism.

The principal instruments for Bernstein's proposed reform of society were the co-operatives and the trade unions; the first to increase wages and lessen commercial profit, the second to do the same for industrial profit. Yet for Luxemburg, co-operatives were merely a hybrid form of capitalism: small units of socialised production remaining within capitalist exchange. They were coercively obliged to take up the role of capitalist entrepreneurs in order to stand up against their competitors in the market. The intensification of labour – exploitation of labour as commodity – is concomitant. For Luxemburg, this contradiction accounted for the usual failure of contemporary co-operatives. They either became pure capitalist enterprises, or, if the workers' interests continued to predominate, ended by dissolving. Bernstein thought the failure of co-operatives in England was due to a lack of "discipline", but for Luxemburg this language merely resurrected the authoritative axioms of the status quo, expressing "nothing else than the natural absolutist regime of capitalism".

Trades unions, according to Bernstein, were another prime instrument in the "struggle of the rate of wages against the rate of profit". While Luxemburg defended unions as an expression of working-class resistance to the oppression of the capitalist economy, she also argued that they represented only the organised *defence* of labour power against the attacks of profit. Trade unions, however, were not able to execute an economic offensive against profit. The activity of unions, she argued: "does not take place in the blue of the sky. It takes place within the well-defined framework of the law of wages. *The law of wages is not shattered but applied by trade-union activity*". Luxemburg argued that the workers share was inevitably reduced by the growth of the productivity of labour. These objective capitalist conditions transformed the activity of trade unions, subject to successive cycles of boom and bust, "into a sort of labour of Sisyphus". Bernstein's theory that capitalism had resolved its inner contradictions was of course mercilessly exposed in the global Depression of the 1930s, not to mention the current crisis.

Trade unions and co-operatives, without challenging the mode of production, provide the economic support for a theory of revisionism. Luxemburg's critique lambasted Bernstein's regression to idealist forms of social justice and his attempts to constrain socialist struggle within the field of distribution: "[a]gain and again, Bernstein refers to socialism as an effort towards a 'just, juster, and still more just' mode of distribution". This problematic tendency in trade unions became clearer with time. In 1948, the Dutch communist and advocate of workers councils, Anton Pannekoek, concisely summarised the role of trade unions as an "indispensable function" of capitalism: "[b]y the power of the unions capitalism is normalized; a certain norm of exploitation is universally established. A norm of wages, allowing for the most modest life exigencies, so that the workers are not driven again and again into hunger revolts, is necessary for uninterrupted production. ... Though products

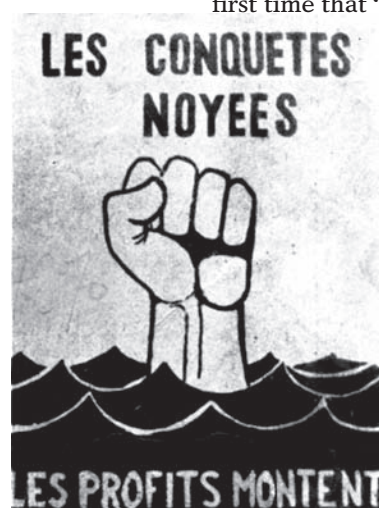
of the workers fight, kept up by their pains and efforts, trade unions are at the same time *organs of capitalist society*".

Ersatz Marxism

Bernstein and the German and international socialist movement were indelibly shaped by Engels' famous preface to Marx's *Class Struggles in France* (1895). Evaluating the French Revolution of 1848, Engels argued that belief in an imminent socialist revolution had become obsolete: revolutionary street fighting had been superseded by parliamentary tactics as the most effective means to socialist change. The text represents a 'classical' documentation of the opinions prevailing in German social democracy at the time, and the tactics Engels expounded went on to dominate German social democracy, in Luxemburg's phrase, "in everything that it did and in everything that it left undone". In 1918, Luxemburg, battling against reformist social-democratic tendencies in Germany, argued that the preface represented the chief document of "the proclamation of the parliamentarism-only tactic". For Luxemburg this was the beginning of *ersatz* Marxism, the 'official' Marxism of social democracy – an ideology which has provided an illusory unity to the socialist movement ever since.

What remained hidden in this seismic shift of socialist tactics was the fact that the preface was written by Engels under the direct pressure of the SPD parliamentary delegation. The delegation pressed Engels, who lived abroad and had to rely on their assurances, to write the preface, arguing that it was essential to save the German labor movement from anarchist and allegedly adventurist deviations. Engels died the same year he wrote the preface, and with him went his protestations at the revision of the document, whose most radical passages were doctored to appease the Reichstag which was then considering a new anti-socialist law.⁶ With Engels buried and Marx long departed, the theoretical leadership of the international socialist movement passed over to the social democrat, Karl Kautsky, who still proclaimed revolutionary Marxism even as he led the way on a reformist path. Luxemburg had already come into conflict with Kautsky when he suppressed her insurrectionary article on mass strikes for the sake of party unity and parliamentary grace. Her critique was typically direct: "Marxism [under Kautsky's leadership] became a cloak for all the hesitations, for all the turnings-away from the actual revolutionary class struggle, for every halfway measure which condemned German Social Democracy, the labor movement in general, and also the trade unions, to vegetate within the framework and on the terrain of capitalist society without any serious attempt to shake or throw that society out of gear". With Engels' text wielded with biblical status, Kautsky, "[t]he official guardian of the temple of Marxism", attempted to neuter the revolutionary movement in the name of Marxist orthodoxy. For Luxemburg, the craven capitulation of the German social-democratic movement in the face of German Imperialism in 1914 for short-term political gain was the inevitable result of Kautsky's reformist strategies.⁷

Luxemburg's critique of both Bernstein and Kautsky's social-democratic vision found favour with George Lukács in his early writings. Both attacked 'scientific' Marxism for starting from the assumption that society progresses mechanically and teleologically, and for imagining a definite point of time, external to and unconnected with the class struggle, in which the class struggle would be won. For Lukács, the a-historical view of vulgar Marxism, preoccupied with the isolated 'facts' of the specialist and reified disciplines of bourgeois political economy, lost the *active* dialectical side of Marx's thought wherein theory and action, subject and history could be realised in praxis. Instead, the scientific view preached a contemplative, still ideological faith in scientific progress: a theory of 'evolution' without revolution; of 'natural development' without conflict. Drawing productively from Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, Lukács argued that the scientific view had been seduced by the fetishistic character of economic forms under capitalism. Such forms isolated the various interacting elements of



capitalist relations and masked the contradictory and hierarchical relations between men which lay behind the processes of production: “the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labour which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers”.⁸ For Marx, these formal objective conditions, if understood subjectively and in their *totality* by the working class, would provide the conditions for their eventual emancipation. Far from a static or objective scientific account of history, Marx’s theory, famously given expression in the eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*, was an endlessly relevant call to engagement: “[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”.

Beyond the economic fatalism that has always been intimately bound up with the social-democratic project, and which has always left it to arrive on the scene of struggle too late, Rosa Luxemburg saw in the early days of the Russian revolution, especially in the explosion of mass strikes, direct democracy and the formation of soviets (workers councils), the “will to power of socialism”. While Kautsky declared the conditions for revolution “unripe”, Luxemburg viewed the unbridled radicalism of the Russian workers as an exemplary example, evidence that “the masses do not exist to be schoolmastered”. Yet even as she extolled the power of the soviets for crippling Tsarism and for the transformation of all existing class relationships, as early as 1918 Luxemburg condemned the Bolshevik Party for its suppression of direct democracy and the will of the soviets. Despite the Bolshevik Party’s public condemnation of social democracy it would adopt, in crude and distorted form, many of the major flaws of the scientific determinism so typical of orthodox Marxism. Luxemburg, murdered by order of the German Social Democratic Party, would not live to see the results.

The Russian Tragedy

“The mirage of Leninism today has no basis outside the various Trotskyist tendencies, where the conflation of the proletarian subject with a hierarchical organisation grounded in ideology has stolidly survived all the evidence of that conflation’s real consequences.”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Despite Alexander Berkman’s initial euphoria at being placed in the epicenter of potentially “the most significant fact in the whole known history of mankind”, his analysis upon leaving Russia was that the revolution had already been “done to death” by an authoritarian, dictatorial Bolshevik Party. Like Luxemburg, Berkman saw the significance of the Russian Revolution in the movement that lay behind the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” For Berkman, the initial power of the revolution lay in the unity of the revolutionary forces against the provisional, reformist Kerensky government. Bolsheviks, Anarchists, the left of the Social Revolutionary Party, revolutionary emigrants, and freed political prisoners had all worked together leading up to October 1917 to achieve a revolutionary goal: “[t]hey took possession of the land, the factories, mines, mills, and the tools of production. They got rid of the more hated and dangerous representatives of government and authority. In their grand revolutionary outburst they destroyed every form of political and economic oppression”. Immediately after the revolution, as a means to establish direct democracy and workers’ control over the means of production, the organised labour movement formed shop and factory committees coordinated by the soviets.

Berkman, however, would soon watch in horror as the Bolshevik Party declared the autonomy of the shop committees superfluous, filled the labour unions with its own representatives, and banned all public press except Bolshevik publications. Under Bolshevik authority the workers would now be bound by the industrial, scientific principles of productivity, with the shop committees subjected to the ideology of the ruling party. The hoped-for dictatorship of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie had swiftly moved under Bolshevik rule to a

dictatorship *over* the proletariat. The soviets’ fate under the Party was sealed: “[a]ll who interpreted the Social Revolution as, primarily, the self-determination of the masses, the introduction of free, non-governmental Communism – they are henceforth doomed to persecution”. The brief era of direct democracy was soon crushed under the weight of bureaucratic authority: “[t]he peoples’ Soviets are transformed into sections of the Ruling Party; the Soviet institutions become soulless offices, mere transmitters of the will of the center to the periphery”.⁹

Under the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921, which encouraged private enterprise to trade for profit, the position of the worker was returned to that of the worker under capitalism: “[t]he city worker today, under the new economic policy, is in exactly the same position as in any other capitalistic country. ... The worker is paid wages, and must pay for his necessities – as in any country”.¹⁰ The conditions experienced by the Russian worker replicated the worker’s fate under other capitalist regimes of private ownership: “[s]hops, mines, factories and mills have already been leased to capitalists. Labour demands have a tendency to curtail profits; they interfere with the ‘orderly processes’ of business. And as for strikes, they handicap production, paralyse industry. Shall not the interests of Capital and Labour be declared solidaric in Bolshevik Russia?”.¹¹ To cement these policies, the 10th Congress of the Communist Party of Russia in 1921 put a decisive veto on workers’ opposition when the demand to turn the management of the industries over to the proletariat was officially outlawed. The outcome of these authoritarian policies was seen in the infamous crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion by the Red Army and later in the rise of Stalin: “[h]ere with us – or out there with a gun in your hand – but not as an opposition. We have had enough of opposition”.¹²

Berkman was not alone in his analysis. As early as 1920 in his *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, Anton Pannekoek argued from within the communist movement that the Russian state had developed into state capitalism. The suppression of direct democracy and the soviets in the name of scientific Marxism led to a system of production which Pannekoek, with the benefit of hindsight in 1948, articulated quite precisely: “[t]he system of production developed in Russia is State Socialism. It is organized production with the state as universal employer, master of the entire production apparatus. The workers are master of the means of production no more than under Western capitalism. They receive their wages and are exploited by the State as the only mammoth capitalist. So the name State capitalism can be applied with precisely the same meaning”. In Guy Debord’s later phrase, the Russian bureaucracy resolved itself into “a substitute ruling class for the market economy”.

For Debord, Lenin was simply a faithful Kautskyist who applied orthodox Marxism to the prevailing conditions in Russia. This ideology, asserting that its whole truth resided in objective economic progress overseen by the ideological representatives of the working class, could only ever reflect the specialisation and division of labour inherent within the Party hierarchy: “[i]n consequence the speciality of the profession in question became that of *total science management*”.¹³ By usurping the name of revolution for a system of workers’ exploitation, Leninism and Bolshevism made the name of communism an object of hatred and aversion among workers and foes alike. For Debord, the moment when Bolshevism triumphed for itself marks the inauguration of the modern spectacle, the point at which a false banner of working-class opposition was advanced. It was the moment when “*an image of the working class arose in radical opposition to the working class itself*”. The unity that Lenin demanded masked the class divisions and alienating working conditions on which the capitalist mode of production is based: “[w]hat obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what separates them from it. ... What pushes for greater rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What creates society’s abstract power also creates its concrete unfreedom”.¹⁴

To the detriment of the working class, the orthodox Marxist line in its Bolshevik form held sway over the international labour movement up until the early 1950s, until the mutinous rebellions against Russian bureaucracy in East Berlin and Hungary helped put the questions of alienation and wage-labour, which lay at the heart of the production process, back on the agenda of class struggle.

Workerism And The Return Of Class Agency

“From the working-class point of view, political struggle is that which tends consciously to place in crisis the economic mechanism of capitalist development.”

Mario Tronti, cited in *The Society of the Spectacle*

Tronti was a key figure within the strand of Italian Marxism known as Operaismo (‘workerism’) that emerged in the early 1960s as a response to the conservatism of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Franco Piperno, associated with Operaismo, captured the general perception of the PCI within the movement when he identified the Party as: “the working class articulation of capitalist social organization”. As opposed to the term ‘workerism’ in its narrow sense (evoking the industrial proletariat at the expense of other social groups), Operaismo was concerned with the heterogeneous, ever-changing dynamic of *class composition* in contrast to the eternal, unchanging working-class subject of the Party. As its most famous proponent, Antonio Negri, noted, Operaismo was initiated as an attempt to reply politically to the crisis of the Italian labour movement in the 1950s in the aftermath of World War II. For many workers – after their prominent role in the struggles against Mussolini and the Wehrmacht – the future held out the promise of socialism, or, at the very least, major improvements in work conditions and pay alongside more participation in the production process. Yet Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the PCI, had other ideas. Above all, Togliatti sought a programme to unite the broad mass of people against the group of capitalists yoked to fascism. The decisive arena for political gains, according to Togliatti, was in formal, parliamentary politics where accommodation with other groups was deemed a necessity. The quest for these political objectives, within the Constituent Assembly and the Constitution, led inexorably to the subordination of working-class antagonism and the struggle for fundamental economic change.

Togliatti, saw productivity as the path to Italy’s salvation: the resumption of economic growth within the framework of private ownership would ensure the construction of a “strong democracy”. As the “[t]rue children of the Comintern”, the PCI were willing to concede shop-floor organisation for unitary economic reconstruction through “the restoration of the managerial prerogative” within the factories. Hostage to nationalist ideology and private forms of management technique, the PCI facilitated the extraction of high levels of exploitation from the workers by placing labour discipline and productivity at the top of their agenda. As one Fiat worker put it when Togliatti and Christian Democrat leader De Gaspari came to visit his factory:

“[t]hey both argued exactly the same thing; the need to save the economy. ... We’ve got to work hard because Italy’s on her knees, we’ve been bombarded by the Americans ... but don’t worry because if we produce, if we work hard, in a year or two we’ll all be fine. ... So the PCI militants inside the factory set themselves the political task of producing to save the



national economy, and the workers were left without a party”.

Such compromise had predictable results. In 1947, the historic left was expelled from the De Gaspari government and an intense regime of accumulation was established based on production for international markets, underpinned by low wages, low costs and high productivity. Workplace organisers, disorientated and disillusioned by PCI policy, were mercilessly attacked as Italian capital sought labour docility through the disciplinary law of value. This was the context for the development of autonomist Marxism, which in its most militant sense expressed itself as a radical new rationality counter-posed to the ‘objective’ occult rationality of modern productive processes. Raniero Panzieri’s ‘The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx versus the Objectivists’ written in the early 1960s, was, according to Sandro Maccini, “the first demystifying analysis of technological rationality” produced by an Italian Marxist. Against the ruling PCI, Panzieri argued that the struggle for socialism must come from below in the form of “total democracy”. New class formations were required in the economic sphere, “the real source of power”, so that the “democratic road” would not become “either a belated adherence to reformism, or simply a cover for a dogmatic conception of socialism”. Union work, he said, had devoted itself for too long to political questions “with a capital P” whilst ignoring the reality of changing work conditions.

Togliatti, and others within the CPI, following the outline of orthodox Marxism, had led the Italian left to believe that productivity and technological progress somehow stood apart from class antagonism. Instead of accepting the reigning production relations as ultimately rational, beneficial and eternal, however, Panzieri, returned in earnest to Marx (an unusual step at that time for a ‘Marxist’) to theorize machinery as accumulated ‘dead labour’, fully determined by capital which utilised technological development to further the exploitation and subordination of ‘living labour’. Elements of the Italian left, in thrall to social democracy, were obsessed by the productivist idea that technology could liberate humankind from the limitations of environment and surroundings. But for Panzieri, these elements passed over the crucial question of the ownership of the workplace and the role mechanisation and automation played in increasing the authoritarian structure of factory management and organisation.

Panzieri, criticised the Leninist belief that socialist planning was entirely neutral and that science and technique were socially disinterested forces. Instead, for Panzieri, planning was a form of “social despotism” which hid the social relationships of domination and exploitation behind the language of bourgeois political economy. Denied of this understanding by a blind ideological adherence to scientific Marxism, the consequence of Lenin’s policies in the USSR was, for Panzieri, “the repetition of capitalist forms in the relations of production both at the factory level and at the level of overall social production”. The autonomists’ great contribution to debates around the negation of capitalism was to re-instate, after decades of suppression in the name of productivity, the idea of *alienation* and antagonism at the heart of the production process, positing a radical rupture from the ‘golden chains’ of the wage-labor relation in Italy and beyond. News also travelled from abroad. In the aftermath of May ’68 in France, Massimo Cacciari would state that liberation *from* labour, not merely the liberation *of* labour, had become the key aim of revolutionary politics. When young Renault workers in France, during May ’68, demanded



a minimum wage of 1000 francs per month (an exorbitant and impossible demand), Bologna and Daghini saw that the demand, which threatened to “blow up” the labour market, was symptomatic of a desire on behalf of the workers, “to negate their own figure as producers”. The “strategy of refusal” first posited by Mario Tronti in 1965 was now a widespread actuality.

Mai ’68

“Forward to a communist society without capital or waged work!”

10 May Group, 1968

When Rene Resiel of the *Enragés* put forward his demands at the student occupation of the Sorbonne University in 1968 – “the abolition of class society, wage-labour, the spectacle, and survival” – he gave voice to the theory of the Situationist International and its radical critique of everything. Against the reasonable demands put forward by the emissaries of social democracy, the SI and their followers exhibited the greatest of contempt for the “pseudo thinkers of details” and the maximum disrespect for all those who would attempt to find a concord with capital within the left parties. The unacceptable demand became the chief tool of breaking with all the dead generations of the past. Work, for so long the ABC of social-democratic thinking, duly came in for a kicking. In 1967, Raoul Vaneigem declared his opposition to the wage-labour relation thus: “every call for productivity under the conditions chosen by capitalist and Soviet economics is a call to slavery”. With work – “the punishment for poverty” – widely defined as “hard labour”, society as a “racket”, and trade unionists as “cops”, Vaneigem argued that every appeal for productivity is always an appeal from above at the behest of the commodity. In the “post-scarcity” era, the alleged imperative of production under the former imperative of survival was no longer valid: “from now on people want to live, not just survive”.

The role of the SI in May ’68 is deeply disputed, but it is clear that the theory of the spectacle, associated first and foremost with Debord, held considerable sway. Debord’s writing, which reworked the ideas of Hegel, Marx and Lukács, among many others, borrowed deeply from Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, whereby in the production and exchange of commodities the relations *between people* assume the form of relations *between things*. In this he returned to early Lukács who had engaged in a similar project in the late 1910s. In order to produce commodities for exchange, the workers’ labour and what they produce come to dominate their life. Commodity relations take on a mysterious force: the products of labour are turned against the worker, appearing now as an autonomous, alienating power, a “social hieroglyphic” which elides the human labour that produced the commodity. While Marx concentrated on alienation within production, asserting that at least the worker had access to non-alienated relations outside of work, the SI argued that the restless expansionism of

capitalism and its need to secure new markets had extended commodity relations, and thus alienation, into all areas of social experience. No longer a mere adjunct to production, consumption is integral to the circulation of commodities, the accumulation of capital, and the survival of the economic system. For Debord, extending Marx’s original thesis beyond production, modern society had produced The Society of the Spectacle, a “vast accumulation of spectacles” and a concrete inversion of life which created a social relationship between people mediated by images. The SI project embodied a refusal to co-operate with this logic of commodity exchange and a radical negation of the capitalist relations that reproduce the abstract, alienating equivalence of the spectacle.

Much of the language, tactics and expressions of the events of May ’68 seemed to affirm the theories of the SI: “[t]hat the increasing modernization of capitalism entails the proletarianisation of an ever-widening portion of the population; and that as the world of commodities extends its power to all aspects of life, it produces everywhere an extension and deepening of the forces that negate it”. The first signs of what was to come emerged from the student milieu of Strasbourg University in November 1966, when students in collaboration with the SI produced ‘Of Student Poverty Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, and a Modest Proposal for its Remedy’. The pamphlet, which should be essential reading for the student of today, ridiculed student privileges and the illusory forms of rebellion adopted as specialised ‘roles’ within the milieu. Students must understand one thing, the pamphlet declared: “... there are no ‘special’ student interests in revolution. Revolution will be made by *all* the victims of encroaching repression and the tyranny of the market”. Hastily translated into more than ten languages, the pamphlet encouraged widespread discussion of Situationist analysis. The publication of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* in 1967 further intensified these discussions. New student agitations persisted throughout the first half of the year including the formation of *Enragés* and the *Mouvement du 22 Mars*, two groups which would have a significant impact on the May events. Yet far from being a mere student revolt, the May events sustained a general wildcat strike of ten million workers alongside a critical position that encompassed every aspect of capitalist life.

In terms of the economic and political analysis of orthodox Marxism, the events were simply unthinkable, yet the general wildcat strike, with three weeks of action, brought the country to a halt. On 19 May, *The Observer* called the revolution “a total onslaught on modern industrial society”. It went on to describe the contemporary conditions: “[i]n a staggering end to a staggering week, the commanding heights of the French economy are falling to the workers. All over France a calm, obedient, irresistible wave of working-class power is engulfing factories, dockyards, mines, railway depots, bus garages, postal sorting offices. Trains, mail, air-flights are virtually at a standstill. Production lines in chemicals, steel, metalworking, textiles, shipbuilding and a score of industries are ground to a halt. ... Many a baffled and impotent manager is being held prisoner in his own carpeted office”. Rene Vignet’s highly subjective *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May ’68* left the best general account of the events from a Situationist perspective:

“Everyday life, suddenly rediscovered, became the



center of all possible conquests. People who had always worked in the now-occupied offices declared that they could no longer live as before, not even a little better than before. ... Capitalised time stopped. Without any trains, metro, cars, or work the strikers recaptured the time so sadly lost in factories, on motorways, in front of the TV. People strolled, dreamed, learned how to live. Desires began to become, little by little, reality."

The May '68 events presented impossible demands irreducible to higher wages or the details of workplace organisation. The radical critique of existing capitalist relations was evidenced throughout the events: e.g. the Schlumberger factory workers who stated that their demands "had nothing to do with wages" before going on strike for the highly exploited workers at the nearby Danone factory. Similarly, the workers at the FNAC chain of stores declared: "[w]e, the workers of the FNAC stores, have gone on strike not for the satisfaction of our particular demands but to participate in a movement of ten million intellectual and manual workers. ... We are taking part in this movement (which is not about quantitative demands) because ten million workers don't stop work at the same time for a pay rise of F6.30 or 100 centimes, but to challenge the legitimacy of the whole leadership of the country and all the structures of society". The Censier worker-student Action Committee likewise declared: "[i]t's not a case of demanding more of this or more of that. It's a case of demanding something else altogether. ... In this way the *totality* of demands will appear, and their incalculable number will produce the evidence that the capitalist regime cannot really satisfy the least of them". In a strident document signed by 'Some postmen' (usurping beautifully the status of 'roles' endemic to the specialized division of labour under capitalism) the postmen stated with exemplary simplicity that, "open struggle against the ruling class" would be the condition of their emancipation: "[t]he renowned participation that power can afford us is in fact only integration into its system of exploitation. We have fuck all to do with helping them with their profits".

The reaction to all this revolutionary activity by the established unions is shrouded in infamy. Vienet succinctly described the trade-union counter-offensive: "[t]he trade-union strategy had a single goal: to defeat the strike. In order to do this the unions, with a long strike-breaking tradition, set out to reduce a vast general strike to a series of isolated strikes at the individual enterprise level ... the union leadership assumed the task of reducing the entire movement to a program of strictly professional demands". The Communist Party's trade union, the biggest in France, meanwhile played the heaviest counter-revolutionary role in the May events: "[i]t was precisely because the CGT had the most powerful organization and could administer the largest dose of illusions that it appeared all the more obviously as the major enemy of the strike".¹⁵ While the workers, six million by 20 May, soon to be ten million, voted for a perpetuation of the general wildcat strike and the occupation of the factories, the leadership of the CFDT and CGT, the main union organisations in France, were agreed on the basic social-democratic principle of the necessity for negotiations with state and management.

The result of these meetings, triumphantly produced by Seguy, the leader of the CGT, on 27 May at the rebellious Renault-Billancourt factory was the 'Grenelle agreement', concluded by the timeworn social-democratic triumvirate: the unions, the government and the employers. The agreement would raise wages 7% and lift the legally guaranteed minimum wage from 2.22 to 3 francs. The days lost in the strike would not be paid until they were made up in overtime. Given that "[a] higher percentage of French workers than ever before, across every sector and in every region of the country, had been on strike for the longest time in French history",¹⁶ the poverty of the 'gains' agreed by the union leaders was dwarfed by the scale of the movement. The workers knowing full well "that such 'benefits' would be taken back in kind with imminent price rises"¹⁷ famously rained down insults on Seguy and rejected the agreement. The unions learned their lesson. The refusal of the agreement was met with an acceleration of integration by the CGT:



rigged ballots, false information (e.g. informing individual railway stations that the other stations had gone back to work), prevention of secondary picketing, and organised train delays which prevented workers' solidarity. By these methods, and acting in collusion with the hated national riot police (CRS), the CGT were able to bring about the resumption of work almost everywhere. Ultimately, the CGT and the CFDT proved themselves perfect instruments for the integration of the working class into the capitalist system of exploitation.

For Vienet, the future for the radical left would now involve an unequivocal fight against the reformism of its own unions. He criticised many of the groups in May '68 for remaining entrenched in their own stale ideology, drawing proud experience from past working-class defeats and the traditions of the 'dead generations': "[t]hey seemed to perceive nothing new in the occupation movement. They had seen it all before. They were blasé. Their knowing discouragement looked forward to nothing but defeat, so that they could publish the consequences as they had so often done before". Yet May '68 for all that it was defeated, astounded almost everyone by its very existence in modern capitalist conditions. That the unthinkable took place at all suggests that it can take place again.

Times change

"...the revolutionary organisation must learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle."

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Capital's response to the show of strength by working-class organizations in the sixties and early seventies marked a shift to what has broadly been termed 'post-fordist' or 'flexible' modes of accumulation, a shift characterised by increasingly flexible labour processes and markets, intensified geographical mobility of capital flows, rapid shifts in consumption practices, and the erosion/destruction of Fordist-Keynesian modes of labour regulation and control. Beyond a few notable exceptions such as the miners' strike, the working-class in the advanced capitalist countries has been in disarray ever since, even if struggles elsewhere, in South America, India, and China for instance suggest that global capital might meet its nemesis in an ever-expanding global proletariat. But if the fight over the global workplace is not just to become, in Panzieri's expression, "either a belated adherence to reformism, or simply a cover for a dogmatic conception of socialism", then we might do well to return to, and update, Rosa Luxemburg, who brilliantly theorised the inexorable destruction immanent to capitalism's incessant drive for self-expansion, and whose intense opposition to reformist compromise suggests a pro-revolutionary, fiercely anti-capitalist alternative to contemporary capitalism.

In her speech to the Founding Congress of the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League) in December 1918, Rosa Luxemburg argued that the Erfurt Program, "the founding document of the Second International", authored by Karl Kautsky in 1891, had imprisoned German Social Democracy within a hopelessly reformist paradigm. By placing immediate minimum aims (parliamentary reform) in the tactical foreground, while relegating maximum gains (the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism) to the misty realms of a utopian future, the Erfurt Program created a new dichotomy within the movement. The tactics of piecemeal attrition were now *opposed* to the overthrow of

capitalism; and minimum and maximum aims were presented in separate, distinct realms instead of combined in a productive dialectical tension. By defining themselves in direct opposition to the Erfurt Program, Luxemburg and the Spartacus League expressed their profound disagreement with the strategies of the dominant reformist German Social Democratic movement: "[f]or us there is no minimal and no maximal program; socialism is one and the same thing: this is the minimum we have to realize today".

This tension, between minimum and maximum demands, falsely separated in the Erfurt Program of 1891, suggests a theoretical stratagem that might avoid the illusory hopes of reformist practice, while circumventing the isolating, and isolated, ghetto of 'more radical than thou' Puritanism. Raoul Vaneigem's advice to those seeking a way out of capitalism, prior to May '68, offers a way of understanding which acknowledges that none of us are born 'radical', that solidarity will be central to any mass movement, while at the same time challenging the stasis of purely reformist measures: "it is impossible to go wrong so long as we never forget that the only proper treatment for ourselves and for others is to make ever more radical demands". One such demand, if we are really serious about an exit from capitalism, should return us to the continuing resonance of Guy Debord's salutary statement: 'Never Work!'

Notes

1. 'The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation', in 'Karl Marx: Selected Writings', Oxford University Press, 2001, p.365.
2. Ibid, p.522.
3. Ibid, p.519.
4. Ibid, p.520.
5. Pannekoek, A, 'Workers Councils', AK Press, 2003, p.8
6. Luxemburg, R, 'Our Program and the Political Situation' (1918). At this time, Rosa Luxemburg did not know the full details of the falsification of the document. These only came to light later on. "It was not Engels who wrote the seemingly revisionist views cited here. The Party leaders, arguing that because the Reichstag was considering passage of a new anti-socialist law it would be dangerous to give them grounds to attack Social Democracy, eliminated all the passages in the Preface which seemed too radical. Engels protested, but died before any changes could be made."
7. See Luxemburg's 'The Junius Pamphlet' (The Crisis in German Social Democracy).
8. Ibid, p.6.
9. Berkman, 'A Russian Tragedy', Phoenix Press, p.40.
10. Ibid, p.29.
11. Ibid, p.31.
12. Cited in, Debord, G, 'The Society of the Spectacle', Zone Books, p.72.
13. Ibid, p.68.
14. Ibid, p.46.
15. Plant, S, 'The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age', Routledge, p.85.
16. Ross, K, 'May '68 and its Afterlives', The University of Chicago Press, p.68.
17. Vienet, R, 'The Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68, Rebel Press, p.92.

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