



Because We have
NO FUCKING
LIMITS.

Everything Must Go!

The Abolition of Value

Bruno Astarian
Gilles Dauvé

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Everything Must Go:
the abolition of value

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2015

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Bruno Astarian

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Foreword

Are the times a-changin'?

Well... yes.

On a historical scale, a new alternative was born out of the crisis of the stormy 1960s-70s: in short, proletarian “anti-work” activity brought with it an altogether different perspective.

The emergence of this ground-breaking paradigm, however, has proved more of a sign of times to come than an epoch-making landmark. The social earthquake was powerful enough to bring a new proletarian subjectivity to the fore, but it was not strong enough to reach a point of insurrection. What it did achieve was the unsettling of certainties inherited from Marx via the (councilist, Bordiguist... whatever) Communist Left.

Until the 1970s, communist theory was built around a set of measures to be applied once the proletarian insurrection had taken power. Despite contrasts and oppositions, the fundamentals were fairly similar: dispossessing the capitalists of their property and imposing self-managed and planned work on everyone.

This agenda did not become obsolete because theorists refuted it, but because a sizeable active minority of the proletarians reacted against work and practically dismissed the programme of a work-focused and production-centred society, even in the form of communal cooperative work, i.e. of wage-labour freed from capital.

Such was the undercurrent that caused people like us to reject some of the Communist Left tenets, including their contemporary variants. For example, because of ecological awareness, people now rarely equate the “transition period” with a huge growth of heavy industry productive forces, but quite a few radicals still have no objection to the persistence of key capitalist categories like money and work, as long as these realities come under true adequate proletarian or popular control.

This was the background against which what is called *communisation* came about. What it means is a revolution (regarding an historical break, not gradual peaceful evolution) that creates communism—not its *preconditions*. Wage-labour, work-time as cut off from the rest of our life, money, property, State agencies as mediators of social life and conflicts, all of these must go, and not just be run by collectives: they must be replaced by communal, moneyless, profitless, Stateless forms of life. Social change will take time but will start from Day One: in the very early days, the way the insurgents will relate to each other, treat workplaces, organize street-fighting, and feed themselves will determine the future unfolding of events.

It took a while for this perspective to sink in, and it will take more time for mist and confusion to clear. Questioning some of the basics of communist theory runs into supposed common sense as well as against long-held revolutionary principles. The notion of communism as a *non*-economy, that people would produce things but there would not be a communist *mode of production*, these ideas are both essential and difficult to accept. To get the message across as best we can, this book is made of three parts that complement each other.

First, what could a **communist insurrection** be? The current crisis raises the issue of what a revolutionary exit from the crisis might consist of. The proletariat is the first (and last) exploited class in history whose exploitation periodically results in the impossibility of getting a job and calls into question its most immediate reproduction. When the capitalist crisis breaks out and deepens, the proletariat is forced to rise up in order to find another social form capable of restoring its socialisation and immediate reproduction.

Secondly, the main difference with the 19th century and most of the 20th is that it has now become impossible to conceive of communism as a society of *associated producers*. For this to be

grounded on relevant hypotheses, we cannot dispense with **revisiting the Marxian theory of value**. “Back to Marx” comes with re-assessing Marx. We can no longer regard the first chapter of *Capital* as the founding stone of a theory of value adequate to our time. The concept of “abstract labour” was theorised by communists who could think of nothing better than to project into communism the same work as the one done by the proletariat—albeit freed from exploitation. For them, work was an inevitable human activity, an organic exchange with nature. Therefore they invented at the heart of work an abstract dimension, allegedly the source of value, which communist planning could get rid of. It’s time to understand that abolishing value implies abolishing work.

Lastly, though this presentation may sound very lofty, this is the real world we are talking about. From bicycles to doors to coffee to child-rearing, everything relates to ways of life now determined by capital/wage labour relations. This is why our last part **broadens the field** to a number of vital and daily issues, so-called small ones as well as big ones. “Nothing human is alien to me,” Marx used to say (quoting an ex-slave turned playwright two centuries B.C.). Just as we need not be afraid to venture into abstraction, equally there is no harm in a dose of utopia. For instance, thinking about how to integrate sensory pleasure into productive activity can help us envisage not just the abolition of *work* but also the superseding of *art* as we know it. The same approach is certainly valid for family, sport, science, urban planning, and other similar historical constructs.

Ultimately, the theoretician talks about herself and himself.

B.A., G.D.
September 2015

Part One

CRISIS ACTIVITY AND COMMUNISATION (2010)

Bruno Astarian

INTRODUCTION

The current crisis raises the issue of what could be a revolutionary exit from the crisis. Crisis is generally the crucible in which communist theory is forged, in its specificity as neither a science nor politics, neither economics nor philosophy, but a category of its own. What makes theory unique is that the class that upholds it is also unique: the proletariat is the first (and last) exploited class in history, whose exploitation periodically results in the impossibility of working and calls into question its most immediate reproduction. When the capitalist crisis breaks out, the proletariat is forced to rise up in order to find another social form capable of restoring its socialization and immediate reproduction. Throughout the history of capitalism, this alternative form was called *communism*, even though the content attributed to the word varied greatly depending on the period. However, communist theory has always been characterized as the

iterative movement between analysis and critique of the capitalist society and projection of the exit from the capitalist crisis brought about by the proletariat. The communist society projected at each period had its own specific features derived from the historical conformation of the relationship between capital and proletariat. In other words, the notion of communism has a history, just as the class relationship itself does. The invariance of the fundamental content of the capitalist social relationship (extraction of surplus value) does not exclude its historical embodiments.

Until now, what characterized communist theory was its construction around a *program* of measures to be applied once the proletarian insurrection has taken power. This general formulation differed depending on the period. The Manifesto program (nationalizations) is not the same as that of the Paris Commune (direct collective democracy), which in turn differs from that of the Russian and German revolutions in 1917-1918 (workers' councils). Despite these differences, however, the principles are the same: in one way or another, the outcome of the insurrection to which the proletariat is compelled by the capitalist crisis is the seizure of political power and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Whether democratic (the councils) or autocratic (the party), the dictatorship of the proletariat always amounts to dispossessing the capitalists of their property and imposing work on everyone. At that point begins the *transition period* during which society must move from the reign of necessity to that of liberty. Such is the *programmatic* schema of the communist revolution. It is obsolete.

The aim of this essay is to present the *communizing* alternative to the programmatic schema. On the scale of history, this is a new alternative, since its birth can be dated to the crisis in the 60s-70s.

I. Crisis and crisis activity*

The crisis has to be considered as a social phenomenon, not an economic one, as a crisis of the social relationship between capital and the proletariat. When the crisis of the capitalist social relationship deepens and turns insurrectional, the proletariat's activity changes qualitatively from what it was in the ordinary course of the class struggle, which never stops even in times of prosperity. *Crisis activity* is what I call this peculiar form of the proletariat's struggle in an insurrection. It is in this very specific moment that the whole issue of communism has its roots, because it is here and only here that the question of the link between a capitalist society (in crisis) and communism (as the overcoming of the labour/capital contradiction) arises *socially*. And it is from here that the communisation of the society will eventually start. In the history of the proletariat, crisis activity appears in the 19th century Parisian barricades as well as in today's frequent riots. In these moments, one can understand the specificity of this notion. If the current crisis unfolds in insurrectionary phases, the crisis activity will of course have specific traits marking the historical level reached by the contradiction of the classes. And the limits of the current riots will have to be transcended, quantitatively and qualitatively, for a real possibility of communisation to take form.

I.1 With the crisis of the reciprocal presupposition of the classes, automatic social reproduction disappears

In the capitalist mode of production as in the other modes of production, the classes of labour and property presuppose each other. With the capitalist mode of production, this reciprocal presupposition is immediately stronger due to the fact that the

*All quotations are from Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*

proletariat, as soon as it stops working, is totally separated from the means of production. In the precapitalist modes of production, this is not the case, or is only partially. The reciprocal presupposition of the classes is even more tightly knit when capital has established its real domination over labour, for then the entirety of the proletariat's life is directly controlled by capital. For example, capital has stripped labour of its skills, and handicraft is no solution for all those proletarians that the crisis has left out of work. In farming the situation is the same. In the industrialized countries, agriculture is purely capitalistic, and only the most marginal proletarians will attempt going back to the country, ending up close to a situation of slum life. Likewise in the developing countries, the transformation of the countryside prevents those who left it to find a job in towns from returning when they are unemployed. This is what happened with the Asian crisis in 1998 and in China today.

The interdependence of the two classes is today tighter than it has ever been. This is another way of saying that the proletariat cannot save the jobs imperiled by capital without saving capital itself, i.e. working harder for less pay. As skilled work left its hands to become incorporated into fixed capital, the proletariat can no longer claim, as under the formal domination, that it could simply take over the means of production and produce without the capitalists. This claim was illusory even at the time of skilled trades. Today, even skilled workers know that most of the technical-material conditions of their activity are incorporated into the machines, computers, or vehicles that are their means of labour. In other words, the function of property today is no longer—assuming it ever was—to enjoy the resulting income, but to manage a system of production and reproduction that developed precisely to escape the control of the working class, completely and definitively. Even after eliminating all the dividend-cashing capitalists, a *working class* revolution that envisions only the reappropriation of the means of production could not avoid entrusting the management of those

means to a particular category of workers who would become the collective capitalist. Today, self-management is a pipe dream for middle managers. The reciprocal presupposition of the classes tightly links them together around an enormous mass of fixed capital. This preempts any notion of a revolutionary outcome of the crisis that would affirm the working class and work against the capitalists, who would be eliminated. If the proletariat is to abolish capital, this will only be possible by abolishing wage labour, the fixed capital that dictates its content to work and work *itself*.

As long as the capitalist society reproduces itself normally, the proletariat's activity derives automatically and directly from the succession of different phases of the cycle¹: once the labour force is sold, the content of work itself—followed by rest and reconstitution of the labour force—are directly dictated by capital. Far from a voluntary and chosen act, the sale of the labor force itself is imposed on the worker as soon as his wage has been consumed, i.e. immediately after the end of the cycle.

All these automatisms* in the social reproduction disappear when the crisis explodes. Then, the proletariat's activity is *forced to turn to invention*. In the insurrectional crisis, the relationship of reciprocal presupposition becomes confrontation. Work and exploitation stop massively, and there is no more negotiation for the exchange between labour and capital. In this confrontation, the capitalist class tries by all means to force the proletarians back to

¹This does not imply that there is no struggle any more between capital and the proletariat. This struggle is constant and is part of the continuous adjustment of the relationship of exploitation. The insurrectional phases of struggle differ from this continuum by the fact that the proletariat posits itself as a revolutionary subject.

*“Automatism” or “Automatic reproduction” means that, in periods of economic prosperity, the successive phases of capital's reproduction (production, realization, and re-investment of surplus-value) follow each other smoothly. This means especially that the proletariat doesn't encounter problems selling his labor force in the labor market.

work for a reduced wage, whereas the proletarians seek to impose a standard of living higher than the one they rejected when they rose up against capital. This insurrectional moment—we will come back to it—is the moment of the greatest subjective intensity of the proletariat's activity. History shows us how the *crisis activity* of the proletariat has been able, in each period, to invent previously unthought of social forms in order to confront the danger it has to face in the crisis.

I.2 Proletarian individualisation in crisis activity

What we said about the automatism of the proletariat's reproduction during the prosperity of capital posits the class as coming before the individual: a person's class determines their behaviour. The modalities of labour subordination to capital leave the proletariat little liberty. It is free to sell its labour force or die, to take the bus or be late for work, to obey orders or get sacked, etc. At work, only collective labour produces commodities, not the personal labour of a particular proletarian. This general labour (cooperation) belongs to capital. As a result, class reproduction is only one moment in the reproduction of capital, and all the proletariat's activity presents itself as a vast massified routine.

This is precisely what breaks up when crisis turns to insurrection. Nothing that the capitalists propose is acceptable to the proletariat any longer. There is no objective standard of living that would constitute an intangible floor below which the proletariat would automatically rise up. History shows that the proletariat can accept abyssal poverty, but also that it sometimes refuses a lowering of its standard of living, even when the latter is seemingly no worse than other attacks by capital. The parameters of this sudden shift from submission to insurrection cannot be determined in advance.

In opposition to what goes on during prosperity, there are no automatism in an insurrection. Proletarians themselves have to invent the way to resocialise among themselves to confront capital.

An interactive process develops among proletarians, and the more their individualisation is advanced, the more intense it is. Whether the subject is building barricades around working-class areas in Paris (in 1848 for example), the Kiel sailors' mutiny in 1918, or the destruction in downtown Athens by young Greeks after one of them was murdered by the police, the insurrection starts each time at an individual level. By word or deed, there has to be a few proletarians to start. Some women had to give the alarm and try to prevent Thiers' army from seizing the Garde Nationale cannons for the Commune to start. Nobody gave orders, because nobody would have found reasons to obey. The ways in which an insurrection starts and develops are always somewhat mysterious and seldom reported in history books. And, in any case, there would be no lessons for would-be leaders to draw because the circumstances are, in their details, unique every time. The only thing that counts is that, on each occasion, some proletarians, as individuals, had to take the initiative to cross the line of legality, overcoming fear so that the crisis activity could form itself in an interactive way. Without that crisis activity, no communist revolution is possible. The subject's individualisation is one of the necessary conditions of communism.

All the proletariat's insurrections in history show a strong development of proletarian individualisation in crisis activity. This individualisation derives directly from the crisis of capital, which calls into question class contingency. In today's conditions, individualisation in crisis activity will be reinforced by the fact that, even before its crisis, capital achieved a de-massification of the proletariat (precariousness, subcontracting...). But in crisis activity, individualisation of the subject in no way implies atomisation. On the contrary: it is on the basis of inter-individual interaction that the assembled class ceases to be a crowd (as in demos behind union banners), to become an active and conscious collective, able to act and react, to take action and to correct those actions, to debate internally, and to confront capitalists in the most suitable way. By

this interactivity of proletarian individuals, the proletariat forms an internal social relationship that is the foundation stone for the possibility of communism. However, this social relationship has to exist concretely.

I.3 Taking possession of capital elements, but not to work

The construction of crisis activity as a social relationship peculiar to the insurgent proletariat occurs when the insurgent proletariat confronts capital and takes possession of certain components (factories, inventories, vehicles, buildings, etc.—as long as this doesn't happen, the proletariat's activity remains at the level of meetings, demonstrations, and demands). When the proletariat's activity goes beyond that level, it crosses a qualitative threshold, which, then and only then, makes it appear as the possible subject of a communist revolution. This distinction lessens the importance of the proletariat's struggles in the daily movement of the class struggle.

The insurrectional uprising of the proletariat cannot escape taking possession of some elements of capital because its starting point is its total separation from society, facing it as capital. This process has been considered as the beginning of the expropriation of the expropriators, with a strong implication of a return to work under the workers' control and for their own benefit. This implication probably arises mainly from the ideology developed in proletarian politics based on skilled labour and the notion that capital steals the products from the worker, who could easily produce without the capitalists. What was already at the time an ideology has no basis in today's conditions.

It is a general rule that an uprising never seizes elements of capitalist property to relaunch production for its own account. I don't think that history offers a single example of a return to work by insurgent proletarians that doesn't take place within the counter-

revolutionary reversal of the uprising. Otto Geyrtonnex² thinks that the Spanish uprising of July 1936 is an exception: during the first days of the uprising,

some sections of the working class saw the need to take over the factories in order to arm themselves. Numerous metal workers used the tools that previously enslaved them to armour lorries. Bakers suddenly appeared [...], transportation and utilities were restarted [...] These activities were never motivated by the need to sell, by the production of value. What counted was the revolutionary struggle, and production meeting its needs was part of the same surge.

Actually, we only see here insurgents adapting lorries for the struggle and bakers occupying their boss' shop to bake the flour available in them. It is doubtful that real production circuits were in place during the first days of the insurrection. Concerning transportation, as soon as July 27 (only a week after the victory of the workers in Barcelona), the main CNT paper "called for workers both to return confiscated cars and return to work"³ What were the rebels doing with their cars? Fun, maybe: they "painted the initials of their organization on them and drove around Barcelona at dangerously high speeds... these militants caused numerous accidents"⁴. The same paper had to warn workers of sanctions if they were "illegitimately absent." What we see here is the painful return from insurrection to work. The fact that insurrections don't work is meaningful because insurrections are not simple fights against the police. They constitute a proper social relationship among proletarian seizing components of capital—the means of production—but not to work. Precapitalist insurrections attacked the landlord's belongings, not the means of production. With the massive accumulation of fixed capital, the current conditions of capitalist production reinforce the general

2 *Against the myth of self-management*, project, July 2009.

3 Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work*, Insubordinate Editions, sd, p. 91

4 *Ibid.* p. 1

rule: taking possession of elements of capital in the insurrections of our times obviously won't aim at reappropriating the means of production and at relaunching production by the workers involved. A complete transformation of production and the rest of life is required.

Conclusion

The proletarian insurrection creates the subjective conditions for communist revolution through the proletariat's crisis activity. The class's subjective expression is profoundly modified by the interactive relationship created by individuals to take possession of elements of capital and confront capital: while exploitation lasted, the production of a surplus product and its transition to property constituted the proletariat's participation in the construction of the social relationship. With crisis activity, the proletariat is no longer a partial subject determined by its subordinate relationship to the other class, but attains the status of subject in its own right. The key components of this subjectivity-in-crisis are that it involves inter-individual relationships, that it finds in itself the means to access nature as it exists as capital, and that work is neither its content nor its objective. On the other hand, it is a highly unstable social relationship, not only because of ferocious attacks by capitalists, but also because there is no production. The way out of crisis activity implies a resumption of production either in capitalist or in communist conditions.

II The Current Crisis*

II.1 Periodization

What was written above, at a general level, should be modulated according to the periodisation of capitalism's history, but we will not do so here. My analysis in *Hic Salta 1998*⁵ is only an outline but sufficient to show that the crisis of capital, like capital itself, has a history. As a result, communist theory and the very notion of communism have a history too. Despite certain invariant elements, the communisms in 1848 or 1918 are not identical to that of today.

II.2 The conditions for communism at the outset of the 21st century

Compared to the general conditions of a communist revolution such as we have seen above, what is the specificity of the current period? Let's say first that the current period offers better conditions for overcoming capital than ever before: the same is true of every new phase of crisis, since the contradiction between classes never diminishes as history unfolds. But our period also poses radically new problems because the high degree of capital domination in social reproduction indicates that it is difficult to imagine overcoming the capitalist mode of production without both classes being abolished *at the same time*, without supersession of the economy and invention of a totally new life for which the current categories of social analysis are basically useless. We will come back to this.

It seems to me that two main elements should be underlined

5 *Éléments sur la périodisation du capital; histoire du capital, histoire des crises, histoire du communisme*, Hic Salta, 1998. <http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/hic-salta-98/elements-sur-la-periodisation-du-mpc-histoire-du-capital-histoire-des-crisis-histoire-du-communisme>

*All quotations are from the first chapter of Marx's *Capital* (unless otherwise specified)

if we want to analyse the subjective conditions of a communist revolution in our times: the return of anti-work after a period of eclipse, and the demassification of the proletariat in post-Fordism.

II.2.1 Anti-work is back

In the 60s-70s, the workers' reaction to the Fordist conditions at the time went beyond the wage demands that had until then aimed at offsetting extreme working conditions. Wages were of course often good (especially in the car industry)—that was part of the Fordist compromise. And it was precisely that compromise that was challenged by the line workers' revolt. Beyond the wage demands controlled by the unions, and in opposition to the latter, line workers in the 60s and 70s began sabotaging, missing work, drinking and taking drugs, stopping work on the slightest excuse or without any excuse at all, causing havoc on the shop floor. All these kinds of actions were grouped under the term "anti-work" to underscore the lack of proletarian identification with their activity in the factory, of respect for machines, and of pride in being workers. These manifestations of the proletariat's revolt against capital forged the basis for subsequent theoretical developments from the end of affirmation of labor against capital (as an "overcoming" of the capitalist mode of production) to the current notion of communisation (immediateness of communism, simultaneous negation of the two classes, and overcoming of the economy and of work).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the line workers' revolt against Fordized work caused a serious crisis of valorization. While the bosses reacted by automating, firing, and offshoring, the commentators at their bidding launched into incantations about the recomposition of labor. In reality, for workers, post-Fordism differed from Fordism by being more ferocious, more delocalized, and, above all, by the fact that it put an end to the compromise that was originally necessary for labor to accept it. In developed countries, labor was not recomposed, but the system of self-managed groups, automation of

certain operations, and out-and-out repression under the threat of layoffs and restructuring made factory work and—what was new—office work more destructive. The 80s and 90s were marked by the bosses' victory. In the developing countries, Fordism was transferred without much technical change, but with drastic discipline and terrible line-speeds that were allowed by the availability of vast pools of cheap manpower.

This immediately raises the question: what will happen when revolt explodes in today's factories, where conditions have become so much worse? As we haven't seen any major insurrection in the key global industrial centers yet, the answer to that question is difficult. But there are already indications that, after a period of silence, anti-work has returned.

A sign of radicalization of class war is that time wasting (a Taylor favorite) has reappeared as a pet theme among certain management experts. Only the term used now is “downtime.”

Downtime affects [...] all categories of employees. Destruction of working hours [sic] can stem [...] from the voluntary behavior of certain employees. The point for them is to make up for poor working conditions or inadequate wages by 'paying themselves on the beast's back'.⁶

These words of wisdom followed a long phase of employer offensives to take back all the dead time in the working day, including the 35-hour work week Act in France and other measures of work time reduction in various countries. Despite—or because of—the substantial gains in productivity, it seems that fighting “waste of time” is still one of capital's objectives.

Another aspect of the current class struggle in developed countries seems to me equally significant: when workers—more and more often violently—protest against layoffs, they begin not by defending their jobs but by bargaining straight away over the

6 Laurent Cappelletti (an academic), *Les Echos*, July 21, 2009.

financial conditions of the layoff. This in no way indicates that they are content to lose their jobs and think they'll be able to live comfortably with their unemployment benefits. Rather, it shows that they are realistic about the employment issue. The necessity of overcoming the wage system (if not work itself) is thus a material aspect of an increasingly widespread practice within the Western working class. They don't demand that the boss save the company, but that the severance pay be as big as possible so they can keep going *even without a wage-earning alternative*.

In just thirty years, China, the “global workshop,” concentrated tens of millions of overexploited proletarians in factories that are not at the cusp of global progress. The workers' revolt took the “anti-work” forms seen in the West in the 60s-70s. Referring to a wave of strikes in Japanese factories in the Dalian special economic zone (summer 2005), a businessmen's magazine representing the major multinationals operating in Asia worried

Although the workers apparently do not have leaders, they develop an organizing strategy without a head. Because the workers have widely-shared interests and a sense of shared suffering, they react to subtle signs. Workers explained that, when they are dissatisfied, it just takes a handful standing up and shouting 'Strike!' for all the workers on the line to rise up as if in ovation and stop working.⁷

This is reminiscent of the wild atmosphere in the Italian factories in 1969. Except that now, the atmosphere is without doubt more serious. Killings of bosses are frequent in China and destruction occurs almost daily. There are numerous examples recalling certain features of the anti-work of the 60s-70, but to a higher degree: lack of discipline, destructive fury, few or no demands, and indifference to the consequences of violence to plant and equipment or to jobs. These characteristics are strongly present in the recent struggles in Bangladesh.

7 *Corporate Social Responsibility Asia*, vol. 2, #4, 2006.

Textile workers in Bangladesh

This under-industrialized country has experienced accelerated growth in the textile industry since 1970. It counts some four thousand companies today, from only eight in 1977, which employ two million workers, primarily young women. Bangladesh exports eighty percent of its textile output.

In May 2006, the violent repression of workers protesting wage cuts triggered a series of movements of fury that rapidly escalated beyond the company that was originally concerned. At the peak of the violence, on May 22, a protest broke out at a plant where the boss hadn't paid wages for some time. The same day, the strike movement fanned out to a number of other factories, two of which were torched and a hundred ransacked. The entire population, not just the women textile workers, took part. In the most violent battles, the women workers apparently let the men take over. The following day, the revolt widened, reaching the capital, Dhaka. Looting and destruction spread to the center of city. That is when the demands appeared according to the account in *Echanges et Mouvement*.⁸

An agreement was finally signed between the bosses and the Textile Workers Federation. It was revised several times but rarely implemented, so the movement began again in the fall. It is remarkable that a movement defeated in a shaky collective bargaining agreement found the strength to resume a few months later, with the same fury and the same violence. As in the spring, the movement spread very quickly around a local conflict and gained ground with looting and destruction of factories. That is the striking aspect: workers in a struggle to defend their wages and working conditions destroy the factories they work in, even though the jobs those factories propose are rare and considered attractive. Most of the employees in those companies come from neighboring slums.

⁸ *Echanges* #118, Fall, 2006. For more recent information, see issues 119, 124, and 126.

The movement resumed in late 2007 to early 2008. As in 2006, it didn't take long to spread, for cars to be torched and highways blocked. On January 5, 2008, the Paina Textile Mill's fifteen hundred workers turned up to apply for jobs. They had actually been locked out in that the industry's bosses had thought it wiser to close the plants when the protests resumed. The workers came not so much to work as to get paid what the bosses owed them. The latter only wanted to pay half, so the workers swept into the mill and broke everything in sight.

The movement continued over the following months. To cite only the most noteworthy of numerous examples: four hundred women who were laid off without notice or pay attacked a police camp close to the mill. The police fired on them; the crowd that had assembled, no doubt in solidarity, turned around and went back into the mill, ransacking and torching it for four hours.

Recently (June, 2009), the movement erupted again in the suburbs of Dhaka. Strikers from many textile plants learned that the factories owned by the Ha Meem Group were still running. (The strikers were apparently from subcontracting plants in difficulty, whereas the Ha Meem Group is higher up on the scale, ranging from subcontractors at the bottom to the Western principals at the top. Whatever the case, the workers at Ha Meem were not on strike since their situation was not as critical as at the small subcontracting plants). About fifty thousand workers (and others) marched towards the factories. The police were forced to retreat. On their way, the demonstrators ransacked and torched some fifty factories. At the same time, small groups split off and methodically torched buildings belonging to the Ha Meem Group: a sweater factory, three apparel factories, two washing plants, two fabric warehouses, eight thousand machines, and some busses and trucks. Other groups meanwhile blockaded the neighboring highway, thereby keeping the firefighters out for five hours. This episode seemed to involve two closely intertwined aspects: the

attack on factories in general and the attack on the Ha Meem factories, where the workers refused to go on strike. In other words, there was simultaneously an attack on capital and competition among workers. The simultaneity of the struggle against capital and clashes between groups of workers reflects the earlier-mentioned fragmentation of the proletariat, here in the form of subcontracting. That is one way in which capital accumulation was realized over recent decades.

We stress the highly paradoxical nature of these movements, which *defend* the wage-earning condition while *destroying* the means of production. The proletariat develops radical crisis activity, seizes the means of production, and storms factories—but to destroy them. We saw that these destructions were not “collateral damage” caused by traditional demonstrations that were only a little more violent than usual. They are not just bad luck, but part of the fundamental content specific to such struggles. The case of Bangladesh could represent in our times what the riots in the American ghettos represented in the 60s, with an important difference between the two situations: now, a fraction of the productive proletariat that is situated at the core of global extraction of relative surplus value is directly involved in revolts that leave politicians and people in power speechless.

Public transportation

If the factory destructions demonstrate that proletarians do not affirm themselves as workers in their crisis activity, I think the same is true of the destruction of public transportation. To my knowledge, this is a new phenomenon. Young Greek insurgents ransacked several subway stops in Athens. In Argentina, some stations in Buenos Aires were the theater of real riots over disruptions in train operations. Even in France, where trains have a good reputation, the tension is palpable in public transportation in the Paris area. The aged trains shuttling workers into Paris on the Troyes line have

been known to run through stations between two rows of riot police without stopping. On that line (notorious for poor quality), when a train is cancelled and the next one isn't scheduled to stop at a particular station, commuters call each other to find out what's happening. Those on the train sometimes help those in the station by setting off the alarm so the train has to stop. And that creates real chaos!⁹

Although the deteriorating quality of public transportation doesn't date from the current crisis, attacks and destruction of public transportation will, in my opinion, be part of crisis activity in the next insurrections. I think this simply because time spent in transportation is unpaid work time and because there is no reason why public transportation—the link between suburbs and factories or offices—should be spared when suburbs and workplaces are not, and finally, because being crammed into trains is a humiliation that proletarians experience twice a day. One way that class confrontation manifests itself in modern cities is through actions that reject public transportation. By challenging being shuttled between work and home, the proletariat attacks a fundamental division of its life. And indeed, overcoming the separation between work and leisure, between social life and private life, and between production and consumption, is a fundamental moment in the communist revolution.

As the standard of living declines and working and living conditions deteriorate, the proletariat's struggles demonstrate that anti-work is back. In each of its manifestations, anti-work says that when the proletariat clashes with capital, the aim is not to restore or install the conditions of the Fordist compromise, but something else. That "something else" is totally absent from the landscape, it has no existence in society. We cannot organize ourselves around the

9 From a colleague at work who travels on that line. I've never seen incidents like this mentioned in newspapers.

embryo of a future society to develop it. All we can do is observe that the most combative struggles are those that take one or several forms of anti-work. It can be deduced that when the proletariat in capital's major urban centers rise up massively, they won't follow the proletarian program model, whatever the variant. For its most advanced sectors in any case, it will not occupy factories, will not form workers' councils to manage them or manage other aspects of its own reproduction (neighborhood councils, etc.), it will not have as its principle the generalization of work throughout society. And it will oppose any attempts at planning, at a return to workers' association as the basis of society. And all of this because, right now, what proletarians are saying to whomever is willing to see and understand is that they are workers only under constraint, without pride and without a future, and even though their work is directly destructive of their being.

II.2.2: Demassification of the proletariat

As we've seen, inherent in crisis activity is a tendency to individualize proletarians by temporarily calling into question labor's subordination to capital and class contingency. Over the past 30 years, the segmentation of the working class has already led to an obvious demassification of the proletariat, and there is no point in calling for its formal reunification unless one has plans to get into politics.

The impact of demassification on struggles is recognizable in several ways (we have just seen an instance in Bangladesh), by noting, for example, that parties and unions have little to do with the outbreak and escalation of most major conflicts. In the West, proletarians are forced to raise the stakes and resort to violence in order to defend themselves against the most severe effects of the crisis. Union bureaucracies rarely take the initiative. And the more frequent presence of union locals does not invalidate the logical development of the proletariat's movement, which, as it

becomes increasingly radical, depends more on *local initiatives* than on *national slogans*. Such local initiatives (whether by a union or not) result from the fact that the large umbrella organizations are no longer in touch with the realities of the class relation and they indicate that workers have to some extent overcome the passivity that characterized the phase of Fordist prosperity. Yet these are not, as such, insurrectionary situations.

Greece, December 2008

Throughout the history of the proletariat, insurrection has constituted an acute phase of individualization, and over time that characteristic has become more pronounced. (Other factors may come into play, such as the depth of the crisis.) The riots in Greece in December 2008 were probably a breakthrough point in that process. Without giving a detailed account, and while fully aware of the problems posed by the lack of participation of the traditional working class, I would like to stress certain points.

Commentators frequently underscored the role of cell phones and the Internet in spreading the rioting right from the first evening. Yet they know that those means of communication mainly flood the world with twitter, ignorance, and prejudice. It takes more than that for communication to foster interaction between individuals and trigger rioting. For all the ease of communication, there is no less fury and individual daring in the fact that those who were at one instant a group of young people comparing cell phones become a squad of fire-bombers in the next. Because that is another characteristic of the Greek movement: it developed as a loose conglomeration of *small* groups acting *locally* and *independently*, with no concern for whether “the masses” were following. I am not advocating exemplary action to make the latter conscious of their historical responsibility nor did the young Greek insurgents. They weren’t politicians, and their actions sometimes scared even the local anarchists.

The sources I used (mainly TPTG and *Blaumachen*) did not analyze the demonstrations in great detail. Nevertheless, there

were clearly no big demonstrations. The highest figure was twenty thousand demonstrators. That was in Athens on Monday, December 8. The demonstration had been called by the law school, i.e. the leftists. According to TPTG, the demonstration advanced slowly, with fifteen hundred youths entering and leaving the demo to ransack and loot. At the same time, more looting and attacks of police stations occurred in other parts of the city, but this time with no big demonstration. (That is a far cry from the huge stroll-marches intended to prove to the French prime minister that people demonstrating were two million, a figure he had himself determined as a condition for his resignation.) The accounts or chronologies published by Greek comrades repeatedly refer to demonstrations of two to three hundred people in the suburbs or provinces, whose objective, frequently, was to attack the local police station. The meaning of those systematic confrontations between young people and the police is debatable. (Was that the best objective?) But there is no denying the advanced demassification of an insurrectionary movement that, due in particular to that dispersion (as well as the remarkable absence of demands), struck fear in many a government.

I think that this tendency is going to grow in the coming phases of the global proletariat's crisis activity and that there lies one of the key conditions for success of the communist revolution. The 2008 Greek riots surely give an idea of what a deeper insurrectional phase could be: by multiplying the seats of struggle, not controlled by any center, the proletariat will focus the struggle on the most concrete, specific forms of exploitation and subordination. The initial specificity and even localism of the confrontations will play as a guarantee against attempts at political recuperation. In addition, by confronting capital and the State at such base levels, the more the struggles succeed, the more they will foment dislocation of the State.

Conclusion

From the above we can see that anti-work is back, but not in the

same way as in the 60s and 70s. The destruction of the Fordist compromise in recent decades led to far-reaching changes in the conditions and content of the proletariat's struggle against capital. For example, casualization of labor invaded Fordist factories through outsourcing and temporary work. This phenomenon is often deplored as a factor of class division. That is true, and it plays against the proletariat in its day-to-day demands-oriented struggles. But we need to look further ahead. In case of a stronger movement, one without demands for example, we will see the sense of identification with the firm disappear and the enemy appear more clearly as capital *in general*, even in a single workshop where several firms have their own workers working side by side. Moreover, capital's division of the class over the last thirty years will backfire on capital when the demassification of the proletariat decentralises crisis activity into a multitude of nuclei that will be harder to control through politics (e.g. Greece). Also, subcontracting and outsourcing is a way to fragment the proletariat but the process includes lots of logistics, which may easily become a weak link in the reproduction of capital.

Generally speaking, the changing class relationship within the last thirty years must be understood against the background of capital's furious struggle against the falling rate of profit. The headlong flight into credit is one aspect of this. Outsourcing is another. It is one of a whole series of offensives to lower the value of an already significantly inessential labor force. This movement is not prompted by whim or cupidity on the part of the capitalists. It is the condition for reproduction of the social relationship, i.e. between capital *and the proletariat*. The content of at least some of the struggles against the capitalist offensive show that the way out of the crisis is not through a better balance in the exploitation of labor, that there is no possibility for sharing the benefits of productivity growth. Those struggles imply the necessity of doing away with both classes simultaneously. In the 60s and 70s, this issue

appeared on a limited scale in the struggles of assemblyline workers in Fordized industry. Today, a comparable process is experienced by a far larger section of the labor force (illustrated, for example, in the changes affecting office work). And that is true for all aspects of the proletariat's life, not just in the work component but also for every aspect of life (housing, transportation, schools, unemployment, etc.). In a way, it could be said that what was considered anti-work in the proletariat's struggle will become *anti-proletariat*. Unless one imagines a return to previously existing conditions of the capitalist social relationship, the current struggles, as well as an analysis of the modes of labor exploitation, point to the possibility and necessity of communisation.

III Communisation

III.1 Communisation and transitional society

One of the major theses of communisation theory is the rejection of the notion of the transitional society. But let's not confuse immediacy and instantaneity. When we talk of the immediacy of communism, we posit that the communist revolution no longer has the objective of creating a society halfway between capitalism and communism, but of going to communism directly. As a result, the problem of taking political power disappears and with it the questions of alliances with other social layers, of the transition (withering away of the state, etc.). The communist revolution nonetheless has a duration, a history, phases of advance and retreat, etc.

The immediacy of communism is not a notion coming out of the blue. It appeared with the crisis of the 60s-70s on the basis

of the inability of the left and leftists to take into account the most advanced forms of the class struggle, especially those that I regroup under the term of anti-work. But neither the communist revolution nor communism abolishes history. And this is precisely why the word *communisation* was coined: to indicate that the abolition of classes and the transcending of the economy is a process, with a succession of “befores” and “afters” and with the passage of time. But these successive phases do not consist of putting in place a transitional society *between* capitalism and communism. The meaning of the socialist society that the proletarian program puts in place is that the proletariat bases its power on the State and the latter takes charge of creating the conditions for communism (at its own expense, moreover, since the State is supposed to wither away!). One wonders how this gross fiction could delude people for such a long time. Is it because it guaranteed a job after the insurrection to the politicians who sold it to the proletariat?

Thus, the immediacy of communism is not the cancellation of time, but the fact that the revolution doesn't create anything other than communism. Communisation doesn't mean the creation of a new form of property that precedes the abolition of property, a new form of government preceding the abolition of all forms of power, etc.; it means the abolition of property, the suppression of any power, etc., by creating social forms that ensure that people live better than during their crisis activity.

III.2 The issue of gratuity

It is obvious that looting, requisitions in supermarkets, etc. will be part of the crisis activity of the communizing proletarians. But, in my opinion, this is at best only a first approach to the abolition of property. In the capitalist mode of production, even more than in the precapitalist modes of production, property refers less to the fact of having (a house, a car) than to the right of access to the means of production and reproduction as they are monopolized

by the capitalist class. Consequently, property is not so much the right to enjoy one's belongings privately as it is the possibility of compelling others to work for oneself. In short, the abolition of property is not merely redistributing everything to everybody but above all creating a social form where questions like "what is there to eat?," "where's a place to sleep?," and "what can be done with the children?" do not even arise.

Théorie Communiste's text *Communisation vs Socialisation* states that "gratuity, the radical non-accounting of whatever, is the axis of the revolutionary community that is building up." Non-accounting is indeed a basic fact of communisation. It is the absolute anti-planning. But it doesn't mean that figures won't be used anymore. "How many bricks for a one meter wall?" will remain a legitimate question. But planners will not be in a position to balance supply and demand, since supply and demand will no longer exist. Production will regulate itself by people circulating from one activity to another. If bricks are lacking, finishing the wall will be postponed because the need for it won't have the urgency that it had under capital when it was a commodity that had to circulate quickly. And this doesn't presuppose that communism requires a superabundance as imagined by those who dream of automation as the solution.

Concerning gratuity, it is necessary to specify whether we are talking about commodities available from capital's inventories after being seized by the insurgents or things produced in the process of communisation. In the first case, it seems obvious that commodities looted or requisitioned are freely distributed. It is less obvious that they won't be counted, for this inevitably suggests utopian images of limitless abundance, of plundering, which gives anti-communisers a good opportunity to protest and call for a bit of common sense. All the same, this point of view has to be defended, and one must insist: if the proletarians of the crisis activity start counting their loot, they restore an economy, be it a use-value one,

a power relationship, delegations (who counts what, who stores what, etc.), all of which goes against communisation. One can see that gratuity and non-accounting are two different things.

In the second case, there is no reason why products produced in a communist way should be declared free. Gratuity is, after all, nothing but the suspension of value and price during a lapse of time or in a given space. Communism satisfies needs, whatever they are, in a way that is neither free nor costly. The simplest way to understand that is to consider that there is not a system of needs face-to-face with a system of production and separated from it. Today, if I want to eat, I have to work—which has nothing to do with my appetite and my tastes. At work, I do not eat, I am not given anything to eat, but money instead. After work, I will go and spend the money on food. It seems that the problem with the notion of gratuity is that it takes us back to the sphere of distribution. That it maintains the separation between the need and the means of its satisfaction. Except that one doesn't pay. This is why the notion of non-accounting is more fundamental than gratuity alone, provided that the nature of this activity for which there is no accountancy is better defined.

From the moment when the communising proletarians start to produce, the question is not so much that of gratuity, but rather that of the radical transformation of activity, of all activities, including looting.

III.3 Production without productivity

As we will come back to this question when considering the abolition of value (cf. Part 2, chapter 4.4.2 and 4.5), I will only give here a first outline of what production-without-productivity could mean. The words at our disposal to describe a society did not foresee that this society could be communist. To go beyond the theme of gratuity, we need a category that is neither production nor consumption, etc. The unification of life in communism, the

overcoming of all separations, and direct production of socialization at the level of the individual, all these pose problems of vocabulary that I could only solve with the expression production-without-productivity or, put otherwise, consumption without necessity.

Communisation starts in the crisis activity to go beyond it. Communisation doesn't correspond to an ideal or a political slogan. It is the solution to the difficulties encountered by the proletariat in its reproduction in crisis activity. The crisis activity is a struggle against capital to ensure survival, nothing more. Once the proletariat's attempts at demands prove ineffective in saving the proletariat economically, communisation makes the jump into non-economy. There is a paradox here: the economic crisis is at its deepest, the proletariat's needs are immense, and the solution is to reject productivism. Indeed, production-without-productivity is not a production function. It is a form of socialization of people that entails production, but without measuring time.

III.3.1 The struggle for a totalizing activity

In the communist revolution, the productive act will never be *only* productive, if only because producing without productivity will also be a fight against capital as long as revolution doesn't succeed. One sign of the communising of production will be the fact that the product will be considered particular: it will correspond to needs expressed *personally* (by the direct producers or by others). Moreover, the satisfaction of the need won't be separated from the productive act itself. Let's think, for example, about how housing construction will change as soon as standardisation disappears. Production-without-productivity will mean that any individual engaged in the project will be in a position to give his opinion concerning the product and the methods. Things will go much slower than in today's industrialized building industry. The participants in the project may even wish to live there after the building is finished. Will it be a total mess? Let's just say that time will not count and

that cases when the project is postponed or goes uncompleted, when everything is abandoned in midstream—maybe because production of the components is without productivity too—won't be a problem. Again, this is because the activity will have found its justification in itself, independent of its productive result.

In a general way, one can say that communisation replaces the circulation of goods between “associated producers” with the circulation of people from one activity to another. This implies especially

- that the “sites of production” won't keep a permanent staff and that they will produce or not depending on the number and objectives of those present because the “sites of production” will above all be places of life
- that, at least in a first phase, communisation will develop locally, not as autarchic communities, but as initiatives controlled entirely by the participants. Communisation will take place as nebulae of local initiatives. In my opinion, the local level is the only level at which communisation can prove its ability to immediately improve the life of proletarians by transforming it radically—by abolishing the class. And this is fundamental: proletarians make a revolution for a better life, not for ideals
- that the “sites of production” will actually be places of life, because any production will build itself as a totalizing activity, not for the sake of the beauty of totality, but because this will correspond to the needs of the struggle against capital. This totalizing tendency is lacking in current rebellions, not only because the proletariat remains circumscribed by its original place or faction, but also in the sense that it cannot broaden its scope (for example, passing from the looting of supermarkets to requisitioning apartments, not to mention production).

Entering into too much detail means the risk of outlining a non-economy just as restrictively as a transitional society. At the same time, how can we not give examples (and show the poverty of our imagination) to make clear that all the solutions brought by the communist revolution have as their principle and their end the absolute priority given to the relationship between individuals and to the activity rather than its results? This is another way of saying that the main result aimed at by the activity is the activity itself. Individuals will circulate between activities according to their affinities, and every step of this circulation will be a moment of reproduction. Products will circulate along with these individuals, but without exchange.

III.3.2 The end of separation of needs

We have written above that, in the face of communisation, a tendency toward economic realism will most probably develop in the name of the urgency of the situation, of the deep poverty of the class, and of the immensity of the needs. Of course, this realism entails sacrifices for a better tomorrow. To criticize this point of view, several remarks may be made:

- a) on the one hand, the immensity of the needs we are talking about concerns the current proletarians, in a phase of crisis without revolution for the moment. But needs are not absolute. They are related to one's life. The wage earner who has to work feels much more comfortable if he has a car that works, a public transport pass, domestic help to take the kids to school and keep the house in order, a television for his evening rest, a cell phone, etc. There is no point in criticizing these needs, in saying that they are artificial, illusory, that the proletarians are victims of advertising. Let's simply note that they correspond to a type of life. In the crisis activity, everything changes. Of course, there are always the basic needs. For those who are below the basic threshold, the first answer will be for them to simply take

- what they need. There is so much empty housing, as well as all the buildings that have a purely capitalist function (banks, offices, storehouses...): many possibilities for proletarians who lack decent housing. The same is true for the other basic needs.
- b) Another way of referring to the requirement to justify a necessary phase of economic transition, which would be the only efficient solution, is to cite the problem of gaps in development levels. Inhabitants of poor countries would somehow have to catch up with the level of development in the rich countries, where the proletarians would have to make even more efforts to help the proletarians in poor countries. The point here is not to reject the notion of solidarity in general, but to wonder about the context in which this argument is used to justify economic realism. Don't those who talk about economic realism envisage poverty in the same way as Mike Davis talks of slums? Total destitution, radical exclusion, an almost animal-like life, Mike Davis looks at the inhabitants of slums as complete outcasts, as absolute poor, as if they didn't belong to the global capitalist society. This simplistic point of view has been criticized in the name of all the struggles taking place in slums, which clearly show the class relationship between slum dwellers and capital¹⁰. Moreover, as in Argentina, the extreme conditions of slum life have for years fostered the invention of new social forms or production processes. Since these take place at the margin of valorisation, they give some sense of the imagination that will be released when slum dwellers can reject the straightjacket that the surrounding city imposes on them. This imagination ranges from building processes (which the World Bank tried in vain to spread because they are so cheap) to urban micro-agriculture and attempts to self-manage the slums. Nothing revolutionary, but enough to show that slum dwellers know what to do and

¹⁰ See <http://www.hicsalta-communication.com/textes/are-slums-another-planet>

won't need a communist "development aid." This does not exclude solidarity (but not as a prerequisite to communisation in developing countries) by the proletarians who live there—and who all have a proletarian relative in the rich countries' slums. Of course, the needs covered there by communisation won't be the same as those in capital's global cities. But why should they be the same? And why should the extreme poverty of the inhabitants of the developing countries prevent communisation? The latter doesn't result from a hypothetical abundance. The issue in communisation is not to meet a list of pre-established needs, but to overcome the notion of need as want by abolishing ownership (all ownership) and its capacity to satisfy needs from its monopoly on the means of (re)production. In the developing and central countries alike, although in different productive contexts, revolution won't unfold as a series of measures predetermined according to needs currently unsatisfied and urgent. Not only will the transformation of society abolish the separation between need and satisfaction, but it will make needs and activities appear and disappear, constantly and fluidly.

This whole issue is not just a figment of the imagination. It is based in the current movement of the capitalist mode of production. I particularly think of Argentina and the crisis of 1999–2000. The latter pushed a fraction of the piquetero movement towards very radical positions. The characteristic features of this fraction are the will (and the actual attempt) to produce without the product being the sole objective. The piqueteros consider that the productive act should also constitute a moment where the relationship between individuals changes. Hence the principle of horizontality, the rejection of leaders, General Assemblies without agenda, decision-making without voting but by consensus. These are limited experiments, encircled by a capitalist society that goes on as best it can. They bear the mark of these limits, especially in their

voluntarism, their call to a “change of mentalities” as conditions for qualitative change in the productive act. What I wrote above about the slum dwellers points in the same direction.

On the basis of such experiments, I think that communisation is not something very complicated, and it is certainly not more utopian than the transitional society and the withering away of the State, as long as you don't try to fit the capitalist society—with its workshops and offices, its airports and supermarkets—into a communist mould. Alternatively, I am ready to learn a lesson in realism, as long as there is no talk of economy.

III.3.3 The issue of the individual

One of the topics that complicates the discussion of communisation is the issue of the individual. There is justly emphasis on the fact that the abolition of classes is synonymous with the emergence of the free, directly-social individual. This is the end of class contingency, whereby the individual is and does what his class belonging dictates. This belonging may appear in various ways (belonging to a company, stigmatization of a neighbourhood, etc.). It generally means that this individual here who attends this machine, who takes care of this patient, etc. is actually nothing but the puppet of the institutions that define him. Confronted with this determinism, the individual who wants to prove his particularity appears as a monad, a free electron whose revolt strongly resembles a whim when it is purely individual. He says “I am not a puppet, I also exist as an individual,” but this is only partly true, because capital has absorbed much of his personality, which faces him as skills incorporated into the machine, as personal tastes picked up in magazines, etc. So that when he affirms his personality, he says commonplace things or becomes desocialized, sometimes even driven to madness.

Yet it is often this whimsical individual who is projected in thinking about communism. I sometimes did so when I asserted the pleasure principle against the reality principle in order to convey

that, in communism, nothing would be produced if the individuals associated in this activity didn't find it personally satisfying. Faced with this, accusations of utopia are easy for those with "realist" and "no-nonsense" critiques who propose organisational schemes with rules and obligations that are safeguards to keep our whimsical individuals under control. With those arguments we have returned to the economy and the discussion goes round in a circle.

In order to get out of this vicious circle, we have to understand positively what the individual in communism is, which isn't totally mysterious. To approach him, we start with the insurgent proletarian—the proletarian whom we see in the crisis activity, in the insurrection—and not the rebellious individual envisioned above. The specificity of the crisis activity is that it emerges from an interactive relationship among proletarian individuals. This signals concretely the crisis of class contingency (not yet its abolition). It is what I called above the end of social automatism. Now what do we see in the crisis activity? We see individuals, who only yesterday formed an undifferentiated mass of wage earners, who now invent social forms of struggle with unsuspected imagination; we see them take decisions (and often apply them); we see them adapt to changing circumstances from one hour to the next; we see them forget their personal interests of "before", sometimes burning their bridges at the risk of their lives. And all of this without a leader, or at least without a pre-existing leader, without a pre-existing organization, without a formal pledge and without responsibility towards a principal.

In all the important insurrectionary moments of the proletariat's history, those who committed themselves to the struggle didn't wait for it to be decided by a vote. The individual's participation (to the barricade, in the workers' council, in the riot) is optional, uncertain, left for him to decide. People leave one front to go elsewhere or give up the struggle without being accountable to anybody. And it works out because the insurrection isn't a sum of arbitrary,

atomized revolts but the unfolding (fleeting on history's scale) of a social activity in its own right, where individuals socialize directly, and where, already, the activity comes before its result. Were that not the case, how could we understand the "mistakes" that we detect with hindsight in so many insurrections? There is no point in choosing between discipline/efficiency and individualities/time losses. For it is part of the revolution that individuals find new ways of relating to each other. This demands time, which is another paradox because insurrections rarely have time on their side. But in spite of its extreme brevity, the crisis activity is the crucible where we can glimpse what might be a directly and personally free, social individual.

III.4 Consumption without necessity

The realm of necessity is not where the productive forces are insufficient to ensure abundance (abundance is a notion that is hard to define exactly). The realm of necessity is where the existence of property is a constant threat of lack for those who are not owners. This is why, in the present society, gratuity or low prices provoke reactions of stockpiling or overconsumption. And this why looting without a view to trade wares later, without preparing for a return to capitalist normality, will be a sign that insurrections are evolving from the "ordinary riot" towards something more significant. In communism, the fear of want disappears at the same time as property. Property positively abolished is also the guarantee that gratuity doesn't mean simply "price = zero." Rather, gratuity is gratuity of the activity (in the sense that its productive result is secondary). It is freedom of access to one's living conditions (including the means of production and consumption).

Consumption without necessity and production without productivity are identical when taken as totalizing activities. The producer doesn't leave his needs in the cloakroom. He includes in his productive activity his choices, his personality, and the

satisfaction of his needs. And vice versa: the consumer is not sent back to a life deprived of sociality to assume the functions of his immediate reproduction.

Conclusion

The notion of a transitional society, if ever valid, is now obsolete and reactionary. The communist revolution defines itself today as the simultaneous abolition of the two classes by the communising proletariat. Hence, it is the immediate radical transformation of activity, the overcoming of all separations. The communisation of society unfolds as a seizing of capitalist property, using it for the needs of the struggle—with no accounting—as production without productivity, consumption without necessity. It is set in motion during crisis activity and overcomes that activity by affirming and spreading the space of liberty gained in the insurrection.

General Conclusion

For several years now, the theme of communisation has led to controversies that are very often ill-informed. I am ready to admit that it takes some naïvete to assert that communisation is not all that insurmountable a problem. There are those who simply reject the whole issue of a revolutionary exit from the crisis, saying “we’ll see when the time comes what the proletarians do.” I have always challenged that view, for two main reasons.

First, an analysis of the whole movement of class struggle cannot dispense with understanding what overcoming the contradiction between classes means. It is not enough to lay down the terms of a contradiction. The moment one does so, this contradiction begins moving, and one will not adequately follow that movement without understanding, as far as possible, what it must produce. Obviously, nothing is certain beforehand, and even less so in the case of communisation, in which, as we have seen, even the vocabulary tends to be lacking. Nevertheless, communist theory

has always been traversed by this tension, which has to be accepted even while we recognize our limits.

Second, the proximity and intrication of revolution and counter-revolution requires distinguishing as clearly as possible between what advances the crisis activity of the proletariat towards communism and what makes it move backward towards the restoration of capital. The examples I gave should not prevent more theoretical discussion to continually improve our understanding of what is meant, in the context of the insurgent proletarians' action, by the abolition of value, the overcoming of labor and the liberation of activity, etc., but also by value *abolished*, labor *overcome*, liberty *established*, etc.

Part Two

VALUE AND ITS ABOLITION

(2014)

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The following text is a shortened translation of *L'abolition de la valeur*, to be published in 2016 by Editions Entremonde, Genève.

1 Marx's vision of the abolition of value

1.1 The critique of the Gotha Program

Before looking at Marx's theory of value as it is set out in chapter 1 of *Capital*, we must examine the way he conceived the *abolition of value* in his period of maturity. This is not an inversion of priorities. Communist theory is not a science that deducts communism from the economic analysis of capital. Rather, communist theory starts from the class struggles of the proletariat and endeavours to understand how the contradiction revealed by these struggles offers a possibility for overcoming the capitalist mode of production and

establishing communism. Marx's later views on the abolition of value are best expressed in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, but he holds very similar views in *Capital*. Here I will limit myself to the *Critique...*, which is a good example of the "proletarian program" of the revolution, i.e. the set of measures by which the proletariat assumes its hegemonic power and replaces the bourgeoisie to manage the economy.

1.1.1 Distribution of the social product and rate of exploitation of "free men"

Marx criticizes his German comrades' notion of "undiminished proceeds of labor," which would be a right of workers in a socialist society. Marx says that before the total product is distributed to the workers, various reserves and funds must be deducted. And he makes two successive deductions. First, he sets aside the means of production, which cannot be distributed to the workers. Second, he divides the means of consumption into one category that is consumed collectively and another category that is distributed individually. All this is well known.

Now, in Marx's view, the first deduction from the total product cannot be open to debate among the associated producers. Marx only says

These deductions from the "undiminished" proceeds of labor are an economic necessity, and their magnitude is to be determined according to available means and forces, and partly by computation of probabilities, but they are in no way calculable by equity.

In other words, the "cooperative society" does not have much choice, and Marx insists that justice has no place in this debate. This means that the first repartition of the social product appears as a given, imposed by the "available means and forces." This impression is confirmed further on in the text when Marx explains the relationship between the distribution of the means of production and the distribution of the means of consumption. In capitalist society,

the means of production are controlled by the capitalists, and the workers have only their labor power. Marx concludes that

the present-day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically [meaning: low wages and misery for the workers]. If the material conditions of production are the co-operative property of the workers themselves, then there likewise results a distribution of the means of consumption different from the present one.

One can only agree with this reasoning, but it is important to note that here again he ignores the question of the repartition between means of production and means of consumption. Although Marx presents this division as an objective fact determined by conditions, it is in fact a fundamental issue. There is ample matter for discussion: the same steel, the same cement can be used for factories or for housing. It is up to the cooperative society of free people to decide, to arbitrate between immediate enjoyment and delayed consumption to permit investment. Another aspect worth discussing is the replacement or enlargement of the means of production—it is a *political* question. Marx never mentions it when he talks of the state in the transitional society. This is especially the case in the rest of the *Critique*... In Part IV, the “democratic part,” Marx asks “What transformation will the state undergo in communist society?”

In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions?

And his only answer is

This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word ‘people’ with the word ‘state.’

And he leaves us in ignorance about what “science” has to say on the question. This is another example of Marx’s silence regarding the “rate of enjoyment” of workers in the future society. This formula of a rate of enjoyment is proposed to stay in line with the internal logic of the proletarian program. Actually, however, we should talk of the rate of *exploitation*, while admitting that in the

programmatic project, this rate is lower than in capitalist society.

We agree with Marx's critique of the Gotha Program regarding the fact that the total social product cannot be distributed to the workers. However, we note that the workers are not entitled to a say on the size, and probably not even on the nature, of the proceeds to be ultimately distributed. For them, the "cooperative property" changes nothing other than perhaps the level of their wages. The main decisions concerning the new society, namely the share of production to be allocated for consumption, remain beyond their power and implicitly fall within the purview of the planners.

1.1.2 Abolition of the market and abolition of value

What about value in all this? It is abolished.

Within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of total labor.

There is no longer any exchange. This assertion is fundamental, since it establishes the abolition of value. "Just as little" makes the link. In the proletarian program, the abolition of exchange is the *nec plus ultra* of the abolition of value. And this applies right from the transitional society. The abolition of exchange and its replacement by the plan and labor certificates, the obligation to work, the prohibition of individual property other than personal means of consumption—all of these measures abolish value by making exchange useless or impossible. But the plan necessarily becomes a separate function within the association of free men. This function pertains to property, even when it is supposed to be cooperative. The separation is implied in Marx's text because he says nothing about the plan's mechanisms and about its disconnection with society as far as the first repartition—between means of produc-

tion and means of consumption—is concerned. Yet this repartition determines the standard of living of workers, and the rate of their exploitation. Apart from a hypothetical enthusiasm for the plan’s objectives, nothing indicates that the socialisation of workers is direct. For them, work remains a means without personal content, work certificates notwithstanding.

1.1.3 Work certificates, the law, and the police

Now we come to the distribution of that part of the social product that is consumed individually by the workers. Marx adopts the system of the work certificates.

The individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labor. For example, the social working day consists of the sum of the individual hours of work; the individual labor time of the individual producer is the part of the social working day contributed by him, his share in it. He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labor (after deducting his labor 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 labor cost.

This passage calls for several remarks.

The producer has a certificate showing the amount of labor he has done, and with it he buys the “same amount of labor cost.” Actually, the exact amount of work done could be mentioned on the certificate, but the amount of work contained in the means of consumption is necessarily an average. So we would need two ways of counting the amount of labor: exact for the individual worker, but average for the means of consumption to be withdrawn by the consumer.

Indeed, this is what we understand when Marx speaks of the “individual quantum of labor.” He talks of the social working day as a sum of individual days, but then asserts that the *individual* labor

time of *each* worker is defined as his share in it, not as an average. And when, a little further on, Marx admits that in the transitional society, an equal (bourgeois) right still prevails, he quickly adds that *principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange exists only on the average and not in the individual case.* (Marx's emphasis)

Unless every single means of consumption is counted for the exact individual worktime contained in it, one has to admit that the exact number of hours will only be counted for the living labor of each worker. The planning administration, which is supposed to be the elementary "bureau of accounting," is thus bound to have a double accounting system. Such a system in no way fosters the simplicity and transparency that is supposed to replace commodity fetishism.

Moreover, Marx admits that

one man is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time; and labor, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor... it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment, and thus productive capacity, as a natural privilege.

This analysis of the principles underpinning the law is fine, but Marx leaves it up to the reader to imagine how the law *is to be applied*. He limits himself to stating that "these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society," probably assuming that the dictatorship of the proletariat discussed later in the text will be responsible for checking that the unequal endowment among workers does not take the form of cheating the clock that measures their exact contribution. Everyone knows the difference between "time of work" and "time at work." Work certificates don't abolish wage labor. How can one assume, then, that workers would cease considering their work as means to an end (and so, trying to get a maximum income for a minimum effort)? In other words, what-

ever right exists, equal or (increasingly these days) unequal, time-keepers, foremen, policemen, and judges will always be needed to check that the law is enforced.

1.1.4 Father Enfantin's benediction

Are we simply confronted with the inevitable defects of the transitional phase? At this point we move on to the second phase, the passage from socialism to communism. Marx devotes only one paragraph to it, which is nonetheless a beautiful conclusion, in which every word counts.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor—and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor—has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!

This famous text is still referred to when describing communism in its most advanced form. However, it remains strictly within the programmatic limits. Even though it doesn't mention the abolition of value, it deserves a close reading. It consists of three premises and two conclusions.

What are the premises?

1) End of the enslaving division of labor, mainly between manual and intellectual work. Intellectual work here means two things. On the one hand, it concerns conception and management work in the economic sphere. This would include the work of planners. Marx's assertion is that workers will acquire the necessary knowledge for this kind of work during the transitional phase.

Let's admit that that it is so. Now, the producers have full

control over production. They really are “an assembly of free men acting according to a concerted plan” (*Capital*). In fact, however, Marx omits the many mediations required for the conception, calculus, and control of the plan. He wants to believe that the plan could be an institution that is not separated from the workers. And he tells us that “the society” is immediate to the individual workers, who work assiduously to develop the productive forces while receiving from that society—without having participated in some of the fundamental decisions—the means of production, the instructions on how to use them, and their subsistence.

This is another fiction about the transitional society, which wants us to believe in its transparency and in the social immediacy of the individual (yet another one is the self-extinction of the state). Actually, right from the start, the first layer of opacity and power can be detected in the silence about the first division of the social product, between means of production and means of consumption. The rest ensues.

On the other hand, “intellectual work” designates the sphere of culture. We know what Marx has in mind: forging iron in the morning, writing poetry in the afternoon. Here, the separation typical of a class society between production and enjoyment, between work and art, is reproduced but internalized in a single class rather than defining two separate classes. The transitional society simultaneously develops the productive forces and reduces the working time (in order to leave spare time for education and art). Seemingly contradictory, “the all-around development of the individual” will provide society with super-productive workers. This may be a premonition of capital’s need for literate, educated workers, which will soon manifest itself in all countries, but it is far from the abolition of value.

2) In this context, work is posited as “the first need.” This is the second premise before the conclusion. Of course, work as envisaged by Marx is not exhausting and degrading as it is in capital’s

factories. Nevertheless, it is still work, an activity separated from life just as the morning at the forge is separated from the afternoon in the library. When Marx speaks of “all-around development of the individual” and of work as the first need, is he aiming at the unification of productive activity and the needs to be met? Is he thinking of the “reconciliation of man and nature,” as he aspired to in his early writings? This is unlikely, since Marx is fundamentally a productivist. One example is how, later in the text, he envisages the schooling of children. On the whole, work as “prime life’s want” doesn’t mean that work is transformed into something different, but that work is the essence of man.

3) The third premise before the conclusion is the reference to abundance, attempting to drown the fish of value in the springs of the developing productive forces. This is a recurrent feature. Abundance is the miracle solution capable of overcoming value. On the one hand, abundance is here to make us understand that production will be more than sufficient to cover needs. People would only have to help themselves according to their needs, thus eliminating the need for accounting. We will see that this is illusory. On the other hand, the necessary development of the productive forces and the affirmation of work as a separate activity lead Marx and the other programmatic authors to insist on a systematic accounting of everything to balance supply and demand (see below the case of the Group of International Communists [GIK]). This is the role of the “concerted plan.” The argument in favor of abundance is of course that freedom amidst shortages is impossible. But abundance and shortages are merely the two sides of the same coin. They refer to a way of looking at needs that are determined separately from the activity by which they are met. And this is precisely what has to be criticized.

After presenting these three premises, Marx concludes with two points regarding communist society.

a) First, communism will cross “the narrow horizon of

bourgeois right.” Does he mean that right in general will be eliminated? Apparently not. His considerations on equal and unequal right indicate that the latter will prevail. This unequal right is easily conceivable, since that is what we have today in many countries where one’s rights are modulated according to age, health, family, and so forth. But if such a right is kept under communism, the judiciary that applies and controls it must also be kept. As a result, crossing the narrow horizon of the bourgeois right doesn’t bring us very far in terms of liberation.

b) How could it be otherwise? The final glorious formula of Father Enfantin, the Saint-Simonian leader, clearly opposes needs and resources and necessarily requires a tradeoff between them. Admittedly, “from each according to his ability” indicates that the obligation to work is applied with qualifications, not with the brutality of capital. So it is clear that young children, elderly, or disabled people, etc. do not contribute to the productive forces (although children must be trained to do so, alternating between school and the factory). The others work as much as they can, thus satisfying their prime want, and if they can only do a little, they won’t be put at a disadvantage in terms of consumption: those who lack a “natural privilege” won’t be condemned to misery. The unequal right is there to protect them. But the judiciary also has to be there to see that lazy workers do not take advantage of society. Does Marx think that work will be so pleasant that nobody would want to skip it? If that is the case, his text sorely lacks details to help us understand what could be attractive in work as he envisages it. We can only conclude that the various contributions and needs of every individual worker will have to be evaluated and controlled. Society will have to check that an individual’s contribution is not beneath his or her ability. Similarly, it will have to check that an individual’s needs are real and not exaggerated. Unless we assume that everything that one could need or desire is abundantly available (and then why work?), a system of controls is required

to balance abilities and needs, to check that a worker doesn't own more than what he or she needs for subsistence, etc. There again, Marx's visionary outlook doesn't take us much farther than the unequal right of today.

1.2 GIK and labour-time accounting

Unlike Marx, the members of GIK [a group of left communists, founded in 1924 and based in Holland—ed.] knew what “real socialism” and its plan were. In the *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* (1930), they start with a lengthy critique of the Bolshevik experience. GIK thinks that the elements contained in Marx's *Capital* vol. I must be strictly applied, so let's look at the results.

For GIK, work-time accounting is equivalent to the abolition of value because it would enable continuous control over production and repartition. GIK lays out its basic point of view: the workers-consumers

*must keep an exact accounting of the number of hours they have done, whatever their form, in order to be able to determine the number of hours contained in each product. No 'central administration' has to distribute the social product; it is the workers themselves who, helped by their work-time accounting, decide on this distribution (chapter 1).**

Although the link is tenuous between work-time accounting and the power of the rank and file working class, GIK affirms that Marx's ideas can be applied without relinquishing property and power to the planners, without giving up communism and the abolition of value. However, we observe that throughout the text, “the producer” is replaced by “the enterprise.” For example:

The enterprises place their products at the disposal of society. Society supplies the enterprise with new means of production, new raw materials, new labor forces... Each enterprise computes how much social

*All translations from GIK texts are my translation from the French.

product it has consumed in its different forms (chapter 1).

The free and equal associated workers appear completely subsumed under the enterprise, which is now the real subject in the social relationship. True, managers are elected and accountable to the workers, but the enterprise still mediates between the workers and society. It is the enterprise that will enter the number of hours worked by each individual worker in the ledger. One can easily imagine all the problems and cheating this implies. The mediation by the enterprise, which keeps the work-time accounting, provides no guarantee whatsoever that “social relations of men to their work and to the products of this work remain simple and transparent in production and in distribution” as GIK claims, quoting Marx.

Faced with many difficulties when they have to prove that their system of time accountancy abolishes value (whereas it actually only elevates value to self-consciousness), GIK ends up talking a magical language. For example, in an attempt to refute Kautsky’s objection that establishing an average price for commodities in the same category is difficult, GIK takes the example of a shoe factory, which easily computes its average labor time. All shoe factories do likewise. And all together, they will compute the average of their averages. GIK concludes

We see that the necessity to compute the average social work time leads directly to a horizontal union of enterprises, and this junction is not due to a system of civil servants but arises from the enterprises themselves, pushing from the bottom upwards. The how and the why of activities is absolutely clear in the eyes of each producer, everything becomes transparent, and thus the need is met for accounting that is open and controlled by all (chapter 4).

The magic comes from words and phrases like “horizontal,” “from the bottom,” and “transparent.” These words are designed to make us believe that a private bureaucracy (the horizontal union) won’t impose itself on the workers from above. Only much later in the text does GIK admit that “a central management of

a cartel [another name for the horizontal union of enterprises] could confiscate for itself all the power over production. Such a risk has to be taken into account.” (chapter 10) Their solution is that the workers will have to fight actively against such a tendency “inherited from the capitalist mode of production.” That’s all.

After the verbal magic, autosuggestion comes to the rescue of GIK’s attempt to turn the very truth of value (time accounting) into a hypothetical abolition of value. We have seen that the enterprise is, in GIK’s scheme, the real subject, and that it imposes itself as mediator between the workers. In a passage discussing the question of the wage scale, GIK insists that the wage differentials have to be minimal “lest the workers lose the sense that the enterprise is part of themselves” (chapter 5). Here, the producers’ social immediacy rests on a feeling. But if we take a closer look at the text, we understand what the so-called all-around development of the individual is in reality: in order to feel that the enterprise is part of his or her life, the worker spends hours in meetings to decide on everything, to note all the hours done, to check the accounts, to meet with other enterprises, to go to the consumer co-op to express and discuss his or her needs, all this on top of his or her basic job. This is another angle of the fiction proposed by the proletarian program. Instead of an “all-around developed individual,” we have a militant of the economy. The all-around developed individual works all around the clock.

GIK itself doesn’t really believe the fiction it has built. Although it affirms that work-time accounting is self-regulating and doesn’t require persnickety controls as does centralized planning, it finally admits that abuses are possible. “In the event of actual carelessness in production, sanctions are imposed on the business organisation by the relevant social jurisdiction” (chapter 10).

Thrown out by the door, power comes back in through the window. This should not surprise us, as nothing of the old world has disappeared. Value has become self-conscious in work-time accounting, and the market is still there in the form of a constant

dialogue among cooperatives.

In conclusion, three main points can be drawn from *Fundamental Principles...*

1) First, as we have noted, in GIK's vision of communism, workers disappear behind their enterprise and their consumer cooperatives. What about the length of the working day, working conditions, the organisation of production, etc.? *Fundamental Principles...* has nothing to say except that workers will adopt Fordism with enthusiasm. Their immediate work is identical to what they lived under capitalism, except for the feeling that the enterprise is part of them. Concerning the payment of their work, it depends on all the averages that are required before the content of an hour of work can be defined, meaning that there is no direct relationship between their immediate activity in the enterprise and their living standards.

2) The second point is that the enterprise is still, and even more so, the pole around which the workers group together and with which they identify. However, these enterprises cannot avoid competing with each other. This stems from the complicated and illusory way that GIK tries to convince us that increases in productivity will circulate freely from one enterprise to another. Each enterprise declares the number of hours it spent to produce a given volume of output. And society replaces the means of production consumed in that same amount of hours. What GIK says is that, if a factory succeeds in producing the same output in half as much time, it won't conceal that gain, it won't try to obtain more hours from society than it contributed to it. In other words, they will let their own productivity gains benefit the rest of society. But, unless the workers-managers-salesmen-accountants are saints, they are bound to hope for a little benefit for all their efforts and conceal that they worked more rapidly than the average. This means that competition remains too—as is normal with value, which rests on the existence of separate and independent (private) producers.

3) Lastly, GIK's scheme maintains a complete separation between production and consumption. In its view, workers after work go to the consumer co-op to discuss their needs. But the fact that the same person or group assumes different functions does not mean that there is no separation. It only means that the person or group is internally divided. In the case of GIK's communist workers, they are at the same time both workers and managers, executives and controllers, producers and consumers. What a hell of a work day!

GIK's claim to be true to Marx's *Capital* Vol. I is only partially verified. GIK's *Fundamental Principles...* diverge from Marx in rejecting central planning and putting the enterprise in the forefront. Nevertheless, the claim is verified in the sense that GIK described the many intricacies of time accounting only mentioned by Marx. In doing so, however, GIK shows that the abolition of the market as we know it is far from sufficient to abolish value. It is very striking that its *Fundamental Principles...* actually promote a utopian self-conscious value, and call it communism.

2 Marx's theory of value, per chapter 1 of *Capital*

2.1 The starting point: the commodity

2.1.1 Use Value

In order to introduce the commodity, Marx starts with its use value. This is simple: "The utility of a thing makes it a use value." Use value is identical to the usefulness of an object. And, "In the form of society we are about to consider, [the use values] are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange value." This excessively naturalistic way of looking at use value may be the reason why Marx comes back to the question at the end of the first section

of the chapter. He first asserts that: “A thing can be a use value, without having value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not due to labour. Such are air, virgin soil, natural meadows, &c.”

But then he has to clarify (with the help of Engels): “To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, to whom it will serve as a use value, by means of an exchange.”

It is Engels who remarked to Marx that taxes in kind are use value for another, but are not commodities. Hence the addition in the 4th German edition concerning the “means of an exchange.” For Marx and Engels, use value is a natural category that must be further defined by exchange when it applies to a commodity. We will return to the question, and see that use value is an entirely social category, which has to be distinguished from a thing’s mere usefulness.

2.1.2 Exchange value, value

Marx first introduces exchange value as a seemingly arbitrary quantitative relationship between two commodities ($xA = yB$). He then turns to the labour that produced them, as the only thing the two commodities have in common, making them comparable. Further on in the text, he develops:

If we say that, as values, commodities are mere congelations of human labour, we reduce them by our analysis, it is true, to the abstraction, value; but we ascribe to this value no form apart from their bodily form. It is otherwise in the value relation of one commodity to another. Here, the one stands forth in its character of value by reason of its relation to the other. (section 3, §b)

We note that Marx considers “congelations of human labour” as an abstraction. We will return to that point later. For the moment, let us follow Marx’s reasoning:

1. The commodity is produced as a congelation of human labour, but remains a pure use value...
2. ... until it is put on the market, where it confronts other

commodities.

3. Only then is its “character of value” established.

We have here, as it were, a definition of value by stages: use value as depository, value *per se* as the congelation of labour, which cannot yet be distinguished from the usefulness of the thing, and exchange value as the form of appearance—i.e. as the social reality of value. We find here, again, the emphasis put on the market in the Marxian concept of value. The market is not only the stage at which the value produced by labour is realized. The market is the moment when the product of labour effectively constitutes itself as a commodity. By virtue of their confrontation on the market, commodities appear as value, assert their essence of value. They were already value in production, but that could only be understood by entering the clouds of abstraction. That becomes obvious when reduced to the concreteness of the equation $xA = yB$.

However, this way of reasoning by stages leaves an ambiguity. Is value, the true value, created at the level of labour, or only later, at the level of exchange? The proletarian program answers first “at the level of exchange,” because abolition of the market is in its view the aim of the revolution and because labour, being a natural activity that has always existed and will exist after value has disappeared, cannot be *per se* the bearer of an alienation such as value. However, and secondly, isn't the proletariat, the class of labour *par excellence*, the source of all bourgeois wealth, and thus of value? Labour *must* then be the source of value, but this source and this value are relegated to the sphere of abstraction in an attempt to solve the ambiguity arising from the fact that the labour that creates value is not characterized beyond an expenditure of human labour power—which, unlike exchange, exists in all societies. The labour that creates value is thus posited as “abstract” because of the indetermination of the crucible in which value is formed. Actually, in the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx doesn't care much for the adjective “abstract.” When he uses it, it means labour “in general.”

Marx didn't elaborate a conceptual definition of *abstract* labour. It is mainly his followers who have tried to give substance to this notion.

2.1.3 Rubin on abstract labour

In his *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Black and Red, 1972), Rubin devotes a whole chapter to the concept of abstract labour. He very clearly formulates the problem of the positioning of the source of value, as already seen with Marx: where is abstract labour really formed? Rubin begins by describing the question as "very serious and profound" (p. 147). However, after explaining that Marx did in fact say that concrete labour is reduced to abstract labour only through exchange, he asserts that "it is not hard to reconcile these views" (p. 149) with the other Marxian assertion, that value is created in production. According to Rubin, the solution consists in "distinguish[ing] exchange as a social form of the process of reproduction from exchange as a particular phase of this process of reproduction, alternating with the phase of direct production" (p. 149).

These two concepts of exchange are to be "adequately distinguished." In other words, Rubin evades the issue by playing on production and *reproduction*, by giving a definition of exchange that includes everything. Thanks to this trick, exchange is everywhere, in exchange *and* in production. Please note the subtle shift from "value is created in production" (p. 148) to "exchange as a social form of the process of reproduction" (p. 149), and then to "exchange is above all a form of the production process" (p. 149). Rubin explains that

when Marx constantly repeats that abstract labour is only the result of exchange, this means that it is the result of a given social form of the production process. Only to the extent that the process of production acquires the form of commodity production, i.e. production based on exchange, labour acquires the form of abstract labour... (p. 149)

This confirms our first impression: now "exchange" means "commodity production," which creates a tautology. Value-creating

labour is labour taking place in a society grounded in value. But we still don't know what specificity this labour has as a general productive activity taking place in the conditions of commodity production.

2.2 The substance of value: the issue of abstract labour

2.2.1 From commodity to labour-substance of value

Starting from the equation representing the exchange of two commodities that have different use values, Marx concludes that this equation can have only one basis: "If then we leave out of consideration the use value of commodities, they have only one common property left, that of being products of labour."

And, if we leave use value out of consideration, we also leave concrete labour out of consideration. Labour here is not that of the carpenter, of the blacksmith, etc.

"There is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract."

Note that Marx removed the word "abstract" from the French translation, which he supervised, and replaced it by "without consideration to the particular form in which this force has been expended." This means that the adjective was not crucial to him, and that "labour in the abstract" means "labour in general." That said, did Marx mean that the substance of value is the expenditure of human labour power? Not exactly. The expenditure of human labour power, a physiological phenomenon, initially appears as nothing but a loss. To attain the substance of value, this destructive process must also be creative (bear in mind that we are talking here of labour in general, without considering the concrete aspects of labour and its product). Here Marx, without troubling about complexities, shifts from the expenditure of human labour power to the creation of a substance of value by a simple verbal apposition. Without the reader noticing, this results in an overlapping of two

different senses of the term “labour”—living labour and dead labour. (These adjectives were not used here by Marx.)

“All that these things now tell us is that human labour power has been *expended* in their production, that human labour is *embodied* in them.” (my emphasis)

Marx identifies labour in general, the expenditure of human labour power, which is a loss, with the substance of value that is preserved and accumulated. There he speaks of crystallized, or sublimated, or gelled, or dead labour—the adjectives vary. Hence, the expenditure is not a pure loss. It brings something into the commodity. He does not prove this crucial point at all. This something that is “brought in” is introduced without notice and presupposes that there is something to be transferred. The conclusion that immediately follows the above quotation is thus improper, because it is already contained in the assumption: “When looked at as crystals of this social substance, common to them all, they are—Values.”

And then Marx poses the question of how to measure the magnitude. For him, the question of value and its substance is settled. Everything clear? Not really.

2.2.2 The two approaches to abstract labour

The first chapter of *Capital* shows that Marx followed two ideas when trying to define the substance of value. On the one hand, he has a “social” approach, based on the “total labour power of society” counting “as one homogeneous mass of human labour power.” On the other hand, he has a “naturalistic” approach resting on the notion of “expenditure of human labour power.”

2.2.2.1 Social approach

Strangely, the social approach appears *after* Marx seems to have settled the question of the substance of value, since he now wants to deal with the question of its magnitude. He wants to understand how value is measured. The magnitude of value, says Marx, is

measured by labour time. This is easy to accept, except that some workers are slow and can thus be expected to produce more value than workers whose productivity is higher. This problem brings Marx back to the question of the substance of value

The labour.. that forms the substance of value, is homogeneous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour power. The total labour power of society, which is embodied in the sum total of the values of all commodities produced by that society, counts here as one homogeneous mass of human labour power.

Whereas we thought the matter was settled, we now have a new approach to the question of the substance of value, which differs significantly from the previous one. Here, the emphasis is put on labour as a social totality, and the averages based on that whole presuppose all kinds of social processes that have nothing to do with the expenditure of human labour power in a physiological sense.

As we shall see, the “social” approach to value and abstract labour is the most fertile one. It leads to the division of this “homogeneous mass of human labour power” into private and independent producers, etc., as an essential factor in defining value. But Marx doesn’t follow that lead to its end. In the second section of the first chapter, Marx looks at the labour of the whole society.

To all the different varieties of values in use there correspond as many different kinds of useful labour, classified according to the order, genus, species, and variety to which they belong in the social division of labour. This division of labour is a necessary condition for the production of commodities [but not sufficient, as seen in the case of the primitive Indian community or of the modern industrial workshop...]. Only such products can become commodities with regard to each other, as result from different kinds of labour, each kind being carried on independently and for the account of private individuals.

This is true, and I only quote this passage to underline the fact that Marx, at this stage of his thinking, makes an opening towards the division of labour, the necessary complementarity of the productive

branches, towards the social organisation of the production of value. But he doesn't dwell on this and returns quickly to commodities "with regard to each other." This apparently innocent bias makes sense when we take into account the way Marx envisages the abolition of value—namely as the abolition of the market and its replacement by the plan. Now, the issue of the social division of labour is crucial to understand value as a form and to define the labour that creates it. We will come back to this in the next chapter.

2.2.2.2 *The physiological approach: the expenditure of human labour power.*

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx only touches on the social approach, which does not affect the issue of the substance of value. In the first chapter as a whole, Marx speaks most often of the substance of value in the physiological sense, and this approach ultimately prevails, without a real social definition having been found for abstract labour.

As we have seen, the common feature shared by the labour of all producers of commodities is that it can be reduced to "an expenditure of human labour force, without consideration to the particular form under which this force has been expended" (translation from the Roy French edition of *Capital*). At the end of the second section of the chapter, Marx similarly underlines the physiological approach.

... all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities.

For the Roy translation of *Capital* into French, Marx added the adjective "abstract:"

...labour must first and foremost be useful for it to be assumed an expenditure of human labour power, human labour in the abstract meaning of the word. (This is my translation from the French.)

The physiological approach is prevalent throughout the chapter.

There are other examples. One is a passage on fetishism at the beginning of the fourth section, which discusses the characteristics of labour that determine value. Looking for the “theological niceties” that characterize commodities, Marx first eliminates the faulty explanations: “The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value.”

What are these factors? There are three of them: first, it is a “physiological fact” that all forms of labour are “essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, etc.,” second, “in all states of society, the labour time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind;” and third, “from the moment that men in any way work for one another, their labour assumes a social form.”

Then, when Marx situates in the commodity itself the origin of its mystical character, he explains that the general characteristics of labour are transformed.

The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products.

This passage indicates that characteristics exist that determine value, but at the same time do not determine it, since they are to be found in all types of non-mercantile societies, past and future. Among those characteristics, we find the expenditure of muscles, brain, etc. that, in the previous sections of the chapter, defined the substance of value. Now it is a general feature of all forms of labour. This leads us to understand that the social conditions of commodity production are what causes the expenditure of human labour power to become value. That is obvious, but what is left to explain

is commodity production, an explanation that Marx does not give, at least not here. He seems satisfied with simply mentioning here and there the precondition constituted by the existence of private and independent producers.

The conclusion is that the expenditure of human labour power becomes value-creating labour when commodity production is the form of social production. Not only is that tautological, but we also have to conclude that labour remains unchanged no matter the social relationships. So the transformation of the physiological expenditure into value rests on the exchange between producers. Exchange appears as the decisive moment in the creation of value because labour cannot be that moment, since it is the eternal and necessary form taken by the organic exchanges between man and nature. We are back to what we already saw: the expenditure of human labour power has to be further defined by the social conditions for it to become value creation and abstract labour.

2.3 Measure of value

Measuring the magnitude of value by the labour time is not a problem. An average time between less and more productive workers has to be calculated. The value of a commodity is then determined by the mean productivity in the branch under consideration. When discussing the question of the impact of productivity and its variations, Marx says that labour time

changes with every variation in the productiveness of labour. This productiveness is determined by various circumstances: amongst others, by the average amount of skill of the workmen, the state of science and the degree of its practical application, the social organisation of production, the extent and capabilities of the means of production, and by physical conditions.

He then gives examples. For him, the formation of that average-of-individual-labour-times appears to be a merely arithmetic process, a simple observation that producers make when they enter

the market to sell their commodities. Some producers need more time than the average, some less. This is what averages are made of. But this apparently common-sense way of looking at the question eludes a crucial element, which is that the producers never know if they are above or below the average time. They are therefore under constant pressure to reduce their own labour time. For that reason, we should say that the average socially-necessary labour time is the average of all the *minimal* times of each producer. We will come back to this question. Here I only want to ask the question: why doesn't competition appear in Marx's analysis of socially-necessary labour time? I suggest that the reason is to be found in the model of society he relies on in the first chapter. This model is an idealized, simple, commodity mode of production, in which competition is not as fierce as it is in capitalism.

2.4 Value and society in the first chapter of *Capital*

Although the first sentence of the chapter of *Capital* tells us that the frame of reference is a capitalist society, the text of the first chapter as a whole, even of the first section, doesn't bother to show the traits specific to capital, those that distinguish capital from the simple commodity production model. According to many commentators, all the developments devoted to value are posited at a level of abstraction that exempt Marx from having to give any details on the social relationships where value exists. Is it possible to speak of value in the context of a hypothetical commodity-based social model that is so general as to encompass all cases that have actually existed? Although this is a quality that is often attributed to the first chapter of *Capital*, I don't think so. We need to take a closer look at the social partners in the first chapter.

2.4.1 Which producers?

Who are these producers represented by Marx with their commodities?

Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange.

What kind of society are we in? In the first place, there is one striking aspect: the society of value that appears throughout the chapter has no classes. Producers produce and exchange. The only “social” relationship they know is exchange. We do not see craftsmen with their apprentices, nor capitalists with their workers.

This is why many commentators say that Marx posits his analysis of value in a society that is not historical but theoretical, where he finds the requisite level of abstraction. My opinion is that Marx uses a social model that is very close to simple commodity production. This is somewhat puzzling. We have seen that Marx approaches the question of value from the standpoint of the market, and we found out why (abolition of the market as the abolition of value). We now have to ask the question: why doesn't he proceed from the *capitalist* market rather than from a market where the producers themselves sell their products? I tentatively make three hypotheses:

One plausible explanation is simplicity. In the first chapter, producers produce and then they exchange. Value would be more complicated to explain on the basis of a capitalist society. A capitalist would have to be called producer, since he is the one who exchanges; whereas in reality, the workers are the ones who produce, but they don't exchange since the product doesn't belong to them—which makes things more difficult to analyse.

Another possible explanation is that Marx in the first section of Capital follows a historical plan of sorts. There is no capital in the first section (chapters 1-3), and it is only at the end of section 2 that the exchange of labour power for capital appears. Marx's aim in these sections is certainly not to tell us the history of the origins of capitalism. All the same, the path followed goes from simple commodity production to capital proper, through the

“contradictions in the general formula of capital” (the title of chapter 5), contradictions that are solved by “the buying-selling of the labour power” (the title of chapter 6). In other words, Marx’s logical plan is very close to actual historical developments. And, when Marx reaches the analysis of capital (section 3), the problem of value is considered settled and remains untouched.

A third hypothesis lies in the particular way Marx has of looking at simple commodity production. Here we have to make a detour and leave the first chapter.

In chapter 32, “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation,” Marx offers a powerful analysis of the advent and the demise of capitalism. He reveals—and seems to regret—what the emergence of capitalism has destroyed. The secret of primitive accumulation is *the expropriation of the immediate producers, i.e., the dissolution of private property based on the labour of its owner... The private property of the labourer in his means of production is the foundation of petty industry, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or both; petty industry, again, is an essential condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the labourer himself.*

Marx is more explicit in the Roy’s translation of *Capital* into French. There he says that petty industry is “the nursery of social production, the school where the manual dexterity, the ingenious skill, and the free individuality of the labourer are emerging.”* (my translation) The difference is significant: petty industry is more than a condition, it is a positive development of the “free individuality” of the labourer. And Marx looks at that period as if he regretted what primitive accumulation has destroyed. Marx makes a distinction between two types of private property:

Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective property, exists only where the means of labour and the external conditions of labour belong to private individuals. But according as these private individuals are labourers or not labourers, private property has a different character.

In this distinction, Marx looks positively at the property of labourers. And, when speaking of the expropriation of labourers in petty industry, he uses tones not often found in *Capital*. He describes

the transformation ... of the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few, the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labour, this fearful and painful expropriation of the mass of the people forms the prelude to the history of capital.

Marx is well aware of the narrowness of petty industry. He nonetheless expresses a sort of nostalgia for an era when the “labouring people” (as in the Roy translation) were in harmony with their labour and the conditions thereof. Labour and property were unified. This indicates the possibility of a labour *that is not exploited*, the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of workers’ (collective) labour and of (cooperative) property. Let’s recall that one of the problems of the proletarian program is that it keeps work and the economy, and at the same time wants to abolish exploitation. Hence my third hypothesis, that independent and private producers—the “labouring people” of the first section of *Capital*—somehow announce the possibility of the associated workers of socialism. But this implies that the heart of value creation is not in labour, but in exchange. Had he examined value in a capitalist context, Marx couldn’t have shifted so easily from the production sphere to the market.

2.4.2 Which exchanges?

A close look at the first chapter shows that Marx’s producers are always sellers, never buyers. They always come to the market to offer their product, never to buy their inputs (tools, raw materials, subsistence goods). This bias is in conformity with the general logic of the chapter. It is only *after* producing, when they bring their product to the market, that the producers enter into a “social”

relation. If, after introducing money, Marx had split the exchange

$$x_A = y_B$$

into

$$x_A = \text{money}$$

$$\text{money} = y_B$$

we would have seen the producer sell his product for money and become a buyer of his working conditions. We would have seen him as an investor, that is as trying to *insert himself into the social division of labour*. Marx puts his producers on their downstream market, never on their upstream market. We have to wait until chapter 3 to see the producer as a buyer, not only a seller. There, in effect, he splits the basic barter exchange into two exchanges as indicated above. However, he treats selling and buying in an unbalanced way, which is interesting and meaningful. This justifies yet another departure from chapter 1.

2.4.2.1 Selling

In chapter 3, Marx develops the selling process at length. He insists on the division of labour, which engenders the market and the obligation to pass through the market to satisfy one's needs. These are interesting views, where Marx explains the multiplication of the productive branches. He even shows the case of a producer opening a new branch by splitting an ancient trade:

A particular operation, though yesterday, perhaps, forming one out of the many operations conducted by one producer in creating a given commodity, may today separate itself from this connexion, may establish itself as an independent branch of labour and send its incomplete product to market as an independent commodity.

This passage (chapter 3, section 2) describes exactly the way value develops. This is precisely what has to be considered and developed today. As Rubin* would do later, Marx starts out along a promising path but then abandons it because his approach to value and the importance he gives to the market don't move him in that

direction. Considering the development of value, his description lacks only two details. On the one hand, the fact must be stressed that here, the division of labour is also a division of property. A new “independent branch of labour” is also, in this case, a new independent branch of property. Marx of course knows that and says so, but in another place in the text and without acknowledging all the consequences. Drawing all these consequences would mean saying that those producers are also property owners and consequently exploiters of a labour that is neither owning nor exploiting. On the other hand, the reason why a particular operation splits from the former production process should be explained. The explanation for such a split is the requirement to increase productivity. I think that the link between value and productivity is essential. And it never appears in Marx’s analyses on value. Now, the reason why productivity has to increase is to be found in exploitation. Increased productivity increases the surplus product. These two simple points have a considerable impact, as we’ll see.

On the whole, Marx considers the selling side of the exchange mainly for the problems the seller might encounter. He devotes much time to the risks of nonrealisation of value. For him, “the division of labour converts the product of labour into a commodity, and thereby makes necessary its further conversion into money. At the same time it also makes the accomplishment of this transubstantiation quite accidental.” (III, §2, A)

“Quite accidental” is exaggerated. The capitalist mode of production is not *always* in a situation of overproduction. But Marx wants to insist on this risk for the seller.

2.4.2.2 *Buying*

On the other hand, Marx doesn’t dwell long on the risks the buyer is facing when investing his money into new means of production.

*Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value, Black and Red, 1972

Is the buyer inserting himself into the social division of labour? Marx doesn't seem to care much. Is it by chance that, the two times when we see a producer in a buyer's position, Marx ridicules him? One producer-as-buyer shown by Marx is someone buying a bible, and the other buys brandy. Now, the weaver buying a bible after having sold his linen actually needs new yarn, and the bible seller needs paper or new books. Why does Marx neglect this side of the market? From the beginning of *Capital*, the exchanges we see are exchanges between *producers*, who need working means and subsistence to go on with their activity *as producers*. But Marx presents the weaver and the book seller as frivolous consumers.

Marx's developments on the social division of labour should come with considerations about the producer purchasing his means of production, i.e. about the social division of labour in process, about the producer actively entering into global social production. Placing the producer on his upstream market doesn't eliminate the fact that the realisation of value on the downstream market is the ultimate sanction, the practical proof that the producer is actually integrated into the labour of society as a whole. But it does show the producer finding the commodities and the information (prices) he needs to take part in the social division of labour. Instead of spending his money on a bible, he buys a quality of yarn likely to give him an advantage over his competitors or a machine that will raise his productivity. When considering the selling process, Marx insists at length on the potential problems producers may encounter. He sees clearly value and its *realisation*. When speaking of the buying process, he could have gotten closer to the way value is *produced*, but doesn't. He could have approached the way that the conditions of commodity production impose a set of norms and forms on labour (that determine it as an activity specific to the reign of value), as opposed to a general, eternal activity momentarily subjected to the outside constraints of the market.

Did Marx anticipate this objection? Yes and no. He writes

(chapter 1, section 4)

This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production. From this moment the labour of the individual producer acquires socially a twofold character. On the one hand, it must, as a definite useful kind of labour, satisfy a definite social want, and thus hold its place as part and parcel of the collective labour of all, as a branch of a social division of labour that has sprung up spontaneously. On the other hand, it can satisfy the manifold wants of the individual producer himself, only in so far as the mutual exchangeability of all kinds of useful private labour is an established social fact, and therefore the private useful labour of each producer ranks on an equality with that of all others. The equalisation of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz., expenditure of human labour power or human labour in the abstract.

There, Marx added in the Roy translation: "... and only exchange can realize this reduction, by bringing together on an equal foot the products of various kind of labour."

We note in passing that, here again, Marx considers that what defines abstract labour is the expenditure of human labour power. Furthermore, he explains that value has to be taken into account before exchange, in production. This is important, but doesn't go far enough. What is taken into account is only the fact that the product must satisfy a social want. But it does not tell us how labour is transformed by the fact that the product must satisfy a desire from which the producer is fundamentally *separated*, for he is only an independent private producer. Marx only insists on the use value of commodities when he needs to have the individual labour be part and parcel of the collective labour of all. He sees the whole

process of value from the standpoint of the product, not from that of the activity itself. And this is why he ends (in the French version) with the fact that “only exchange” equalizes all sorts of labour.

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities,’ its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.

This is the well-known first sentence of *Capital*. I suggest replacing it with, “The source of the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an anthill of workshops and factories and offices where men and women labour. Our investigation must therefore begin with this divided and unified labour.” This is what we will try to see in the next chapter.

2.5 Commodity fetishism

What is the *raison d'être* of the fourth section of the first chapter of *Capital*, devoted to “the fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof”? How does it find its place in the general plan of the chapter? Many commentators have raised this question. And many have seen in the section the basis of a theory of alienation, since the theme of the lack of control over production is pervasive. They see Marx's premise as arguing that, by producing commodities, men transfer their social relationships in a world of objects, which imposes its laws on their activity and makes them believe that those objects have the power to regulate society and even to, themselves, produce profit, interest, rent, etc. I agree that this may be Marx's position. But his conception of the abolition of value is actually equivalent to value becoming self-aware. Moreover, the production envisaged by Marx for the society of free men doesn't differ essentially from what we have in capitalism, except that planning controls ex-ante what value controls ex-post. By doing away with commodity fetishism, the proletariat abolishes the alienation

characteristic of commodity production.

If this interpretation of Marx's thinking is true (whatever we may think of it), the question remains, why did Marx put those considerations in the first chapter, instead of somewhere more suited to highlighting the historical role of the proletariat? My hypothesis is that Marx chose the end of the first chapter because, in conformity with the dialectics of communist theory, he had to accompany his theory of value with a presentation of his point of view on it, namely that value should be abolished.

The section on commodity fetishism explains over and over men's lack of conscious control over production in a commodity society, the lack of personal relationships between them, the opacity of their reified social relationships. We cannot miss the message: the communist revolution will place social relationships under the control of conscience, make them transparent. The message would have been clear even if Marx hadn't compared the commodity society to other modes of production. But he made those comparisons. He showed that social forms exist where the relationships between men are personal and transparent, even when these relationships are based on exploitation (as in the case of the feudal system). And, above all, he offered a very significant passage on communism, on "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community." Marx concludes his description of communism by saying that, thanks to the "concerted plan" (a significant formula, absent from the first edition, but present in the Roy translation): "the social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution."

This may be the most detailed and explicit passage on communism in the whole of *Capital*. Again, we may ask why Marx

didn't put it elsewhere, in Chapter 32 for example, on the historical tendency of capital. The fact that it has been placed here, at the beginning of the book, seems to confirm my hypothesis about the *raison d'être* of commodity fetishism in the first chapter. This section, which Marx devotes to the reification of social relationships, tells us another story, that of liberty and conscience in communism. Marx denounces the society of value and, at the same time, situates the standpoint from which he speaks. He considers that it is impossible to fully understand value without broaching its overcoming. Whatever the exact content of the overcoming suggested by Marx, one cannot but agree with this way of proceeding. The fact that we don't have the same view on the definition of communism is not relevant here. Marx thinks that the revolution must restore to labour the control over its activity. This not my point of view, which is that proletarian activity must be abolished in all its aspects. But that doesn't matter here. It is enough to see that the question of fetishism is developed here in the first chapter because this chapter is devoted to the definition of value, and this definition isn't complete without considering its overcoming. Whatever Marx's ideas on that, what needs to be followed is the reasoning as a whole: to examine the categories of capital from the point of view of their overcoming.

3 Marx's theory of value revisited

This chapter is devoted to my proposition for casting Marx's theory of value in the concrete.

3.1 The Starting Point: Capital Resting on its Own Basis

Without saying so explicitly, Marx places his analysis of value in a framework closely resembling simple commodity production. Rubin proceeds explicitly in the same way (he explains that this is for simplicity's sake). As for us, who consider the anatomy of man to be the key to the anatomy of the monkey, we place our analysis in the framework of a fully-developed capitalist society. The forms of value are totally developed in this kind of society. Moreover, we now know how difficult it is to define value, and especially abstract labour, when starting from the market. Therefore, our starting point is capitalist production resting on its own basis. What do we see?

To the naïve observer, capitalist society looks like an anthill working without respite to produce goods of doubtful usefulness to those involved in production. But what at first sight appears as production for production is actually production for profit. In the capitalist mode of production, nothing but profit can justify the effort involved in producing something. Besides, this profit—so important, so sought after by the capitalist—is not destined for enjoyment, but for reinvestment in further production, which again is solely motivated by profit. Compared with their aristocratic predecessors, capitalists are not good at enjoying their wealth. The comfort and luxury of their life are but the tip of their true wealth, not the real motive behind their endeavours. Their true wealth is the *value* of their capital.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, to explain what value is, Marx relies on a social model in which producers make and exchange their products. We rely on another model, that of a developed capitalist society. It is composed of numerous social categories, of

various more or less well-paid trades, of unemployed and employed people, of workers, technicians, executives, etc. For our analysis, it suffices to consider that capitalist society is composed of two classes: capitalists, who own the means of production and organize the labour valorizing their capital, and proletarians, who labour under the constraint of their lack of reserves resulting from the capitalists' monopoly over the means of their livelihood. Such is the logic of capitalist production: proletarians who labour without respite for wages that only allow them to go on working, and capitalists accumulating the wealth they extract from the workers without enjoying it fully for fear of losing in the competitive jungle that surrounds them.

This simplified view of classes in the capitalist mode of production avoids the question of the middle classes, which account for a substantial share of final consumption. It is not possible here to explain in detail this simplification, which was previously assumed—in another context—by Gorter arguing against Lenin (*Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*). We can only suggest that the huge prosperity of the middle classes is an exception, from a historical point of view (the thirty years after WWII) and from a geographical point of view (Japan and the West). The middle classes in the emerging markets are not as affluent as their ostentatious consumption may lead to believe. This helps explain the vigour of capital accumulation in those countries.

To return to our simplified model, capitalists and proletarians live without really enjoying the wealth they produce because this wealth exists as value to be valorized. But what, then, do they produce? They produce on the one hand subsistence for the proletarians so that they can go on working and, on the other hand, means of production so that proletarians in increasing numbers can work for capital, which keeps growing and accumulating. To say that the capitalist mode of production is characterized as production for production is another way of saying that this mode of production

produces only means of production (raw material, machines, software, etc.) to put proletarians to work, and subsistence to feed them (this is not different from Marx's producers producing for one another and exchanging among themselves—subsistence means here the set of commodities for proletariat consumption). Capitalists, too, must reproduce themselves. The system of production thus comprises an additional segment producing for the latter's consumption, which must be examined separately, along with the question of productive labour. It goes beyond the scope of this article to develop the issue, but the French-speaking reader can look at *L'échange, la sphère improductive, et la consommation des capitalistes*.*

3.2 Interdependence and multiplication of capitals

Marx on several occasions—but usually only incidentally—raises the issue of the introduction of the independent private producer into the general production of society. The “total labour power of society” and its divisions are not at the heart of his analysis of value. Let's go back to the passage already quoted from Chapter 3 of *Capital*.

A particular operation, though yesterday, perhaps, forming one out of the many operations conducted by one producer in creating a given commodity, may today separate itself from this connexion, may establish itself as an independent branch of labour and send its incomplete product to market as an independent commodity.

Here, Marx shows how a particular operation splits off from a unit of production and becomes an independent branch of labour, producing an independent commodity.

This passage is interesting as much for what it says as for what it doesn't say. It tells us that a new trade is created either by splitting off from an older, more complete trade or by inventing new needs. It shows how the division of labour is at the same time a division of property. An existing production splits into two new ones, each of them putting a specific commodity on the market. In the

same way, the capital of society as a whole continuously produces offshoots—either new capitals putting partial commodities on the market (in the sense that they are subsets of what was formerly a single product) or new commodities corresponding to new needs. Capitalist production developed as a multiplication of new capitals, as an endless division of capitalist property. Marx’s “independent private producers” are born every day.

Marx also tells us that the producer has to legitimize his position in the social division of labour. His labour must be expended in a useful form. As we have seen, basically, capitalist production is the production of the means of production and subsistence. Before considering the time devoted to producing a new product, the first condition of the producer’s legitimacy is that he produces an object serving either as a means of production for other capital or as subsistence for proletarians (capitalists’ consumption is left out of consideration in this article). This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. We will see that other conditions are required. But we can already state *that producing value is producing means of production (including subsistence) for other capital*. Marx often says that the precise nature of the lack satisfied by the commodity is not relevant and that we shouldn’t pass judgments on its legitimacy. If there is a market for useless gadgets that proletarians buy, it means that these gadgets are part of the basket of subsistence necessary for their reproduction, whether physically, chemically, physiologically, or symbolically.

Besides, this aspect of producing symbolic and useless subsistences is marginal in section II of capital, which is essentially devoted to the production of food, housing, clothing, and transport. Finally, a major part of capitalist production is devoted to means of production in section I, where the need that has to be satisfied is certainly more explicit, less subject to whim than in section II.

Let’s now move on to what Marx *doesn’t say* in the passage. He

doesn't tell us, or at least not completely, how the new producer finds his place in the social division of labour. For his introduction into total production to be successful, we have already noted a necessary condition, namely that the new product be useful to other capitals as either a means of production or a subsistence. This is the fundamental rule of the conservation and growth of value: the new products must be capable of functioning as capital. We will look later at the other conditions under which our new producer can assert his legitimacy in the community of capitalists.

Marx also doesn't say why a producer splits from the former unit of production and becomes an independent private producer. The answer to that question is that the multiplication of capitals is motivated by the pursuit of a higher productivity and profitability compared to that of the established capitals. And, as profitability is, in the last analysis, another term for the exploitation of labour, the logical conclusion is that the generalisation of value exists as a deepening of the exploitation of labour (see below § 3.3.1): the true *raison d'être* of value is the exploitation of labour.

So far, the development of value appears to us as a multiplication of individual capitals seeking to satisfy each other's needs—as well as those of the workers—by means of their commodities. At this stage, value appears as the mechanism by which the conditions of every capital are set by another capital, which doesn't know the former. And all these capitals seek to convince one another (and the proletarians) that their commodities are the best for their reproduction. This mechanism defines the *interdependence* of capitals with one another. Marx mostly insists on the *independence* of the private producers. Their interdependence is just as important to analyse value.

Historically, value imposed its rule by supplying more or less autarchic communities with *commodities* that could satisfy a need better than a previous domestic product. Or this is at least the way the origins of value are commonly presented: an unusable surplus

arises in a community, which therefore seeks to exchange it for a product that it doesn't produce or only in insufficient quantity.

The first step made by an object of utility towards acquiring exchange value is when it forms a non-use value for its owner, and that happens when it forms a superfluous portion of some article required for his immediate wants. Objects in themselves are external to man, and consequently alienable by him. (Capital, chapter 2)

This presentation neglects the question of the process by which a surplus appears in the community in the first place. Now, apart from accidental explanations (climate for example), the renewed formation of a surplus is explained by an increase in labour's productivity for a given product in a given community. Whether this surplus is appropriated individually or collectively doesn't change the fact that what we see here is increased exploitation of labour by non-labour, the latter of which, as such, will proceed to exchange the surplus. Hence, it is not accidental exchanges that, as they become widespread, bring about commodity production in the community, but rather the exploitation of labour within the community that leads to exchange of the surplus in order to diversify it. The benefits obtained through exchange of the surplus outside of the community are then a powerful incentive to increase productivity within it. That entails a more intensive exploitation of labour within the community. The pursuit of productivity leads in turn to the fragmentation of the community under the twofold impact of the division of labour and of property; in other words it leads to the rise of new independent private producers and the enlargement of the value sphere.

Once value production has taken its adequate form of capital, its growing prevalence translates primarily into the multiplication of individual capitals. Throughout the process, there is a necessary and continuous division and subdivision of property, a never-ending creation of "independent private producers," who are the fundamen-

tal condition of the value-form (we will see below in § 3.3.1.2 that this need for continuous multiplication of new capitals is always accompanied by an opposite trend, their merger/concentration).

In Marx's developments on value, there is a marked dichotomy between the independent private producer's solitude in production and his socialisation when he reaches the market to *sell* his product. By ignoring the fact that the producers are just as much buyers as sellers, Marx insists on their independence and neglects their interdependence. All the products converge on the market to be sold in response to an unspecified demand. True, Marx says that producers exchange *among themselves*, but without drawing all the consequences, and he evades the question entirely when he shows the weaver buying a bible with the money from his linen (see 2.4.2). Being interdependent, the private producers have to prove their legitimacy in social production as a whole. Their products must therefore abide by certain conditions imposed by the market. But producers impose these conditions on their suppliers as well. With Marx (and Rubin, too), the impact of the market on the producer's labour is only seen as mental feedback from the market, as imagined prices. We will see that it is actually much more than that.

Individual capitals multiplying and producing for one another—such is the form taken by the production of wealth in the capitalist mode of production. These capitals relate to each other through exchange, and the goods they exchange take the form of commodities, which defines the starting point of Marx. As for us, by taking production as our starting point rather than the market, we have in a way situated ourselves one chapter upstream of *Capital's* chapter one, at chapter zero. Before exchanging among themselves, producers *work* for each other.

3.3 Valorizing labour (abstract labour?)

My aim here is to explain that the labour that produces value is *concretely* formatted for that, whatever its particular process. In

other words, abstract labour is not all that abstract. It is possible to describe it concretely. The market remains the ultimate test for the realisation of value, but it is not an instance that producers discover at the end of a day of labour during which they would only have thought about the market. In their labour, *whatever they produce*, all of them have taken the same concrete measures in order to ensure their insertion in the society's global production—in order to guarantee, as much as possible, that their separation as independent private producers is at the same time their socialisation as suppliers to the other production processes around them.

When Marx speaks of “abstract labour,” his point is that all the useful concrete determinations of a work process must be left aside in order to highlight what that process has in common with all the other ones. However, as we have seen, the main definition of that abstraction is unsatisfactory because it concerns, not a directly social form, but a physiological process that then has to be placed in the conditions of commodity production for it to become abstract, value-producing labour.

For our part, we want to show that, if we leave aside all the particular determinations of the work processes that produce commodities, common practical and social (not physiological) features appear, from which we can define the labour that produces value in general. We then consider whether this labour has to be called abstract or otherwise. To do so, we start from what Marx frequently suggests but doesn't fully explore: the independent private producer must prove his legitimacy, must prove that he effectively participates in the labour of society as a whole. We said earlier that the first condition is for producers to produce means of production (incl. subsistence) for other production processes. We will now see that this necessary condition translates, for any particular production process, into two constraints on production, whatever the use value produced. Marx says that any labour is an expenditure of human labour force. We say that any process

of commodity production is always a process of *productivity enhancement* and a process of *standardization*. These two features are not something that the producer imagines later on, in order to increase his market penetration. They are an integral part of the activity of any commodity producer, as a private producer who is separated from the labour of society as a whole and at the same time one of its components.

For the producer, who seeks productivity and standardisation, the market is not in his mind but in his hands, in his factory. As we will see, this definition of what remains when all the particulars of a specific concrete labour are left aside offers the advantage of bringing to light content that is specifically and directly social. Conversely, the expenditure of human force, of nerves and muscles, is a physiological feature not specific to any particular social form of production, or even to production *per se*, since it can be found in any human activity that is not strictly motionless and unconscious.

This implies that we have to reconsider two points in Marx's analyses: the notion of socially necessary labour time and the notion of use value.

3.3.1 Productivity

3.3.1.1 Productivity and socially necessary labour time

Productivity and value are two related notions. One might say that value was invented to increase the productivity of labour. As for the reasons why productivity must be increased, the answer obviously has to be sought in the increase of surplus, of labour exploitation. The mechanism of relative surplus value is the perfect form of this process, but it is also present in other forms throughout the historical development of value, before and under capitalism. As for the exploitation of labour, it doesn't need to be explained here.

Let's come back to Marx and the legitimacy of the independent private producer. Marx first says that the producer's labour has to be useful—we will return to that later. Marx also says that for the

“useful” commodity to be accepted by other producers, it must have been produced in the average socially necessary labour time. As we have seen above (chapter 2.3), competition is not one of the “normal conditions” of production. Yet competition underlies the status of independent private producers. It is an aspect of their socialization as entities separated from each other. It is impossible to consider a private producer in the singular, but in the plural, we immediately have competition just as we have exchange. As we saw, each independent producer necessarily and constantly seeks his *maximum* productivity. In view of the basic social conditions of value as a form, we must talk of the average of the producers’ *minimum times*.

This constant tension is indissociable from value production and transforms any production process in a perceptible and practical way. The intensity of living labour—always striving not to lose time—is not the only element to be considered. There are also the production processes. Whatever its concrete content, any labour-producing value is constantly compelled to check that the methods used are the most efficient and to question the applicable production processes. Value-producing labour includes the labour exerted on labour itself (R&D). Development of productive forces is included in the very notion of value.

When seeking to define the labour that produces value, the concrete historical ways that producers increased their productivity are irrelevant. What is important is that this continual pursuit of productivity is at the heart of commodity-producing labour. In Marx’s analysis, the concrete side of labour appears only as skills and is specific to each particular work process. But there is something concrete that is also common to all commodity producers—the fight against time. Producing a commodity chair is something concretely different from producing a chair in general. When speaking of Robinson Crusoe, Marx describes the way Robinson allocates his labour time according to his needs and resources.

Robinson notes the labour time devoted to each product of his labour, and Marx states “those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value” (ch 1, sect. 4). Actually, Robinson’s life lacks one thing essential to value—competition. Robinson is the master of his time, to the extent that anybody can be. The commodity producer doesn’t enjoy that comfort. Time doesn’t belong to him. He is constantly under the spell of increasing his productivity. This is a concrete part of his concrete daily labour. If the average socially necessary labour time is defined as the *average of the minimum times of each of the producers*, labour can no longer be defined simply as organic exchanges with nature. It must include labour exerted on labour itself and thus the constant modifications of methods, of raw materials, and of the products themselves, with the sole aim of saving time and thus legitimating one’s position in overall social production.

3.3.1.2 Competition and monopoly

Value production as a form presupposes that social labour is divided up among independent private producers who relate to each other through exchange. As far as his theory of value is concerned, Marx stops here: his private producers have no other relationship than exchange. Exchange takes place between different sectors of production since the commodities exchanged must have differing use values. However, producers also have a competitive relationship within a given sector. Let’s take a closer look at this second type of relationship.

Two opposing trends are in action in the capitalist mode of production. First, profit seeking continuously leads to the formation of new enterprises, which find (both in new products or in new ways of producing existing ones) the means to establish their legitimacy in the overall labour of society. This ceaseless profit-seeking, the condition for the survival of individual capitals, explains how value progressively extends its rule on production. In the process, the

surplus value produced by the various capitals accumulates in the form of new capitals rather than in the form of continuous growth of the same capitals. Knowing the financial mechanism through which the surplus value of capital A becomes a new capital B does not matter here. What counts is the multiplication of independent private producers, which lends a value form to products that until then didn't have that form.

Second, every individual capital naturally seeks to attain an oligopolistic or monopolistic position on its market. While favourable to the valorisation of individual capitals, this is contrary to the interests of capital in general. By pricing its products higher than the production price, a monopolistic capital extorts from other capitalists a larger share of the social surplus value, exceeding the normal average rate of profit. The former's gain slows down the accumulation of the latter. Is this a problem for the capitalists in general? After all, surplus value accumulates somewhere, if not in one capital, then in another. Is that not the main point? Actually, no. The legitimacy of the new capitals entering the production of society as a whole also rests on their higher productivity, which they pass on to their clients, other capitalists, through lower prices. A monopolistic capital, on the other hand, strives to keep such productivity gains for itself, within its own sphere, so that the other capitals cannot benefit from that competitive advantage. To exist, monopolies and oligopolies erect barriers to prevent other capital from entering their sector. This is obviously an obstacle to the multiplication of individual capitals, to a global increase in social productivity and, thereby, to the extension of the rule of value. In other words, there is a complete linkage between the development of value as a form, the multiplication of independent capitals, and increased productivity.

Capitalists aren't concerned with the value form, but are very sensitive about the issue of the general productivity of capital. Fundamentally, this is because increased productivity generates

relative surplus value. We are back to the link between the exploitation of labour and the development of value. That's why States, which are in principle friendly towards monopolies and oligopolies, continually monitor the level of competition among capitals and make sure that it plays its role. The point is to see that the rules of the club, which ensure value expansion and increased productivity, are respected.

3.3.2 Standardization

3.3.2.1 Usefulness of objects and utility value of commodities

In order to understand the standardisation of objects and activities under the rule of value, let's start with the difference between usefulness and use value. This difference is not dealt with in Marx's chapter 1, as we noted above. Marx and Engels limit themselves to stating that the product must be useful to someone else. But its usefulness to that other doesn't affect the object in and of itself. All that counts is that the producer produces an object satisfying someone else's need. However, the producer wanting to satisfy that need has only an imperfect knowledge of what it is exactly. Only the actual sale will confirm that the producer's gamble was correct. Standardization, as we will see, is part of that gamble, which is inherent to commodity production. Like the pursuit of productivity, it is the sign, *within production*, of the separation among independent private producers. In that sense, standardization imprints a clearly social mark on the object's usefulness. I use the phrase "utility value" to underline the fact that the commodity's usefulness is not natural. The *thing* being produced is fundamentally a *commodity*. The phrase "use value" has been employed too often as the usefulness of the thing, the mere medium for exchange value, or as something good (as opposed to the evil of exchange value) for it to serve our purpose. "Utility value," in contrast, must be construed as an entirely social category, and an integral part of the theory of value. Let's have a closer look at this.

In pre-capitalist modes of production, when the division of labour materializes as the division of property, this leads to the disintegration of a form of community and to the enlargement of the rule of value. In his *Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy*, and even more in the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx takes value as a given. Aside from brief allusions, he is not interested in how it arose historically. For example, Marx simply notes that “as a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other” (chapter 1, sect. 4). That is precisely what has to be examined.

When a labour process becomes specialized and splits from the community in which it was based and where it found its outlet, it loses that community’s particular features. It must then achieve a sufficient degree of generality to allow its integration into the social interdependence of the labour processes in formation, with little knowledge of what the parameters may be. We saw earlier that this has consequences in terms of productivity and affects the newly independent private producer. But there is more. The labourer producing a table for his family makes the kind of table that the family needs using the means available to the family. Once the labourer becomes an independent cabinetmaker, he has to make tables that will cover various expressions of the demand for a table, even though he has little or no knowledge of what they might be since he is a private and independent producer. This *concretely* modifies the table made. Normally, commodities are not produced on demand but for a market, with all of the uncertainty that implies. To be sure that he can meet the demand and thus sell his tables, the private producer has to conceive of a table that can be used as a table under various (unknown) conditions, which differ from those of our cabinetmaker’s former community. The same is true for a capitalist with a product that sells well on his domestic market who wants to sell on export markets. The table must be neither

too large nor too small, neither too heavy nor too light, it should be usable not only in kitchens but elsewhere as well, etc. And a cabinetmaker specializing in kitchen tables faces the same necessity of determining a standard for how people cook in neighbouring villages/countries, the size of the room used for cooking, etc. In short, the actual table he manufactures must in a way approximate the table as concept.

It is in this sense that the table as “useful object” has to become a table as “utility value.” Therein lies one of the conditions of its exchangeability. Marx says that the commodity being produced is already mentally exchanged. We now understand that more than that is involved. Exchange is already present within the producer’s activity. The commodity’s exchangeability depends not only on its exchange value, on the socially-necessary time required to produce it, but also on the material form it takes in order to meet a large range of particular needs not known in their details. A peasant on his autarchic farm may sit on a log when eating his dinner. For the independent cabinetmaker, meeting the need to sit down entails manufacturing “general,” or “average” chairs. Let’s call *standardization* this process whereby usefulness becomes utility value.

Due to that standardisation process, the commodity satisfying a *particular* need has a more *general* concrete form, or utility value, than this particularity because, given the producer’s separation from the expression of the need, it must be able to cover several particular expressions of the need (think for example of the difference between a suit made at home by a tailor and a ready-to-wear suit, etc.). This pursuit of standardisation has greater importance even than the advantages it affords in terms of productivity (see below). It is consubstantial to the emergence of our independent private producer. In the process of the social division of labour, the independent producer doesn’t wait until he reaches the marketplace to announce that he wants to be part of the global production. This occurs right from the beginning of his endeavour, not only in the

choice of the object he is about to produce, but also in the utility value form it takes, which is subject to general standards designed to meet imperfectly-known needs. The producer doesn't know the nature of the need in its particularity, due not to ignorance, but to his position in society. Everyone knows that even the best market studies don't guarantee a product's success. It is impossible to posit value and commodity without at the same time positing the concept of standardization, which derives from the private producer's conditions of production. And it ensues from these conditions that, like the pursuit of productivity, the standard can never be taken for granted. Standardization, too, is a constant effort to match a product with needs that are imperfectly known. The producer is separated from other producers' needs, and there is no reason that the latter remain unchanged. In fact, the opposite prevails under conditions of value production, implying constantly-changing methods, products, etc. Standardization is thus a permanent, systemic process, regardless of the specific utility value involved.

When a new capital form, based on a new product, it aims both at particularity (to find a niche in the general division of labour) and at generality (to gear supply to a broad spectrum of the need to be covered). Particularity may be illusory—consisting of, for example, a minor change in a common product (e.g. a new mobile phone function), or it may be very real, like the first mobile phones introduced. In the former, the standard has already been established by competitors, which our capitalist tries to modify slightly. In the latter, the capitalist's task is to impose his utility value as the standard on the new emerging market. This may lead to raging competitive battles.

Utility value is a category of value; it is a social, not a natural, category. For Marx, use value is only the “material depository” of exchange value. For us, utility value is part and parcel of the commodity as *social* form. And when the time comes to abolish value, utility value won't be maintained for the sake of the object's

usefulness. The distinction between usefulness and utility value suggests that under communism a form of productive activity in which the particularity of needs and of the objects meeting those needs—and indeed the particularity of the activities producing them—will come fully into play.

3.3.2.2 Labour standardization

Standardization of the product goes hand in hand with that of the activity producing it. Commodity-producing labour is not labour in general. We saw that for Marx, labour that produces a commodity does not differ substantially from labour not producing it, as for example in Marxian communism or in pre-value societies. Now, the way the autarchic peasant makes his table is concretely different from the activity producing a commodity table. No room there for do-it-yourself. From the standardization of the product follows that of the labour producing it. This has precedence even over consideration of the productivity gains resulting from standardization. It conditions the exchangeability of the commodity. Just as the object table is standardized as the table-utility value, so the labour producing it cannot retain the particularities of the autarchic activity.

Let's suppose that the current standard for a table is a rectangular plane board, a drawer, and four feet. Any table producer must know how to organize and perform the labour required for such a table. Surfacing a board, assembling boards, etc. become the sole operations through which a table can come into existence in the world of commodities. The only alternative for the producer is to invent and impose a new standard: round, three feet tables...

In the case of wage labour, production workers don't participate in the definition of utility value and are unconcerned about it. The ones who determine the exact utility value of the commodity to be produced and the methods applied by the labour to do the job are the workers in the research department. The production worker

isn't told "make a table," but "here is a board, cut a rectangle of such and such size; here are nails and glue," etc. Just as the utility value of the table has been defined in a normative way for the people who actually need a table, so the worker producing it has no choice about the way the table is produced. He has to leave any personal ideas he may have on the matter at the factory door. Once again, there is no place for imagination or improvisation. Every gesture by the table producer is predefined for him by the standardization of the product, and not only by the capitalist's pressure to increase productivity.

As the capitalist mode of production develops and imposes its own conditions on each and every detail of production, labour standardization becomes even more essential insofar as product standardization paves the way for mass production and mechanisation. The latter breaks down the worker's labour into simple, more or less identical gestures, whatever the utility value involved. Tightening bolts, serving a machine, etc. represent the same kind of labour for the worker, whether he makes cars or electrical appliances. A few trades probably remain, such as metalwork, construction, etc. But on the whole, labour in all its diversity has been transformed by capitalism into a limited number of relatively simple gestures. True, the deskilling of labour also results from the class struggle between workers and bosses. But the outcome of the struggle as it is imposed by the bosses is nevertheless consistent with the general framework of value production: the process of labour deskilling is its extreme standardization.

By taking out of consideration the particular concrete content of all the varieties of labour, one sees that a standardization effort is common to all the commodity-producing labours. That said, the question remains as to who proceeds to the standardization. The factory worker, emblematic figure of the value-producing subject, does not seem to have much initiative there. On the contrary, he endures it against his own will. His job is to manufacture, according to more and more strictly defined methods, whereas the research

department establishes the standard. Hence, if standardization is part and parcel of value production, where does the latter take place? Is it in the workshop or in the research department? The answer is that the subject of value creation is the collective worker. In capitalist reality, Marx's producer is divided into several functions. To define the utility value of the commodity envisaged, the capitalist has the research department, which specifies product characteristics and organizes the standardisation of labour accordingly. Though frequently antagonistic, the research department and the workshop both participate in the creation of value. For the capital concerned, the effort to enter into the general division of labour is assumed by a fraction of the workforce that is more skilled, active, and better paid (the research department, even though its work becomes more and more standardized and deskilled), and by a fraction that is less skilled, passive, and paid less (the workshop, where modern rules of total quality and zero defects tend nevertheless to impose some degree of standardizing initiative on unskilled labour).

Value-producing labour is not just any labour. Whatever its concrete nature, it is subject to a standardization process directly flowing from the fact that social production rests on independent private producers. Every commodity producer must envisage the usefulness of his product in terms of utility value. This means he must continuously standardize his activity. He cannot say, "Today I fancy making a three-legged table," when the current standard is four legs. Under capitalistic conditions, standardization is extreme. Whatever the case, however, this second feature of value-producing labour is not abstract, but rather defines labour practically, as does the pursuit of productivity. It is part of the labour on labour that is indissociable from commodity production.

3.3.3 Valorizing labour

From what precedes, value-producing labour doesn't seem very abstract, because we can assign it practical features, specificities of

content that determine its social and material reality. Having considered the labour of the independent private producers and *having*, like Marx, *left out of consideration the concrete particularities* of their labour, what did we find in common among them?—the continual drive to raise productivity, and standardisation, which is also a continuous process. Thus, abstract labour—if we momentarily keep the term—is actually a concrete, practical process producing objects, and it is defined as value-producing by the continual tension towards productivity and standardization. Far from being simply “in the mind” of the producer, this practice gives form to every working gesture. Neither the pursuit of productivity nor standardization are required to produce tables but they are necessary from the moment the table becomes a commodity. Value-producing labour doesn’t produce the object in its nature of table, but in its reality of commodity object. It is that moment of the process that, through the practical, material pursuit of productivity and through standardisation, creates the conditions of exchangeability. Whereas Marx says that, after leaving out of consideration the particularities of the different labours, there is only physiological expenditure of human force, we now have to say that what remains is the pursuit of productivity and standardization—which is not abstract.

Labour keeps its twofold character. It is production of useful objects *and* production of value. Yet both sides are in fact concrete. This is why it seems ultimately preferable to drop “abstract” in identifying value-producing labour. All the more so because it is an adjective profoundly marked by the numerous analyses, among them Rubin’s (cf chapter 2.1), which tried in vain to give a clear meaning to the concept of “abstract labour.” For us, “valorizing labour” therefore seems a better phrase to designate the labour that produces value.

So we now have the waged productive labour as the twofold process of concrete labour and valorizing labour. Some readers may think that this re-definition of abstract labour is a break with Marx.

This is not the case. Let's only remark that our times allow us to reformulate the abstractions that Marx deduced from the equality of commodities in exchange. We started from Marx and we only had to push his analyses to their logical conclusion to move from the average socially-necessary labour time to the average of *minimum* labour times and to move from a labour useful to someone else to the notion of utility value as *standardized* usefulness. However, we cannot do so as long as labour in general, and particularly industrial labour and the development of productive forces—which Marx retains in his vision of communist production (cf. chapter 1)—are considered the sole possible forms of organic exchange with nature. Current times allow us to go beyond this limit.

3.4 Substance and magnitude of value: value realization

We now have to clarify the role of exchange after production in the formation of value. The producer, separated from but related to other producers, produced a commodity for exchange. Exchange *realizes* the value produced in the sphere of production. How are we to understand “realize”? In order to answer that question, we first have to understand what the substance and the magnitude of value are.

Value *as a form* arises when the division of labour is also the division of property. That is what makes private producers appear in their independence and what, at the same time, creates the market. The development of the market is a consequence of the progress of the social division of labour, not the reverse. As we saw, the development of the social division of labour can be understood as the result of an increase in productivity. We also saw that this increased productivity is not simply an acceleration of pre-existing labour, but a formal-material transformation of the labour process. Valorizing labour is not pre-value labour immersed in market conditions, but a specific form of labour, defined by the continual pursuit of productivity and standardisation.

Let's now turn to the content of this form in order to understand how exchange is regulated by the measurement of value.

3.4.1 Time, the substance of value

We have seen (in chapter 2) the difficulty Marx and Rubin have when defining the substance of value. First, their definition of abstract labour is full of hesitations and second, they introduce dead abstract labour, which is supposed to be the substance of value, without any explanation. The “crystallisation” of *living labour*, value-producing activity, in *dead labour*, the substance of value, isn't examined specifically. It may be appropriate here to begin by exploring the *raison d'être* of this notion of the substance of value. Why should value have a substance? There are several answers to this question.

3.4.1.1 Embodiment of valorizing labour in the commodity

On the one hand, the notion of a value substance that is embodied in the commodity serves as “proof” that labour is indeed the source of value. Labour crystallized as *dead labour* is proof that *living labour* is the source of value. To say that dead labour is the substance of labour aims essentially at affirming labour as the source of value. By defining a substance of value as crystallized labour and by implanting it in the product of labour, the Marxian analysis ensures that this labour, although an undifferentiated form of exchange between man and nature, is the real source of the value that is obviously embodied in the product (as seen at the moment of exchange of commodities). But with Marx and Rubin, this is verified only once labour has been defined as abstract labour.

The question of the link between labour and value appears in a different light now that we have defined value as a specific, concrete social form of the products of labour that has in turn been described as different from pre-commodity labour. The products produced by valorizing labour bear the concrete mark of their sta-

tus as value, just as the labour that produces them can only be valorizing labour, the source of value, because it is obviously formatted to ensure exchangeability. So, here, the notion of the substance of value is not useful to us. Value gives a concrete form to the means of subsistence and of production, a form that is obviously related to valorizing labour. And the latter *is not abstract*, but materially defined by the pursuit of productivity and standardisation.

3.4.1.2 The substance of value, that which circulates

On the other hand, the substance of value is what circulates in the commodity society. If a given quantity of value moves from one producer to another, what is transferred certainly has a substance. Let's take a closer look at that. In what situations is value transferred? We can first eliminate the case of an equal exchange between two exchangers. There, no value has been transferred. Two forms of value, such as money and commodity, have simply been permuted.

Secondly, can we talk of value transfer between the means of production and the product? A machine, when operating, progressively transfers its value to the products. This point of view is common in Marxist literature. It posits that the machine is a crystallisation of labour and that as it wears out, it somehow transfers those crystals to the product. This is a complicated way of speaking of capital depreciation, which is usually calculated in money terms. If a machine costs \$1,000 and helps produce 1,000 units during its life, \$1 is added to the cost of each individual commodity as part of the cost of the machine. These monetary calculations are the expression of the calculations in labour time that the GIK claims are beyond value, whereas they are in fact just the latter's utopian truth. All this means that the transfer of the machine's value to that of the commodity is only a redistribution of the total social labour time over two groups of products: the proportion of the time that was necessary to produce the machine is added to the other times that were required to produce that commodity.

Finally, we must consider the case of value transfers in unequal exchanges. These are normally the result of the diversity of production conditions within a branch. Let's consider a given branch producing a given commodity. The value to be paid by the other branches to buy this commodity is equal to the average of the individual values of each producer in the branch. In other words, most of the producers make an equal exchange with their buyer because they are about average, whereas others who are more, or less, productive than the average, make unequal exchanges. In the first case, we have a simple permutation of value forms. In the second, the permutation is accompanied by a value transfer. Let's have a closer look at what is transferred.

Let P be a commodity with a value on the market represented by a sum of money, M. The average formula representing the branch gives the value of the product as:

$$C+V+S = M$$

The value of P is equal to the sum of the constant capital C used to produce it plus the new value added by the living labour (V+S). All buyers in the other branches pay that sum, which is socially accepted as the value of the commodity. They thus appear to enter into a simple exchange, a permutation of two forms of value, P vs. M. However, the productivity of some producers in the branch is either above or below the average. When selling their product for M, which is the money equivalent of its value, that sale corresponds to a different formula, namely:

$$C+V+S+\Delta = M$$

This means that their particular commodity has a value that is either below or above average, depending on whether Δ is positive or negative. In other words, the exchange is unequal. In one way or another, more value is exchanged against less value. The more productive capitalist brings a commodity to the market that embodies less labour than the average, but he nonetheless receives M when he sells it. Obviously, he has made an extra profit.

And conversely, the commodity of the less productive producer embodies more labour than the average, but that producer will only receive M. Is what we are seeing here a transfer of value between exchangers? Yes.

In the chapter on the equalisation of the rate of profit (*Capital*, book III), Marx writes that under normal conditions of equilibrium, *commodities whose individual value is below their market value realize an additional surplus value, or extra profit, whereas those whose individual value is above the market value cannot realize all the surplus value they contain.* (my translation, from the second section of *Capital*.)

For our purposes, this means that when the producer is more productive than the average, i.e. when Δ is positive, the difference corresponds to an extra surplus value. It is as if the workers of the more-productive capital had worked longer than they actually did. Conversely, for the less-productive producer, i.e. when Δ is negative, it is as if the workers had worked less than in reality. In the first case, the capitalist exchanged less value for more value. This is equivalent to saying that the rest of society, represented by the buyers, worked Δ hours for him free of charge. Conversely, for the less productive capitalist, Δ is negative. This producer worked Δ hours free of charge, but, in this case, nobody benefitted from that: by paying M for the commodity he buys, the buyer indicates to the less-productive capitalist that the Δ hours he worked above average have no place in the social division of labour. These dissymmetrical situations stem from the systematic link existing between value and productivity. Society pays a bonus for productivity gains, whereas less productive labour is disregarded.

In the end, what was it that circulated within this mechanism of the average value of a branch? Perhaps labour time has, if time can circulate. The only real value transfer happened when the more productive capitalist sold his product to another capitalist. In that case, the transfer meant that without noticing it, the buyer worked

Δ hours for the seller free of charge, and the latter counted those hours as extra profit.

These considerations lead us to conclude that there is no need to define the substance of value as a hardly understandable crystallisation of living labour in dead labour. Counting the hours of labour is sufficient to understand how value circulates and is transferred. If value has to have a substance, then we will call it time. Marx says somewhere that any economy is a time economy. This is a very profound remark, but Marx didn't exploit all of its potential, i.e. didn't go to the ultimate consequence, which is that a true abolition of value means the end of the time constraint on productive activity, i.e. the abolition of productivity.

Time is the only substance of value, if the notion of substance must be kept. And this time does not crystallize. It does, however, impose its rhythms and minute subdivisions, something no value producer can ignore if he wants to successfully enter into the general social division of labour.

3.4.1.3 — *The substance of value, that which is measured*

We began looking for what the substance of value is, first, because the link between labour and value had necessarily to be marked by the embodiment of something in the product of labour that proves that labour is in fact the source of value. And we saw that this approach is no longer necessary under the new conditions in which we consider the question of value. Then we explored the substance of value as what circulates in the commodity society. We found that, if anything is circulating, it is simply (labour) time.

As in the GIK project, time thus appears as both what counts and what is counted. Each independent private producer relates to the labour of society as a whole and counts (in one way or another) how much time this costs him and how much time this saves him. Therefore, we can say that time is the substance of value as long as we understand that the time we are talking about is the time of the

members of the commodity society i.e. the producers' time or, in other words, labour time. Marx reaches similar formulations in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

The labour time materialized in the use values of the commodities is at the same time the substance that makes them exchange values, and thus commodities, and the measurement of the magnitude of their value...As exchange values, all commodities are only determined measurements of coagulated labour time. (my translation, from section 1, chapter 1, *Critique of Political Economy*.)

Time is both substance and measurement of value. Why did Marx add that this time is “coagulated” in the labour product? Is it, as we suggested above, to ensure that living labour leaves something in the commodity that proves it is the source of value? For us, things are simpler. If time is the substance of value, the measurement of value is quite normally assumed as the measurement of time, in days, hours, etc. And, as in the first chapter of *Capital*, the value of a commodity is measured as the average of the (minimum) individual values within a branch.

3.4.2 Exchange of commodities, realization of value

Let's come back to the realisation of value. May we say that value needs to be *realized* because the labour that produced it is *abstract*? There is no need to go this far to find a role for exchange. As we already said, exchange is the only moment when the insertion of the private producer into the labour of the society as a whole is confirmed. This doesn't mean that no value was produced prior to exchange. However, as we recall, Rubin is unable to get rid of that notion (chapter § 2). For him, it is in exchange that concrete labour “acquires social properties... which characterize it as social, abstract, simple, and socially necessary labour” (op. cit. p. 128), but the footnote that follows immediately to the effect that these properties are “potential” or “latent” at the production level shows only Rubin's inability to decide clearly where the source of value is.

As for us, we don't need a detour via the market to understand what value-producing labour is. Even before exchange, we identified it as labour specifically and practically formatted by the conditions of independent private producers. On this basis, exchange *realizes* value, but in a far less radical and much simpler sense than with Rubin.

First, exchange confirms the exchangeability of the labour product. As we already said, until exchange occurs there is absolutely no certainty of the private producer's success in his bid to enter the social division of labour. The first way of winning that bid is, naturally, to sell. And the second is to sell for the right price.

This is where the second role of exchange comes into play. The socially-accepted value of a commodity is the average of the numerous exchanges of the same commodity occurring at the same time. It is only at that moment that the society of private producers find out what the socially-necessary labour time for this commodity is. The multiplicity of exchanges continuously sets the norm of productivity required to produce a given commodity. Here again, value realization doesn't mean that exchange creates value. But it reduces all the individual values to a social average, and we saw (chapter 3.2.2) that this implies gains for some producers and losses for others.

And third, from this point of view, exchange is one of the moments in which devalorization—value destruction—takes place. When an attempted exchange fails, or occurs only at a value below the individual value of the commodity, value realization is, in effect, total or partial value destruction.

Such are the functions that exchange must be given in the definition of value: confirmation of exchangeability, averaging of individual values, and devalorization. On this basis, exchange plays its role in the law of value by distributing social labour among the different branches of production. But that is another story.

3.5 Provisional conclusion

In order to understand value, we started, not from the commodity (as did Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*), but from capitalist production resting on its own basis. Value first appeared to us as a large-scale system of interdependence among capitals, which continually grow, divide, and multiply. The secret of value lies in the division of labour in the form of division of property, engendering private independent producers. The division of property in turn results from the need to increase productivity. The latter doesn't flow from some abstract requirement to develop the productive forces, but from the need for more efficient exploitation of labour. Labour exploitation, finally, doesn't require an explanation. It is the normal and necessary status of labour (see B. Astarian, *Le Travail et son Dépassement*, Senonevero 2001, Part 1).

We saw that value production may be analyzed as did Marx in *Capital*, namely by leaving the specific qualities of concrete labour out of consideration. But in the process, we reached the conclusion that abstract labour is, as it were, concrete and practical. The twofold character of labour now consists of concrete labour and valorizing labour, both of them contributing to the form of exchangeability of the product. What we called *valorizing labour* is actually the pursuit of productivity and standardization as a moment of labour—as the labour on labour that all private producers necessarily have to develop within their concrete activity, for the simple reason that they are independent private producers.

In this way, value can be defined directly at the level of production. And value-producing labour is specified concretely, not abstractly. It ensues that the abolition of value won't merely liberate that labour, those productive forces, but will completely revolutionize the way men consider their immediate relationships among themselves, with nature, and with social production. How else can we envision a system of production that rejects productivity and takes into account the particularity of needs and productive gestures?

4 What is at stake in casting the theory of value concretely?

Does our redefinition of value call into question *Capital* as a whole? I don't think so. The theory of value is only one element of the communist theory of revolution, and, in the general outline of *Capital*, this element is clearly distinct from the rest. Marx himself suggested that the first part of the book could be skipped. The first two sections of *Capital* examine value and money in order to focus on a contradiction in the terms, which capital seems to validate: money engenders more money, despite the assumed equality of all exchanges (cf. Roger Establet, *Presentation du Plan du Capital*, in *Lire le Capital*, PUF 1996 —missing in the abridged English version, *Reading Capital*). Thus, capital *appears* to be an automatic subject. Marx exposes this illusion by solving the apparent contradiction in the following sections where he develops the theory of surplus value. His theory of value plays no role in these developments. Likewise for us: positing value production as a practical moment of labour doesn't modify the rest. The theory of surplus value, capital accumulation, reproduction and circulation, the process of capitalist production as a whole, all of this is still valid. What, then, is at stake in our reconsideration of the theory of value?

4.1 Doing away with abstract labour

In the preceding chapters, one of our results has been to reject the notion of abstract labour. Considering the mass of useless complications induced by abstract labour, this is not insignificant. We have clearly separated value production from exchange (chapter 3.4) and explained the role of exchange in the relationships between independent private producers. On that basis, value, its definition as a form, its production, and its realisation are greatly simplified. Value is formed exclusively in the sphere of production, where producing value simply means producing the form of exchangeability. This is done by the constant quest for productivity and standardization. We have seen how ambiguous Rubin is when he tries to reconcile

a definition of value in production with one in exchange (chapter 2.1.3). Another kind of complication can be found in Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge UP, 1993). Here he defines abstract labour.

One's labor has a dual function: On the one hand, it is a specific sort of labor that produces particular goods for others, yet, on the other hand, labor, independent of its specific content, serves the producer as a means by which the products of others are acquired. Labor, in other words, becomes a particular means of acquiring goods ... The specificity of the producers' labor is abstracted from the products they acquire with their labor. There is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of labor expended and the specific nature of the products acquired by means of that labor. (p. 149, Postone's emphasis)

This variation on the theme of abstract labour introduces the notion of self-mediating labour:

Rather than being mediated by overtly or 'recognizably' social relations, commodity-determined labor is mediated by a set of structures that it itself constitutes. Labor and its products mediate themselves in capitalism; they are self-mediating socially. ... The function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what Marx terms 'abstract labor' (p. 150).

One is led to understand that self-mediation of labour constitutes the social relation specific to capitalism. This is incorrect because the fundamental social relation in capitalism is of course capital's exploitation of labour, not exchange between owners of commodities. This objection doesn't bother Postone because he reduces the exchange of labour against capital to an ordinary exchange, similar to all other exchanges of commodities. This is not accurate. The exchange of labour power for capital is an exchange only in a formal sense. The proletariat doesn't have the choice

of selling his labour power or not, and moreover he produces the value of his wage himself, before it's paid. Likewise, Postone reduces the confrontation between proletariat and capital for the determination of wage levels to a mere functionality of the labour market and he takes this as class struggle in its totality, paying hardly any attention to insurrectional phases in the proletariat's history. On that basis, Postone concludes that abstract labour generates value as a "quasi-objective social sphere" (p. 157) that, although constituted by people, dominates them. This is "*abstract domination*" (p. 126). Abstract domination dominates everything, including class struggle, which is only one part of a closed system.

Postone derives the totality of capitalist society from his concept of abstract labour. The result is that for him the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production has only a vague kind of revolt for subject.

My concern here is... the level of possibility, that is to say, the more fundamental formulation of an approach to the problem of the social constitution of subjectivity, including the possibility of critical or oppositional consciousness (p. 37).

While the automatic subject takes care of people's practical reproduction, their subjectivity is satisfied with just criticizing and opposing. The proletariat plays no role here, since

such [social and political] actions, and what is usually referred to as working class consciousness, remain within the bounds of the capitalist social formation—and not because workers have been materially and spiritually corrupted, but because proletarian labour does not fundamentally contradict capital (p. 371).

On that basis, the overcoming of capitalism relies on various unconnected aspects of the "critical and oppositional consciousness," such as "different sorts of workers' dissatisfaction or lack of identification with their work" (p. 371). Postone also observes "the increasing importance of consumption to self-identity" (p. 370) and seems to rely on the critique of consumption for the formation

of the revolutionary subject. Despite a vague allusion to anti-work, Postone's vision doesn't go beyond the conventional components of the proletarian program: reduction of labour time, meaningful labour, use-value economy, automation, production and (frugal) consumption facing each other, an end to excessive inequality of wealth and power, and renewed democracy to manage it all. Quite a list to conclude a thick volume that began with a lengthy critique of traditional Marxism!

This example from Postone confirms that the purpose of the concept of abstract labour is to keep work and the economy in place after what is supposed to abolish value. In actual fact, work cannot exist without exploitation, and, as we have seen, value has its roots in exploitation. Hence, our quick overview of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* allows us to understand that a theory of capital based on abstract labour cannot lead to a vision of the communist revolution. The reason for this is that the theory of value *is not* concerned with the fundamental social relation in the capitalist mode of production. Value is nothing more than the social form of the means of production (including subsistence) to which both classes relate jointly. But this joint relation of the classes to the means of production is constituted by the contradictory relation between necessary- and surplus-labour and not by the exchange of commodities, even if that commodity is labour.

4.2 The false threat of life's commoditization

By doing away with abstract labour and abstract domination, we can also reconsider the danger of life's commoditization. For example:

While the transition to real domination is a long historical process that continues to our day, its theoretical endpoint, a world in which the law of value penetrates all parts of the planet, all aspects of civil society, transforms every object, every activity into a commodity, absorbs every emanation of social, political, and cultural life into the fabric of the market, comes creepily close to what we are living.

(Sander, *Crisis of Value*, Internationalist Perspective no 51-52, Fall 2009)

This problem is not in fact among the proletariat's central concerns. Its wage is always calculated to be minimal. And its life is limited to spending that wage (this is another way of saying that proletarians never attain the conditions of their private life otherwise than through the mediation of money, because they have neither reserves nor property). This is to say that value's "creepy" invasion of social and cultural life is not the primary concern of the mass of the global proletariat. Proletarians' lives are not under threat of invasion by exchange and value: exchange and value has been their daily fare since the origin.

Undeniably, even in proletarian families, some activities formerly assumed (mainly) by mothers for free are replaced by services in exchange for money. Still, there is no need to invoke the imminent logic of value to explain this "commoditization." In various periods, capital has either brought women (and children) in to or pushed them out of its working population. The subsistence basket is adjusted accordingly. And causality here must not be inverted: it is not the need to find a new fraction of population to which something can be sold that "commoditizes" the life of proletarians; on the contrary, it is the changed conditions of capital's accumulation that generate the need for a new type of workforce (e.g. women) and in turn generate an extension or modification of the commodities required for its reproduction. It is not the abstract domination of the law of value as a concept that turns a family's private activities into commodities; it is the quest for a cheaper kind of manpower that leads capital to produce new commodities in "section 2 industries"* in order to facilitate women's participation in the labour force. That said, it is only normal that capitalists jump on the opportunity to make a profit by selling dishwashers.

Healthcare (at least in Europe) is another example of how a critique of commoditization is on the wrong track. In the context

of strong post-war demand for manpower, healthcare was required to maintain a workforce increasingly injured by Fordist labour. The notion that healthcare is a right, not a commodity, is nothing but ideological window-dressing fabricated around the post-war Fordist compromise. In reality, it was something considered necessary (at the time) for reproduction of the proletariat. More specifically, it was not the actual care that was desired, but insurance premiums paid into the social security system, premiums paid as part of the worker's indirect wage. The individual proletarian receiving care in a hospital considers that medical service a right, but it is actually the reimbursement from an insurance system into which he has paid premiums. He is thus involved in a normal (albeit collective and mandatory) exchange of commodities. The only instance in which we could speak of a "right" is if the system ran a deficit that was covered by state funding, which would then represent a supplementary indirect wage paid to the healthcare recipient. The end of the Fordist period put that expected care, as well as the general state of health of the proletariat, into question. In order to reduce the deficit, the level of insurance coverage is lowered, meaning that those rich enough have to directly pay part or all of their healthcare. Should we conclude that the law of value, which supposedly did not apply in the healthcare industry, now invades it because more and more treatments are privatized? I don't think so. What we have here is a simultaneous decrease in and modification of what is considered subsistence. Formerly, medical insurance was a collective commodity paid for by indirect wages. Now it is an individual commodity paid for from direct wages. Were the sum of the direct and indirect wage to stay the same, the level of health coverage wouldn't change; there would just be a shift from one to the other. But this has obviously not been the case. The *apparent* transformation of healthcare into a commodity is thus a moment in the strategy of capital against the proletariat, and not the triumphal invasion of life by value. Now that there is a glut of manpower,

capital can afford to have a less-healthy workforce.

My purpose is to show that the law of value doesn't do anything except distribute total social production between sectors. What changes the lives of proletarians and capitalists is the contradiction between the classes—the law of capital and the exploitation of labour. Fundamentally, this commoditization is not caused by an irrepressible expansion of value but by an increasing shortage of surplus value, by a slowed production of new value. This shortage of new value not only brought women into wage labour but led to the dismantling of public services, formerly financed out of overall new value (indirect wages and taxes), as well as the replacement of public services with private ones for those who are able to afford them. Public services didn't escape the law of value; they were subject to it indirectly. Today, they've been replaced by private services for the rich and reduced public services for everyone else. Privatizations do not signal the triumph of value, but rather the crisis of valorization, the shortage of surplus value. The privatization of certain public services does not expand value but rather reduces the share of new value (indirect wages and taxes) that goes toward public services. Life's commoditization is not the triumph of value, but a redefinition of its circuits in a context of ever-slower accumulation. This process especially affects the lower middle class, who lose the advantage of a standard of living exceeding the so-called objective value of their labour power (university tuition fees being a typical example).

4.3 Is the proletariat's struggle against value or against capital?

Does value impose a domination on the proletariat that could be considered the source of its misery and its revolts? It is true that the proletariat has an intimate knowledge of value. It is important, however, to understand that the proletariat encounters value solely

* as Marx categorizes them, i.e. industries specializing in consumer goods, vs. section 1 industries, which specialize in production goods.

in the form of capital. This is verified in the three moments of its reproduction: labour market, production, and private life.

4.3.1 Labour market

Speaking of a labour *market* may lead one to think that the commodity, labour power, is subject to the same mechanisms of the law of value as other commodities. This appearance is misleading. What determines wage variations?

The market is the place where independent producers bring their commodities to realize the value they contain. This value is determined by the labour time required to produce them. For the individual producer, the selling of his product is the moment when he checks whether his production time is close to the social average. The labour market operates differently because the production of labour power by the proletariat isn't comparable to that of an ordinary commodity. The value of labour power is determined by the value of the commodities produced in section 2 industries for the workers' subsistence. In other words, the value of a worker's own commodity is set beyond his control. He is separated from the determinants of the value of his commodity just as he is separated from the rest of his life.

The only way a worker can modify the value of his labour power is in the struggle against capital. According to the ups and downs of the struggle, wages oscillate around a level determined by the value of what is considered normal for commodities under specific circumstances. But neither the value of the labour power (namely that of subsistence) nor its price (the actual wage) is determined by the mechanism of a labour market regulated by the law of value. The value of labour power is determined outside of the labour market, by the productivity in section 2 and by the negotiation of wages—ultimately class struggle in both cases.

4.3.2 Production

In the production sphere, the law of value imposes its rule on workers solely as the law of valorization, that is, the law of capital. This can be understood in two ways.

First of all, a wage-earner is not, as in small-scale commodity production, an independent producer who goes to the market to sell his own wares. That is the capitalist's position, and capitalists don't work themselves. They pass on the constraints of value production (productivity, standardization) to the workers in the form of the constraint to surplus-labour. Value imposes its law on workers in an indirect way, through the mediation of labour's subsumption under capital. The capitalist is subject to the law of value (as translated by production prices). He secures his place in the social division of labour by achieving the average rate of profit, but this is never guaranteed. The only way he can beat the odds is to push his workers to produce as much surplus value as possible. Capital has a monopoly over the means of production, ensuring that the law of value (to which the capitalist is subject) is passed along to the workers inside the factory as the law of capital. It is this law, not value, that is the agent of domination. And this domination is not at all abstract.

Second, workers in production have a relationship of cooperation. The fact that cooperation belongs (up to a point) to capital implies a form of fetishism: fixed capital appears to be working and producing value. Marx calls this the "transposition of the social productive powers of labour into material attributes of capital" (Draft chapter 6, *Mystification of Capital*). Simply raising the issue of fetishism points to the idea of abstract domination, as if the fetishization of fixed capital as an independent productive power flowed from abstract domination. But, in reality, this notion of capital fetishism is quite different from commodity fetishism. What makes relations among workers in cooperation appear to be relations among components in a system of machines is not value, but valorization. It is not value (of machines? of the commodities produced? of the

raw material processed?) that distributes workers along the various points in the productive system, but mechanization, fixed capital. And the accumulation of fixed capital is, in the final analysis, a form of the capitalists' war against the workers' resistance to exploitation. Fixed capital is a form of the constraint of surplus labour. The law of capital affects workers in the workshop in the form of the constraint to produce surplus labour. The workers perceive their own cooperation as a foreign and hostile power, not as a commodity but rather as capital. Again, the proletarian knows the law of value as the law of capital.

4.3.3 Private life

The third moment in a proletarian's reproduction comes when he spends his wage in order to reproduce himself as labour power. For that, he enters the retail market, where section 2 capitalists sell him the various commodities making up his subsistence. Here, it would seem, we are in a pure market where the law of value rules freely. Well, not quite.

From the capitalists' point of view, it is true that the law of value regulates the distribution of their general activity. They compete to sell their commodities in exchange for the mass of wages. The most competitive capitalists are those on the market who most efficiently produce the utility values that are best adapted to the proletariat's life. And quite logically, capitalists direct their investments and sales towards the regions or countries where wages are highest.

Things look different from the proletariat's perspective. If the law of value played freely, proletarians would go to regions where subsistence is cheaper. This is not what actually happens. While they do live in suburbs, where housing is less expensive, rather than in downtown areas (although this is not true in North America), this is strictly limited by the need for proximity to their workplace: proletarians cannot choose the cheapest places on the globe to live. This simple example shows that the subsistence market is not as free as

consumer-society ideology would like us to believe. The so-called consumer society is a middle class phenomenon. For the vast majority of the world's proletarians, spending one's wage only ensures the most immediate and basic reproduction. The subsistence market isn't a free market where the law of value abstractly dominates the circulation of section 2 commodities. It is a very particular market. On that market, the proletarian is subjected to a double constraint. On the one hand, he has very little money to spend and cannot buy many commodities. On the other, what little he can buy must first and foremost serve to reproduce him as *saleable labour power*. The life of the proletarian between two production cycles is entirely determined by the necessity of returning to work once the wage has been spent. The worker is not allowed to spend his wage on commodities that don't reproduce him as saleable labour power. If he drinks it, spends it on games or on a fabulous trip, he will soon be thrown out of the labour force for not spending his wage on priority commodities like food, housing, or a car, which condition his ability to exist as labour power. This dual constraint is not the law of value, but the law of capital. It stems from the separation of workers from the means of production. The proletariat's life is subjected, not to value's abstract domination but to the concrete modalities of labour's subordination to capital.

To conclude, throughout the cycle of its reproduction, the proletariat is face-to-face with value. But he knows it only as capital and confronts it in that guise. This leads us to the predictable conclusion that the proletariat rises up, not because—as labour power—it would be one among many commodities subjected to *value's* abstract domination, but rather because—being without reserves and therefore constrained to surplus labour—it is totally separated from the conditions of its life, which confront it as *capital*.

4.4 Value and class struggle

We have said that the proletariat knows value only as capital. Now

we need to look at how the contradictory class relationship affects, or doesn't, value as the social form of the means of production and as a mass of capital to be valorized. The class relationship is constantly contradictory, but we have to distinguish the phases during which the contradiction recurs more or less smoothly from those when it explodes violently.

4.4.1 Daily struggles and devalorization

Let's start with the situations of smooth reproduction. This is when class struggles proceed, endangering at most some individual capitals, but not capital as a whole. What happens to value in this daily class struggle? Capital is a mass of value to be valorized by living labour. If labour goes on strike, for example, the capitalist naturally suffers a loss (as do, generally, the workers!). Any stoppage of production reduces the mass of surplus value delivered per hour, day, etc. For a capitalist confronted with a strike, it is as though his capital dropped in value relative to the prevailing average rate of profit. There is a loss of value in terms of both reduced output and capital devalorization. Further losses may also be incurred due to damage, plundering, sabotage, etc.

To avoid the costs of class struggle arising from the existence of protesting workers, capitalists try to replace them with machines. On the surface, the accumulation of fixed capital may appear to result from competition among capitalists. But if we look deeper, we see that the resistance of workers to exploitation is the fundamental cause. True, each capitalist seeks to produce his commodity at minimum costs to win more market share. He therefore tries to increase productivity. Competition, however, doesn't lead automatically to investment in more modern machinery, to the accumulation of fixed capital. The first, and least expensive, way to increase productivity is to step up the pace of work, which doesn't necessitate investing in new machines. But that cheap solution is no longer feasible when this intensified exploitation comes up

against the workers' resistance. That is exactly what happened in the western world in the late 1960s, and what has been underway in China since the mid-2000s. The costs of class struggle become too high. Workers' resistance or even open revolt cause such great losses that the capitalists try to eliminate part of the workforce and discipline the rest by shifting to a higher level of automation. The quest for productivity leads to the accumulation of fixed capital only because of the workers' resistance to their intensified exploitation. The impact of the daily class struggle is thus devalorization. This is another way of saying that devalorization is inherent to the normal functioning of the capitalist mode of production. The loss of value is due either to the costs of class struggle when it blocks production or to the constraint that the class struggle imposes on capital, pushing it to raise its organic composition.

Throughout the process, neither the reciprocal presupposition of classes nor value as a social form are put into question. And as long as the reciprocal presupposition of classes is operative, the daily class struggle—even violent clashes between the classes—are merely adjustment mechanisms that imply loss of value but do not challenge value as a social form or capital as a social relationship. This changes when the class relation becomes pure confrontation, namely insurrection.

4.4.2 Insurrection and *devaloration*: changing the social form of the means of production

In times of crisis, the class antagonism grows more acute and the proletariat's resistance multiplies the struggles. At some point, a rupture occurs: the proletariat rises up massively, and the insurrection modifies the model and impact of class struggle. The subjectivity of the exploited class changes in form and content, and this is what makes the way for a communist overcoming possible (if not certain).

Insurrections have occurred throughout the history of

the capitalist mode of production: some phases of the Luddite movement (1812-1819), the Canuts in Lyon, June 1848 in Paris, the Paris Commune, the uprising of German sailors and workers in November 1918, the East-German workers' revolt in 1953, that of the Iranian proletariat in 1979, and many others, less well-known or unheard of; it is impossible to list them all. In each, the proletariat rises up suddenly and violently against the conditions imposed by capital. Generally, the uprising follows a period of agitation, of multiple struggles, of political discussions. However, and this is crucial, there is a qualitative break between the daily course of the class struggle, even in an intensified form, and the explosion of a potentially revolutionary insurrection. The defining feature of this rupture is that the insurgent proletarians form their own social relation, among themselves, by taking possession of elements of capitalist property. In its uprising, the proletariat responds to the impossibility it faces—of socialization within capital through its labour. The conditions offered by the capitalists, under the circumstances determined by the moment, are considered unacceptable. In their unwillingness to accept these conditions, the proletarians enter into the “deadly isolation” (Marx) of the pure subject. They are brought face-to-face with the whole of society as capital. The insurrection re-socializes the proletariat in and through its struggle against capital. It attacks by taking possession of specific elements that belong to capital. Whether by unpaving the streets of Paris, taking control of vessels in Kiel harbour, occupying factories, or plundering Los Angeles shops, proletarians initially attack capital with bare hands. Before rising up, they are deprived of everything. So they have to seize from the capitalists' property the material means of their physical and social existence, namely of their struggle and their immediate reproduction. Their activity of reproduction, the very life of the insurrection, can only exist by what they can snatch from capital (buildings, means of production, weapons, food...). By taking possession of elements of capital, they

invent the social relation specific to insurrection. The fact that the insurrection is a social relation among proletarians is what makes the communist overcoming possible.

Like any social relation (in the fundamental sense of human self-production as opposed to just that of a group of individuals), the insurrection gives that part of nature that it incorporates a specific social form. For a relation between men to be social in the fundamental sense, it has to include a reproductive relationship with nature, which gives the latter a specific social form. The same is true for the social relationship that the proletariat forms within itself to fight capital. And, for the proletariat, nature exists as capital, as property it is excluded from. By seizing elements of capitalist property, the proletariat resocializes and renaturalizes itself. It possesses the streets and factories, takes over buildings, loots shops, etc. and gives them a social form specific to the insurrectional social relationship. But don't all these elements already have a social form, namely value? Yes they have, but in the insurrection, their social form changes. Having been seized from capital and integrated into the insurrectional social relation, they no longer function as utility value or exchange value. Let's take a closer look at this.

Insurgents never work: they take hold of buildings, equipment, vehicles, etc. Not only do they divert the utility value of such elements (bolts may serve as munitions, meeting rooms as dormitories, etc.), but it is up to them to determine exactly how they will be diverted. In periods of prosperity, the capitalist social relation automatically gives the machines, raw materials, buildings, etc. the form of means of production and constant capital to be valorized. In an insurrection, on the contrary, nothing is decided in advance, everything is discussed and determined according to the changing initiatives in the struggle. During an insurrection, cars are not necessarily used solely to build barricades. It is up to the insurgents, in their interactive relations, to reach a decision: barricades, means of transportation, incendiary rams... When they

seize elements of constant capital, the insurgents give them a *particular, non-standardized* use, invented on the spot by the insurrection.

We can readily understand why insurgents seize means of subsistence. But we have to see this as more than an act of basic survival. As opposed to what happens when capital buys labour power, the consumption of subsistence doesn't have its usual function of producing fresh labour power (see chapter 4.3.3). The rationality of insurrectional sociality is completely different, as can be seen in the way the seized subsistence is consumed. Labour power does not have to be reconstituted, since work itself has ceased, and the insurgents use the seized objects with a liberty unthinkable in the normal course of capitalist reproduction. Playing, sharing, destroying are possible uses for the wares looted in a supermarket. There is free access to these means, and the modes of consumption change (for example, collective kitchens). Furthermore, many of the items of subsistence are not found in supermarkets, such as housing or means of collective transportation. Here, too, many sorts of *detournement* are conceivable.

By seizing elements of capital, the insurrection negates their utility value. Those objects don't function as commodities in an insurrectional social relation. They don't enter the social relation to be exchanged. Their former value doesn't count anymore, and the time expended on their seizure, on their *detournement*, is not measured. In other words, due to the insurrectional way the insurgents come into contact with them, they cease to function as value or capital. The insurgents' activity is neither standardized nor productivist. Value is the social form that the means of production (including subsistence) take in a system where producers are independent and private. This formulation cannot be applied to the means of production and consumption seized by the insurrection. The insurrectional social relation invents a new social form for them. For lack of a better term, let's call that form *non-value*. Such a neologism is necessary to clearly define the social form of the

fractions of capital to which insurgents relate. Their activity with regard to them is neither standardized nor productivist. They thus cease to be value for them. They nonetheless consist of objects that capital produced as part of its valorization process. This origin of the objects partially limits their potential uses. A supermarket is not a normal or natural way of providing food for the population. It is a specific way for capital to *sell* commodities. When the insurrection takes a supermarket, it negates its social form of capital (for the building) and of commodities (for the content), but their physical form remains. “Non-value” conveys this duality better than a formula like “critique of the commodity,” which doesn’t show the specific social form of the elements seized by the specific social relation among the insurgent proletarians.

Let’s call *devalorization* this metamorphosis from value to non-value. The devalorization of the means seized by the insurgents for their struggle is to be distinguished from the devalorization of capital. The former indicates that what an insurrection generates is more than just a loss of value. It doesn’t give the form of exchangeability to the means it seizes. It gives a *new social form* to the material basis of a *new social relation*, which is historically unprecedented because it is inter-individual and without work.

The insurrectional social relation could be considered the absolute non-fetishism. The relations among insurgents have a material base, but they never appear as the relations of the objects they have seized. The (relative) freedom that proletarians conquer when they rise up consists first of all in the manifestation of their individuality (as opposed to class contingency). Individuals constantly interact. Everything is debated, called into question. Lots of time is “lost” in countless general meetings (unlike the discipline and time measurement existing at work). And this social relation gives—to the fraction of seized capital it encompasses—the appropriate social form, i.e. one devoid of standardization, with multiple potential uses for the seized objects. Non-value also

implies that the seized objects are used but not exchanged.

The non-value social form corresponds to the degree of freedom and consciousness that the insurrection's social activity attains compared to the daily course of capitalist reproduction, since the proletarians' activity is then neither productivist nor standardized. The possibility of a communist overcoming is grounded in this gained freedom and consciousness. It is won, not by struggling against the abstract domination of value, but by the insurrection, a struggle against capital, against the separation and the deadly isolation of proletarians without reserves.

4.5 Value abolished: abolishing concrete labour

Value is essentially a form: the form of exchangeability that the valorizing labour of the proletariat gives to products. But the proletariat knows value only as capital. Value is what has to be valorized, and this only happens through the contradictory relationship of the classes. Therefore, the theory of value cannot be a theory of revolution. The theory of value is only a part of the theory of revolution—and probably not the most decisive. That does not mean, however, that we should simply dismiss it. Within the framework of the abstractive effort by which communist theory understands the relation between capitalism and communism, the theory of value plays a double function. First, the theory of value asserts the link between labour and the ghostlike forms taken by its products in the capitalist mode of production, namely value and money. This link posits labour and its exploitation, i.e. the contradictory relation between the classes, as the real subject of the apparently automatic development of an apparently reified society. Second, the definition of value as the social form of the means of production and of value production as a historically specific, standardizing, and productivist activity gives a key to understanding the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production. Each successive form of communist theory relied on its implicit or

explicit understanding of value to project its negation and give a more or less precise definition of *value abolished*. And this definition contributes in turn to the critique of political economy and the revolutionary project by assigning it its goal. Although logically the definition of value seems to come first, it is always formulated with an implicit or explicit idea in mind, grounded in the struggles at the time, of what value abolished could mean. We saw this with Marx (chapters 1 and 2). The redefinition of value that I offer is no exception to the rule. It proceeds from the specific conditions of crisis in the years around 1968 and its anti-work content. That phase of not really insurrectional crisis¹ occurred years ago. But the changes in the class relation since then have in no way brought that content into question (see above, *Crisis activity and communisation*). I discussed above the two defining features of value-producing labour: the permanent quest for productivity gains and the necessity of standardization (see chapter 3.3). What definition could we give of the negation of these two features, negation that would define “value abolished”?

4.5.1 Negation of productivity

If we consider a productive activity that does not seek productivity, the first thing that strikes us is a completely different relationship to time. The fact that time is no longer measured doesn't mean it no longer exists. However, when it is negated as the criterion for evaluating productive activity, time's inexorable flow ceases to be a constraint on production. The commodity-based society accepts or rejects the participation of a producer by evaluating the time he spent producing his commodities. The resulting constraint on the producer is to constantly check that he produces at maximum efficiency. Failure to observe this rule leads to his exclusion from the society of producers by excluding his commodities from the mar-

¹ See B. Astarian, *The French strikes of May-June 1968*, <http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/accueil/the-french-strikes-of-may-june-1968-5>

ket. The negation of productivity replaces this quantitative time-based appreciation of the legitimacy of a productive activity with a qualitative evaluation. We lack words to describe the relationship that humans will have with their production in a valueless society. “Appreciation” derives from price, “evaluation” from value. These are words of the commodity world, of quantity. Neither is suitable to define the qualitative satisfaction that, in communism, is generated (or not) by a productive activity, for those who produce or who use the product. One of the reasons is that the activity we are considering *won't only be productive*.

In class societies, production of the material conditions of life and enjoyment are separated, each defining one of the two classes, labour and property. “Enjoyment”—as opposed to immediate work—designates here the activity of the class of property. The surplus that the latter derives from exploiting labour enables it to establish a self-relationship that labour is unable to develop. This self-relationship concerns not only the owner’s management of his property but, by extension, the exploitation of labour and the management of society as a whole, as well as so-called superior activities like art and thought. Enjoyment refers here to much more than the pleasures of luxury and leisure.

In work *per se*, the activity’s object consists of the means of production (tools, raw material, etc.). Limiting ourselves to that framework, the activity is objectified in a result (the product) that, by definition, is not a subject but a thing. The worker’s subjectivity seems to have been lost in the thing (which cannot react). This explains why objectivation is in this sense frequently equated with alienation. In fact, neither the worker nor the owner are subjects in and of themselves. In a fundamental sense, to say that humans are subjects means that they produce themselves, that they are their own object in social relations that change from their activity. In this sense, the objectivation of work is not so much the product as the social relationship that results from work and its exploitation. Work

and property—their relation—is what constitutes the subject. It is only at that level that we can grasp man producing himself as history. In a class society, the subject of human self-production is structured by the relation of the two classes to the same means of production, one as a means of work and the other as a means of enjoyment. The objectivation of this divided subject is a *contradictory* social relation. Neither of the poles, can on its own, posit society as its exclusive object and act on it according to its class-determined being. Each of them is prevented from relating directly to that object by the contradictory relationship necessarily linking it to the other. In other words, each class is separated from the social totality, which develops independently of either class' will.

Production that has time, as opposed to labour, can enjoy its own activity immediately. It can be a self-relationship. The negation of productivity incorporates enjoyment into the activity, which thereby becomes not-only-productive. Here, again, enjoyment must be understood in the broad sense of the term. Effort and fatigue are not excluded. The mind and body can enjoy them in an activity freed from the constraint of time because it is possible to stop, to discuss, to do something else, to make changes, to adapt the activity to the participants' possibilities and requirements, etc. No word exists for this kind of activity. Let's call this totalizing activity—in which humans do not have to give up enjoying their relationship because they produce something—a *not-only-productive-activity* (NOPA). This formulation conveys the same idea of overcoming separations as Marx's in *The German Ideology* when he discusses the appropriation of a totality of instruments of production as the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves. But, unlike Marx, we attempt to go beyond the limits of the productive sphere. For us, the "totality of capacities" exceeds the sphere of production and subverts the very concept of an economy by rejecting time accounting and by directly incorporating self-enjoyment into what was formerly production. For Marx, what

defines a totalizing activity is the acquisition of multiple skills by communist workers. For us, it is simply individuals doing more than just producing as they move through the places of life/production in search of the company of others.

The negation of productivity that we posit here naturally presupposes the abolition of property. Only then (when exploitation is ended) can productive activity cease to be subject to time accounting. Then, not-only-productive-activity is man's real conscious goal, not just the thing produced. This is objectivation without alienation, i.e. objectivation in the relationships that people establish among themselves, in which production and enjoyment are no longer mutually exclusive and become the true object of their activity. NOPA is a comprehensive relation among people and with nature. Individuals incorporate the sources and manifestations of their pleasure at being together into that *also-productive* relationship because they have the time and thus no reason not to do so. And they put the means of their immediate reproduction in that *also-enjoying* relationship, which is now possible because the new relation to time opens the way for a totalizing activity. In that sense, their activity requires no further justification, either external or subsequent. To be, not to have.

4.5.2 Negation of standardization

As we said above (chapter 3.3.2), product standardization is a consequence of the separation characterizing the situation of the independent private producer in relation to the needs he has to satisfy. To understand what overcoming standardization implies, we have to envisage what the abolition of separations (separations that we perceive as totally normal) could mean. The separation that concerns us most here lies between the need and the object satisfying that need and even more, between the need and the activity producing that object. Due to this separation, the commodity must take the form of a standardized utility value so that

it can encompass the particularity of everyone's needs and at the same time occult that particularity. If, according to our hypothesis, we posit property as positively abolished, the certainty of finding satisfaction defines need as *need-without-want* (NWW). This NWW, or need at peace, can assert its particularity not as an individual whim (I want strawberries immediately), but as discussion, as interaction, as a project that is not simply consumption. We have to redefine the notion of need.

A redefinition of productive activity as not-only-productive-activity will no doubt raise protest among those who, as realists, argue that the needs will be massive. Communist production, they will surely claim, will have to mobilize all available resources to satisfy those needs. And they will draw up economic plans to organize the aftermath of the revolution. Instead of giving in to overly reasonable realism, we should question the categories we use. We have to examine the problem of resources and needs from a non-economic perspective and question the very notion of need. In communism, should we continue positing needs as "demand," a quasi-natural variable, to be met by productive activity as a "supply" subjected to necessity? The answer is no. It is always possible to argue, on the basis of the obvious, apparently natural, fact, that six billion people need two thousand calories per day, entailing the production of x wheat + y meat + z milk... As realistic common sense would say, communism won't overcome hunger any more than it could get rid of gravity. Hunger reminds us continuously that we are part of nature and that no revolution can abolish the laws of nature. That is true. But hunger in its present form, as we know it today, also reminds us that we are separated by capital not only from the object of its satisfaction but also from the activity producing that object. Hunger reminds us simultaneously that we are part of nature *and* that we are separated from it by capital. So our hunger isn't *only* natural. We know hunger, a natural phenomenon *par excellence*, solely as it has been perverted by property and exploitation into

suffering, fear of want, domination of capital on the object that can satisfy it. Under such conditions, how can we tell whether hunger as we feel it is purely natural or determined socially? Doesn't it appear at intervals dictated by the workday and the rhythm of exploitation? Conversely, once it is devoid of anxiety and assured of satisfaction, why shouldn't hunger be enjoyment as well, like desire during the preliminaries to lovemaking, which is actively involved in the satisfaction of the lovers' need? The basic need (two thousand calories) remains the same but, as need-without-want, becomes an integral part of the not-only-productive-activity that simultaneously reveals and satisfies it. These general considerations are only a first approach to what the non-economy could be in the communisation process.

Need-without-want enters into not-only-productive-activity to ensure that the productive activity remains particular to the individuals who engage in it—and not general and abstract, meeting a separate demand. This is totally anti-productive because considerable time will be “lost” in formulating the need in its particularity, taking in consideration both the nature of the object to be produced and the possibilities for producing it. A common objection is that certain needs can only be satisfied by dirty jobs. Will the need for coal turn mining into an activity that includes enjoyment? Yes. The participation of need-without-want in not-only-productive-activity doesn't mean that the individuals concerned should consciously admit coal *has to* be mined and set themselves to the task. This would be ultra-democratic planning, assumed by militant workers. What it means is that coal will be mined in such a way that it becomes a relationship among people that is satisfying *per se*. Producing not-immediately-consumable goods or goods for others will not entail any sacrifice. This likewise applies to immediately-consumable goods. Realists say: “there will always be dirty tasks; they will have to be done.” I consider it essential to clearly affirm that there won't be dirty jobs anymore.

Tasks that are presently dirty, degrading, boring, etc. will be either abandoned or transformed. The alternative is to take turns, thereby introducing managers and privileges, unless one accepts the notion of communist men and women as militants.

In short, there will be no time so-called lost. The continuous interaction between not-only-productive-activity and need-without-want is materialized as social activity and enjoyment of the individuals. Since a need is not determined by pressing want, it emerges concretely and actively within NOPA, where it is readily discussed because there is time and the activity is, by definition, not just productive. The activity is more important than what it produces in the sense that the fundamental need is to exist socially, to enjoy the society of others. This does not contradict needs for solitude. Marx says that work will be the first need because he sees work as man's fundamental subjective (generic) activity. This proposition must be broadened: social activity, i.e. enjoying being free and conscious, social and natural, active and passive, will be the first need. The notion of NWW tries to convey the possibility of need as interaction among individuals, as conscious project, rather than as a natural limit imposing economic realism and planification on the part of revolutionaries. *If* work and property are posited as positively overcome, then need has to be envisaged as without want, which in the final analysis is part of not-only-productive-activity.

Conclusion

Of course, this *if* is a major shortcut, and the above doesn't fill the gap satisfactorily. The theory of value is not a theory of revolution. The theory of revolution assumes an understanding of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society. That contradiction takes place within the class relation, which alone holds potential for overcoming capital and abolishing classes, work, exploitation, and value. As we have seen, the prerequisite is the insurrectional social relation. Here much remains to be done to understand why

and how communisation will get production under way again without productivist measures. These questions go beyond the scope of this text.

Ultimately, our revision of the Marxian theory of value has been useful mainly in disposing of the non-problem of abstract labour. In value theory, abstract labour is the sign of a programmatic vision of communist theory in general: revolution is projected as the self-affirmation of the working class and its substitution for the capitalist class. On that basis, communism is defined as the hegemonic rule of labour (“one who doesn’t work doesn’t eat”), economic planning by “associated workers.” In this program, work is practically the same before and after the revolution. Value-producing labour is termed “abstract” to mask this identity.

As for us, we have concretely defined value-producing labour as the quest for gains in productivity and in standardization. By defining valorizing labour concretely, we made it easier to understand what a valueless productive activity could be. We showed that it necessarily is a not-only-productive activity, which overcomes labour. The relation to time is radically transformed, as is the notion of need. People’s freedom and consciousness are realized in a non-economic activity, which is no longer subject to the pressure of time and to the separation between needs and the resources to meet them. Like many others concepts, those of “production” and “consumption” are then obsolete.

Part Three

An A to Z of Communitisation

Gilles Dauvé

Pentheus: That makes no sense.

Dionysus: Sense is nonsense to a fool.

Euripides, *Bacchae*, 405 BC

Some people will find our propositions insane or naïve.

We do not expect to convince everyone. If such a thing were possible, it would be very disturbing. We would rather have readers who have to rub their eyes before granting credence to our positions.

A World Without Money: Communism, 1975

AUTONOMY

In 2012, radical Oakland occupiers made it clear that “no permission would be asked, no demands would be made, no negotiation with the police and city administration:” nobody or no body had the power to grant them anything relevant, so there was no point in bargaining with wannabe representatives.

Participatory decision-making implies a communal capacity often called “self-empowerment.” Autonomy is inclusive. As participants share an equal stake in the creation of a different world, the most important thing in their lives becomes their relation to others, and this interdependence extends far beyond the circle of relatives and friends.

In a different time and place, some people have stressed the spontaneity of many recent Chinese strikes, demonstrations, protests, street blockades, and riots. Other observers have emphasized the careful planning that takes place beforehand. Yet organization and spontaneity are two sides of the same coin. A self-initiated work-stoppage needs previous secret talks and meetings, and its continuity needs durable independent information channels (such as a mutual help hotline) and decision-making structures.

However, the *ideology* of autonomy is one of the up-to-date nostrums. **Autonomy** is acting by oneself: it says nothing about what this individual or collective self actually does. In the ebbs and flows of social battles, most occupations and strikes meet the limit of one company, one neighbourhood, one town, one city. Workplace, neighbourhood, kinship, etc. create a potential community of struggle that by its own strength alone can certainly self-manage an occupation, a strike, even community life for a while... but it is not enough to break the logjam.

How does a community of struggle create more than its

struggle? Can it go beyond rituals of social partnership? How does solidarity not become an end in itself? When can a collective wield its transformative power?

Unlike a book divided into chapters that gradually make their point from beginning to end, this A to Z is more like a dictionary in which each entry is to be read in relation to all the others. It is by accident that *autonomy* begins with the first letter of the alphabet. But it is no accident that self-activity should be a starting point. Autonomy is a necessary condition of the whole A to Z of communisation. It does not encapsulate the whole process.

Occupational Hazards: The Rise & Limitation of Occupy Oakland, CAL Press, 2012

New Strikes in China, gongchao.org

Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China*, Cornell U.P., 2014

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Autonomy, troploin site, 2008

See INSURRECTION, CLASS, LABOUR

BLUE COLLAR

In Italy, 1969, after work stoppages for wage increases at the Mirafiori plant, the movement escalated until labour started repossessing the workplace: internal marches, meetings, debates, rotating strikes. As fear was switching sides and top-down authority broke down, the relation of the worker to his work changed. Before, though he felt no love for work, he regarded it as an inevitable fact of life. Now, this necessity appeared conditioned by forces that collective labour could act upon.

It was an active strike, but it was still a strike. Autonomy had

changed scale: it had not changed level. Labour was “taking the factory into its own hands,” a new balance of power was born... then what? “I’ve finally now realised we’re not just fighting the boss, we’re fighting everything,” a Fiat worker said (*Lotta Continua*, November 7, 1969). Everything was at stake. In fact, *everything* can be exhilarating but prove too much of a challenge: *everything* brings one close to a tipping point, putting one’s life support system in jeopardy.

Outside the workplace, the movement spread into worker districts, schools, hospitals, media.... But the heart of the system was left intact: rent, bus fares, bills, taxes, i.e., all that had to do with housing, transport, shopping, utilities, money for the State... Despite many attacks on those terrains (self-reduction, looting...), there was no attempt at a “world without money,” which would have implied doing away with the workplace and with work separate from the rest of life.

Paradoxically, as it extended, the protest lost its cutting edge. Meanwhile, the bourgeois sat out the deadlock, and after 1980 found new means of controlling labour.

At about the same time, in the Argentine *cordobazo* (1969), worker/popular neighbourhoods asserted themselves in self-defence against bosses and police. The insurgents took over the city and did not do anything with it. They stayed where they were. Their strength derived from what they were and where they were: it was also their limitation.

These are only two examples among many. Because no insurrection so far has durably attempted to effectively communise society—which means the insurgents communising themselves—all past and recent historical endeavours reached a stage where their breaking point happened to be their end point.

The 1970s are now regarded as the Western working classes’ gallant but desperate last stand. Blue-collar workers are less lionized than given a bad image. While Asian factory workers receive

considerable praise, in the West their colleagues are treated as a dying species. The Western working class has been progressively disempowered, and it's for the best, some say, since the average worker, especially male and white, tends to be parochial, sexist, racist, possibly a far-right voter, in any case "integrated" into this society, as Marcuse used to write: only concerned with a cash-and-hours agenda. The metal worker is no longer a working-class hero, he is more a liability than a historical asset, only capable of lubricating the social machinery. The working class is consequently ignored or ditched as an inadequate "revolutionary subject." This argument lists a variety of reasons. Because the working class never made the revolution it was supposed to spearhead. Because when it did try (in 1917), it created a nightmare. Because if they had ever got the upper hand, workers would have promoted a productivist model detrimental to the environment. Because class is a divisive bourgeois category. Because there are and will be fewer and fewer industrial workers in a service and information economy.

According to this world view, we ought to look for an entirely newly-defined proletariat: an overlap of groups defined not by their position in production relationships, but in power relationships: women, people of colour, ex-colonial subjects, mental patients, sexual minorities, outcasts, undocumented persons, etc., workers being just one category among many. In the main, the newly-received version focuses on a combination of identities that intersect to form a multi-layer class.

The matter is shelved rather than solved by this catch-all concept.

Our concern is what revolution will **do**. Surely, no revolution can happen without mass strikes and blockades, which are unlikely to be achieved *only* by people outside the workplace: a university lecturer and a power-plant technician do not have the same social leverage. But that does not tell us what either of them will do once the insurrection is under way. The crux of the matter is not the

personnel of the revolution.

D. Giachetti, M. Scavino, *La Fiat aux mains des ouvriers: L'Automne chaud de 1969 à Turin*, Les Nuits Rouges, 2004

J. Brennan, *Working Class Protest, Popular Revolt & Urban Insurrection in Argentina: the 1969 Cordobazo*, 1994, libcom

See CLASS, LABOUR, NON-ECONOMY, INSURRECTION, WORK

CLASS

Though “class” talk is often equated with a marker of radicalism, focusing on class struggle is not a specific tenet of communist theory:

“[L]ong before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle,” and “what I did that was new” was to prove how it led “*to the abolition of all classes.*” (Marx)

Class is a group defined by its specific interests in relation to or against another group. It is not a question of manual work, nor of poverty, but of property. Not just legal ownership: what matters is who manages society and, first of all, its productive material basis. Neither is property necessarily individual: in the USSR, the Russian bureaucratic elite collectively controlled the economy and the State. Yet property was private in the sense that the vast majority was deprived of any say over the running of society, today’s bourgeoisie control the means of production as much as in 1848, and today’s proletarians are equally dispossessed (though usually not disfranchised) as in 1848. The bourgeoisie is the one who can hire other people, put them to work, and therefore profit from them.

This implies a belonging, an ability of the group to self-define

in a confrontation between “Us and Them.” It does not follow that the proletarians confront the bourgeois in order to get rid of the labour/capital divide: most of the time, labour fights to claim a bigger share of social wealth. The proletarians are not revolutionary in essence. Only practices that start to get to the roots of the social divide open up communist potentials. A prime condition is for the confrontation to go beyond the workplace. Then new issues can be raised: What of other social groups? The police and army? The man/woman relation? Employed people and the jobless? Workers and looters? Homeless and renters?

When Dhaka police invade slum areas, this draws in a wider community: strikers turn into rioters. In the last ten years, there have been dozens of factories burnt down in Bangladesh. When proletarians destroy their own means of livelihood, they start acting against their very existence as proletarians. This was not done by a raving mob, but by a coordinated mass. Some groups blocked the road so firemen could not put out the fires, while others attacked a business area. This is when borders are more likely to break.

In a very different situation, the 2011 London rioters came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The media made much of the fact that torching a carpet showroom destroyed thirty flats that housed poor tenants. Law and order will always conflate street-fighting with nihilistic violence and try to sort out the good (the deserving wage-earners) from the bad (the undeserving rabble). We cannot answer this by drawing our own “radical” demarcation line between positive anti-police brick-throwing and unacceptable shop-wrecking or luxury looting, between true proles and a merely destructive sub-class. Let politicians denounce welfare scroungers and sociologists debate on the *working class* as opposed to the *underclass*. We are not looking for the Real Proletariat. It’s best to ask why sections of the proletariat reject forms of political protest that have failed to bring about real lower class life changes. Rioting breaks with usual socialization and causes a variety of

behaviours, displays of solidarity as well as “anti-social” attitudes. Only communist insurrections will be able to re-socialize their participants and build a new type of community. This question has been hanging over theory for over a century: “[...] *a mere general strike by itself* has ceased to play the role it once did. Now nothing but a general uprising on the streets can bring about a decision.” (Rosa Luxemburg)

Any significant historical movement is born out of social relations (first of all productive relations, then—in present society—class relations), builds on them, and risks confining itself to them.

Class is a weapon and is a limitation, and the proletarians cannot evade this contradiction: revolution is the time when they settle scores with the bourgeois, but also *with themselves*.

The proletariat begins, to one degree or another, as those who individually have nothing to lose but their chains and becomes those who collectively have this existence. This class is a matter of “life conditions” and not “identification.” (Kill the Ism)

Marx, letter to J. Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852

R. Marriott, *Tailoring to Needs: Garment Worker Struggles in Bangladesh*, 2010, Insurgent Notes site.

Detest & Survive, Self-Deregulation & Asset Reallocation in the UK, August 2011, wildca-www.de

R. Luxemburg, letter to L. and K. Kautsky, January 2, 1906, quoted in J.P. Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Schocken Books, 1966

Kill the Ism...anti-publicity for the modern era blog, February 1, 2014

See BLUE COLLAR, INSURRECTION, KARL (MARX), JAILBREAK

DAILY LIFE

Everything today comes under (usually verbal) attack: inequality, finance, suffering at work as well as the plight of the jobless, productivism, sexism, commodification of the self, ecological degradation, tourism, addiction to speed, industrial food, energy waste... not a week goes by without a new critical essay against either the trammels of convention or the excesses of modernity. But the attack addresses fragments, detached from their seemingly inaccessible totality. Communitarianism would re-connect these disjointed parts by dealing with their common cause.

For example, today, growing one's food is impossible for most people. Each meal is one more proof of our utter dependency on a system beyond our reach. The crisis, however, is making a virtue out of necessity. In Detroit's inner city, with so many people out of jobs and the city out of money, vegetable gardens have appeared on empty, vacant, or foreclosed lots. At least fifteen thousand residents have turned their backyards into allotments. At present, urban farming is a way of supplementing a meagre income for the poor, and a leisurely fad for the middle classes. Just as yoga alleviates work stress, growing and eating organic is therapeutic.

It is another matter entirely when the experience clashes with vested interests. There's a difference in scale if most consumed food no longer comes from a supermarket: then it shakes the political balance. Reclaiming large expanses of previously common and now enclosed land implies fighting privatization and building another type of community. The property issue is raised, and with it the question of class. Gardening tools, seeds, and water supply cannot be all locally-produced, so people have to invent new productive ways. Re-appropriating what is common cannot be equated with just taking it over and managing it. As the proletarians are the property-less, with no money and no capital, it is impossible for them to produce with the same methods and norms.

In 2013, Jakarta was rocked by a revolt against a government

plan to raise the price of subsidized fuel. Daily life and workplace coalesced into a sprawling resistance. The city's satellite industrial centres were paralyzed, while demonstrators and rioters occupied the streets.

The difference between Detroit's urban farms and Jakarta's riots is not the presence or degree of violence. Even if only for a few days or weeks, the Indonesian rebellion brought together usually separated dimensions of the proletarian condition: productive labour and reproduction of labour power, work and home. On this terrain—a confrontational one—daily-life changes can start to have a generative subversive effect, as long as the people involved keep upping the stakes against huge inertial forces.

Capital, money, wage labour, and the economy are very material realities, so criticism of them must come down to earth. Objects solidify relationships. For instance, a tower block full of three-room flats materializes the coexistence of hundreds of nuclear families. Another example is the ever-expanding panoply of digital communicating prostheses. Capitalism deprives people of social links, then gives links back in the form of commodities. It has the ability to integrate billions, even those who can only afford a cheap mobile. The cell phone *does* (re)connect atomized individuals.

Experience shows how reversible conditioned reflexes are. In 1924, André Breton cautioned us about the “paucity of reality.” Partitions can be brought down in tower block flats. However impressive today's digital paraphernalia are, there is no need to worry about screen addiction: we will suppress, divert, and devise ways of communicating. (Besides, let's not be judgemental about smartphones: in the past, quite a few good people were unable to pass a day without buying a paper.) Watertight compartments can break down.

Historical changeovers are material as well as subjective. Today's machines have the inherent characteristic of requiring more machinery, at an ever-growing pace, with constant, compulsory

updating. They function like life-support systems: we cannot do without them, and, what's worse, we do not know how they operate. People good with their hands are able to fix a car engine: repairing a computer hardly makes sense. So a criterion for communisation would be to use procedures and technologies that end the productivity and standardization drive that infuses every level of our lives and urges us to count and save time all the time.

Communisation is when proletarians start acting and relating to each other differently. The sense of community is certainly not innate; neither is selfcentredness. Contrary to popular (or elite) belief, environmental disasters do not necessarily unleash a panic-stricken self-destructive mob: they often bring about solidarity and inventiveness. Afterwards, social difference and division reassert themselves. In an insurrection, the participants change... and change themselves at the same time:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration that can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (Marx)

Yet capitalism also rids "itself of all the muck of ages," so much so that it seems endlessly flexible and regenerative. In the current sliding scale of values, it is often the upholders of the norm that invite ridicule. Capitalism is endowed with a fertile imagination, market universalism is anything but feeble, and the ruling classes are experienced artful dodgers. Communisation cannot avoid navigating shifting sands. Only when we do away with the social division of labour, and with all sorts of separation, will daily life reach a point of universality unmediated by commodities.

P. Storm, *Battlefield Indonesia*, 2013, libcom

A. Breton, *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, 1924

R. Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell*, Penguin, 2010

Marx, *German Ideology*, 1845, Part I, D

See CLASS, INSURRECTION, MONEY, NON-ECONOMY, TIME, WORK

ECOLOGY

It is not the bourgeois lust for money that makes *productivism* a built-in feature of capitalism. It is the competition of firms, each of them a pole of accumulated value trying to expand, which leads to over-production and over-growth. Likewise, “extractivism” is a side-effect—albeit a major one—of the system’s basic imperative: “Grow or die.”

From NAFTA (1992) to the currently-discussed TAFTA, government agreements have managed to protect the expansion of global trade against trade-restrictive climate policies. Successive climate negotiations aim at reducing the carbon emissions... caused by the carbon-spewing fleet required by sea, air, and road transport. Roosevelt said he wished to save capitalism from itself: facing climate change in our time will prove a harder task than having a New Deal a century before. The “push” factors that create the problem are still at work.

Only producing and consuming differently will be able to lower carbon emissions to a level that one hopes would minimise global temperature rise. Not because of more planet-conscious management: only breaking with productivity can bring about de-growth. Exploited labour and exploited planet go together, and the latter depends on the former. The fate of the rain forest is linked to the human, i.e. proletarian, condition. The ecological problem is

not to readjust the planet, but to change ourselves. All the goodwill in the world will never be enough to tip the scales. Success in cutting down carbon emissions will not come out of a will to save nature, even less out of proletarians' willingness to tighten their belts for the sake of their environment, but only out of a fight to radically improve their condition by transforming their relation to production. Production (i.e. production of value, of surplus value) now rules. The way out of the capitalist economy is a "non-economy" where productive acts and techniques are more than merely productive.

At present, tyre workers want tyre production to go on in order to keep their jobs, and who's to blame them? Most of us use cars.

But when the *road monster* is addressed by workers and local people, what was previously split between workplace demands and "reclaim the street" protests starts to fuse into something that goes to the root cause. Since capital is circulation, it needs cost-cutting transport, with ever-faster trains, ships, planes, and lorries. Besides, the individual car still epitomizes freedom. The motor industry has expanded from a labour process into a way of life. So the road question opens up onto how we move, what we transport, where and how we live, as illustrated by *Reclaim the Streets* in the UK in the 1990s. Part of it (actions against machinery and property) conflicted directly with State and capital. However, its separation from larger issues enabled democratic bargaining to sit out the movement.

Opposition to new airports (Narita in the 60s-70s, Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France since 2013), based on the idea of a commonwealth ("this space is ours"), causes wars of attrition and usually ends in partial defeat. Few workers are involved, and when they are, they are dissociated (in reality and in their minds) from their life in the office or on the shopfloor.

In contrast, the Taranto ILVA conflict pointed the way towards a connection between labour and ecological struggle, all the more so

because some of it developed in autonomy vis-à-vis the State and the unions. ILVA, the biggest European steel mill (with a work force of twelve thousand), was also probably the most lethal workplace and town in Europe (with sixteen hundred fifty related deaths per year, and fifteen to thirty percent more cases of cancer than in the rest of Italy). In 2010, a court ordered the factory closure: later the order was reversed, then it was partly implemented. Actually, the health predicament was also an economic (i.e. profitability) one: European steel mills are said to have an overcapacity of thirty percent.

Your job or your life? Money v. life. Local authorities and unions opted for what they regarded as the lesser evil. But when a big “Let’s save jobs” rally took place on August 2, 2010, hundreds of people disrupted the consensus with songs, jokes, and slogans: a Free & Conscious Citizens & Workers Committee asked for the plant to be shut down and that ILVA made to pay for the human and natural disaster it had been causing for decades. As a committee member said, “Before, people went to football matches and that was all. Now they’re in the street and talking to each other.” Another commented, “It’s like the whole town had been waiting for that demo for years.” A local woman described “a potential repossessing of our destiny, bottom-up this time.”

In 2013, an Italian court ordered 8 billion euros of ILVA’s assets to be frozen, to make up for what ILVA had failed to invest in safety and environmental measures. At the time of writing, Arcelor-Mittal (the biggest steel and mining company in the world) might buy ILVA, provided that Italian public money pays for ecological damage.

Meanwhile, the committee is still active, but has not grown strong enough to impose its solutions. In 2014, it had about thirty permanent members and one hundred sympathizers. Most of the workers are at a loss.

The anti-ILVA movement could be interpreted as another labour and environment failure on both counts: class and ecology.

Its participants realize that only overall change will do. A couple of years ago, a worker member of the Committee said: "Above all, we must think about what will come after ILVA: what activities we'll do, what we'll live off, maybe turn to the sea, restore ruins that go back to Ancient Greece, renovate the old town..." Yet, overall change in Taranto will imply a lot more than Taranto.

Up to now, few proletarian struggles have brought up environmental issues, and the cold hard fact of ecological struggles is that they merely act to "green" capitalism. Nuclear power stations go on or, as in Germany, they are replaced by so-called clean coal-fired plants. World economy needs more energy not less, and Big Green and Big Business go hand in hand.

It would be an illusion to believe that environmental issues are more inclusive than labour struggles because impending disasters concern us all. The imminence of a catastrophe does not mean that billions of people will do something about it. Despite countless examples of festive and/or violent opposition to the degradation of the natural and social environment, vital change can only occur when the challenge becomes more than a one-issue struggle, when the ecological extends to the social, linking pollution to industry, industry to profit-making, profit-making to labour, labour to capital/labour relation, and class to State power. This raises the stakes to a possible breaking point: insurrection no longer just fights the police, it also creates new social and productive relations.

Communisation is the only way to de-growth. Workers would stop working in places that are dangerous for them and detrimental for the environment. Then the question becomes *what* to do. For instance, agro-ecology is impossible when agro-business rules. Nowadays, Andalusian mega-farms manufacture *organic* cherry tomatoes, rely on over-exploited labour, waste lots of input, then have the output sent any day of the year to Finnish or Polish supermarkets. Only non-productivist holistic techniques sequester carbon in the soil and use less carbon for transport.

A. Bordiga, *The Human Species & the Earth's Crust*, 1952
“Auto Struggles: The Developing War against the Road Monster,” *Aufheben* # 3, 1994
Struggles in Italy website
H. Rogers, *Green Gone Wrong: How Our Economy is Undermining the Environmental Revolution*, Scribner, 2010
N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Simon & Schuster, 2014

See **INSURRECTION, NON-ECONOMY, TIME, WORK**

FAMILY

“[T]he concept of mother has absorbed the concept of woman [...] function has nullified the individual,” so “[...] resolution of this problem lies solely in a proper resolution of the economic question. In revolution. And nowhere else.”

Lucia Sanchez Saornil

It all hinges on what is meant by “economic question.”

Class domination does not explain **all** of masculine domination, which long pre-dated capitalism.

Saying that the emancipation of woman will be part of proletarian emancipation is true, but is only valid if we understand that women’s liberation is not a mere *consequence* of revolution: it is one of its *integral parts*. Looking back at the demise of past insurrections, what happened to women was not just the result of a general defeat; it was one of the causes of defeat. In Spain, it is in the Autumn of 1936 (i.e. *before* the militarisation of the militia) that women were expelled from front-line fighting and sent home or restricted to non-armed roles (one self-defeating measure among

others). And it would be historically wrong to put the blame only on the bureaucrats: a man-first political culture was widespread among the rank-and-file as well.

Every society must have mastery over the (re)making of life. The question is *whose* control over *whose* reproduction. Up to now, nearly all societies have done it by forcing women into a submissive role. In today's world ruled by the capital/wage labour relation, it is the reproduction of labour power that organizes masculine domination. The family does not create masculine domination, but that is where it takes place. Unlike the *Brave New World* children, kids are still born by what a 17th century London doctor called the "trivial and vulgar way of coition." But it is not because she bears children that woman is subjugated, it is because motherhood happens within the framework of the family, which forces her to specialize in activities that confine her to an inferior status. And whatever historical origins the family may have, in modern times it is structured and maintained by private property. True, most people have hardly anything to bequeath, but the social function of property does not end there. Even people with just 500 in the bank generally live in a family circle that restricts and protects them at the same time; that 500 is all the more precious as the group has no other reserves, and its existence revolves around the upkeep and welfare of children. The family framework is a constraint and a shelter. Even more so in times of crisis when fear of loss (loss of job, of money, of home, of partner) is widespread.

In spite of a diversity of household models, a broader range of patterns, and a rising divorce rate, the family is not on the wane. Blended families are nuclear. Though in North America and Europe there is a lot more task-sharing between man and woman in the home, that changes nothing about the fact that woman stays locked in a traditional mother's role.

As long as the family remains the basic unit of society, masculine domination will prevail, albeit toned down and cushioned. Men

“naturally” have a public life. Whatever public life they have (in politics or business), women also have to fulfil their role in the home; and the adverb is loaded with ambiguity, as this *also* so often translates into *mainly* or *chiefly*.

Female submission is also visible in many social conflicts: though women act outside their homes, they are still bound by home-related tasks. Quite often, in a strike or even an insurrection, family and home issues are treated as private (i.e. womanly) matters, as opposed to general questions regarding the running of the struggle. Therefore creating a day centre or a communal kitchen will shift the individual woman’s burden to a collective... run by women. This does not change the man/woman balance of power any more than female PMs or admirals change the nature of the ruling class.

Only an insurrection that starts altering the family structure—i.e. getting rid of the family as the social nucleus—as the focus and transmitter of private property, will move women from the private sphere to the public realm.

This will not be done by having children forcibly brought up in dormitories. Collectivizing kids (as well as women) was, and perhaps still is, a bourgeois nightmarish vision of communism: doing away with private property was equated with total negation of the individual. We would rather tentatively describe communisation as the creation of a way of life in which children could be the children of all, as much as the children of their parents. We have no blueprint for this revolution in parenthood, which will be achieved jointly by men and women. Short of that, revolution would soon exhaust its propulsive power. To quote Lucia Sanchez Saornil again, “Anything else would merely be calling the same old slavery by a new name.”

M. Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism & the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, AK Press, 2005

The Question of Feminism, excerpt from “The Woman Question in Our Ranks,” originally published in the CNT

paper, *Solidaridad Obrera*, September–October 1935, by Lucia Sanchez Saornil (1895–1970, anarchist, poet, feminist and lesbian, co-founder of *Mujeres Libres*), recollectionbooks.com

See INSURRECTION, SEX

GIOTTO

Orwell wrote a scathing criticism of the “slovenliness and vagueness” of political speech, its “staleness of imagery” and “lack of precision;” “Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.” Nearly seventy years later, the plight of the proletariat is complemented by the poverty of language. The impoverishment is not absolute (the word flow is staggering, nearly two hundred billion emails per day), but relative (in terms of form and content, with the rise of Globish*, texting and stilted administrative lingo).

By contrast, resisters and rioters make a point of speaking for themselves, which requires a re-appropriation of words and an innovative language. Instead of being confined to the back of an envelope or a laptop screen, poetic creativity suffuses oral speech, leaflets, text messages, posters, papers... Mental acuity and linguistic clarity go together.

That being said, insurrectionary times are also fertile ground for stereotyped romantic idiom and imagery, with the risk of word inflation turning into hollow and padded discourse. Nothing rings through the words any more. Language is weighed down.

The ebbing of revolution goes with expression that functions as a substitute for action, with a twofold outcome. From the bottom, folk art and a simplistic depiction of the people and its archetypal

*Globish is a trademarked name for a subset of the English language formalized by Jean-Paul Nerrière. It uses a subset of standard English grammar, and a list of 1500 English words.

enemies (the bourgeois are always fat). From the top, propagandist pomposity: grandiose educational French revolution paintings, post-1917 Russian agitprop posters, Mexican murals in the 1930s. When the social movement fails to change the mode of life, it loses its autonomy, therefore its own language, which sooner or later is taken back by specialists.

On the other hand, in previous revolutions, a number of thinkers, factions, and leaders opposed art, which they perceived as unsocial and corrupting. Rousseau would much rather have the locals organize a village fête than watch a play. He was not alone in thinking that the people's simple pleasures illustrate and maintain the virtues of grassroots community. Moralizing is a sure sign of the revolution withdrawing inward and dying off.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of a self-critique of art. It is no coincidence that Duchamp's *Fountain* ("ready-made" out of a urinal) and Malevich's *White on White* painting respectively appeared in 1917 and 1918. They seemed to substantiate the claim that "art is dead" as a social relationship. The 1919 German Dadaists' programme asked for "The introduction of progressive unemployment through comprehensive mechanization of every field of activity. Only by unemployment does it become possible for the individual to achieve certainty as to the truth of life and finally become accustomed to experience [...]"

Avant-garde artists recognized an issue that they could not address on their own. In Russia, they sided with the Bolshevik party. The failure of "communist futurism" paralleled the downfall of the proletariat. The tidal wave was drowning everybody, and the revolution was long dead when Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 drove the final nail into the artists' contribution to the overthrow of the dominant social order.

"Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realizing it; surrealism wanted to realize art without suppressing it." (Debord)

Anti-art is art now, and boundaries are blurred between elite

and mainstream art. In the age of the high-low mix, the rock star quotes Rimbaud and the academic loves rap. Because of these shifting borders, it is difficult to think of art as having a subversive effect in a communisation process.

In the past, iconoclasm was a frequent feature of revolutionary times: after 1789 in France for example, when anti-religious *vandalism* was rampant (and the word coined). Communards' voices were heard for the demolition of Notre Dame cathedral in 1871, but nothing came out of it. At the Paris Sorbonne in 1968, rebels did not deface bourgeois-humanist paintings and only wrote graffiti on them. Quite a few Spanish churches were torched in the 1930s. Today, in modern countries, established religion has lost most of its direct temporal power or political authority. Still, people might display their utter displeasure at Assisi's basilica, not because the frescoes by Giotto are offensive, but because woman visitors have to cover their shoulders to walk in and look at them. And what of mosques? Most of this entry so far has dealt with Western countries. Actually, iconoclasts today are far less motivated by atheism, more by religious competition, as when the Taliban destroyed Buddhist statues, or when Iraqi mosques are targeted because of Sunni-Shiite strife.

What we call art has gone through a long history and many forms, but as we know it today, it is a product of the class divide. Art has been a so-called natural privilege of the ruling class, and remains so today. One of its consequences is the near unbridgeable gap between craftsman and artist. The superseding of work as such entails the end of the age-old manual/intellectual split, therefore the end of the artist as a (privileged and looked-down upon) profession, just like the end of any job for life, be it gardener or welder. It does not mean that every human being has the same ability (and desire) to play the flute or compose songs. So what? Our concern is not to substitute people's art for art by artists.

Communisation will not compress individuals into a homogenized mass. Community is not anonymity. Why should the

participants in a collectively organised spectacle have to remain nameless? For a few years after 1917, Russia staged huge “mass theatre” events that combined fairs and carnivals with party-State propaganda and a touch of futurist aesthetics. Dozens of thousands of people took part, sometimes as spectators *and* actors. History was frozen. Revolution was turning into social engineering, with the proletarians re-enacting their own deeds for show. A perfect illustration of the beginning of *Society of the Spectacle*: everything that was directly lived had moved away into a representation.

Since then, at various times, particularly in the 1970s, radicals have called for a cooperative self-managed theatre where the audience would not come to sit and watch, but decide on the content of the play and be part of the performance. Why not? ...bearing in mind that collective art does not suppress art as separate. And who knows what genres and forms will communisers invent, remodel, and discard? After 1750, baroque music went out of fashion for one hundred fifty years. It is all very well to call for generalization of art and its supersession as a separate commercial sector, but the bottom line is, there will be no superseding of the manual/intellectual divide, therefore of art, as long as *work* continues. Actually, there is controversy about Giotto’s “authorship” of the Assisi frescoes: like other famous painters, he had assistants. Was it a collective effort?

Orwell, *Politics & the English Language*, 1946

A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, Russian Futurist Manifesto, 1912

“Absence & its Costumers,” *Situationist International* # 2, 1958

R. Huelsenbeck, R. Hausman, *What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany?* 1919, mariabuszek.com

G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, theses 191 and 1

See DAILY LIFE, HABITAT, WORK

HABITAT

About one billion people live in squats, favelas, shanty-towns, and slums, e.g. one third of the Sao Paulo state population.

For them, one of the prime communizing activities would be getting out of these areas, as well as building, renovating, and pulling down their dwellings, and the task would rarely be done by bringing in the industrialized building industry.

Actually, though modern construction firms do their utmost to break the work process into repetitive tasks, construction is a sector where standardization meets its limits. Physical constraints and coordination between trades make it very difficult to operate a building site like an assembly line. Large-scale house manufacturing (on the type of W. Levitt's suburbia in the US after 1945) remains an exception. Le Corbusier may have wished to "make houses like others make cars," but a construction worker cannot be Taylorized as easily as an auto worker or a supermarket cashier.

Therefore, once the cost-cutting imperative goes, it will be possible for a building site—as indeed many other production places—to become a training ground where skilled workers will help the locals learn carpentry, scaffolding, or electricity as they take part in the process.

In the most adverse circumstances and with little or no outside assistance, Argentine slum dwellers have already devised simpler construction techniques (and developed urban micro-agriculture). In more favourable conditions, they could move from resistance to rebuilding their neighbourhood and try out a wide range of social experiments. Communizers will not be meeting urgent needs primarily by drawing up a list of priorities, which of course they may well do (among them, sheltering the homeless), but by developing the social inter-relations born out of the insurrection. Building a home goes along with building links, in the material sense, a learning-by-doing process that includes but goes beyond mere empathy. People will draw upon the wells of their own collective

imagination as much as they will benefit from outside help. With a combination of local make-do and low-impact materials, it might prove easier to create eco-villages, recycling, and passive housing in Sao Paulo than in New York city.

The purpose of the activity will be the activity itself as much as its result, as much as producing a place to dwell; and probably, after the house is completed, some of the builders will be moving on to other pursuits.

The Housing Monster, PM Press, 2012; also on prole.info
Are Slums Another Planet?, hicsalta-communisation, 2010

See NON-ECONOMY, INSURRECTION, TIME, WORK

INSURRECTION

To grasp how all-encompassing and holistic communisation would be, we can look back at how Albania in 1997 went through a *modern* civil war that left two thousand people dead.

Even before its final demise in 1991, the bureaucratic regime had passed its expiry date. Stations were being stripped of their seats, schools looted, strikes and riots were widespread. People were stealing back from a State that had oppressed them for decades. After 1991, Albania proved as ineffectual and unstable under market capitalism as under State capitalism. A liberal shock policy only resulted in Ponzi schemes with little real assets, paying high returns gleaned from new investors. While the West was being taken over by finance, this was neo-liberalism for the poor, without content, viz., with no productive basis.

In 1997, Albania finally imploded: against a background of lumpen proletarian outbursts, the police vanished. Military stores were looted and most cities taken over by armed groups. All (seven)

prisons were emptied and destroyed.

However, there was no occupation, therefore no transformation of the workplace. Here and there public meetings managed to rearrange life... less so after a while. Middle class people and local worthies took over with proletarian support. The result was "fully armed rebels failing to complete what started as an insurrection and to reorganize social life. The subsequent result was a situation of general inertia, stagnation, boredom and waiting." (TPTG) Gangs appeared. Most local committees acted only locally, in a moderate, reasonable way, afraid that the revolt would turn uncontrollable.

When no transformative program is put forward, the inevitable demand is for a return to normalcy and democracy: people wanted their money back and free elections.

Order was eventually restored with the help of a multinational seven-thousand-strong humanitarian-military force, with little resistance: the revolt had run its course. Elections brought into office a left-wing coalition.

After the rulers had lost their grip and the ruled taken control, the Albanian proletarians had restricted themselves to an addition of "liberated spaces," none of which broadened the scope of its action. They did not escalate from looting food to repossessing lodgings, nor move from the individual to the collective. When looted items are consumed at home, looting is collective in the act but individual in its purpose.

Insurrection breaks the normal order of things. Time flies, there is a suspension of disbelief in change and yet everything is on hold. Whereas the bourgeois can sit out the crisis, the proletarians cannot. In a way, their material situation is worse than before, when at least a number of them got wages. Now the insurgents are separate from everything, cut off from the means of production that provided for their livelihoods. In most cases, it will be impossible for them to leave the cities and live off the land, as many Russian workers did after 1917. Where traditional family farming still exists, it is barely

capable of coping with extra mouths to feed.

Insurrection is a historical breakdown for both classes: it challenges capitalist domination, but first of all it is a challenge for the proletariat. Either the proletarians go back to work, possibly with some degree of self-management, or they move on to an altogether-new way of life, which poses the question of the resumption of production.

Self-management will only be an opportunity for a minority, and a divisive option. The theory of self-management developed when plants were to a large extent self-sufficient, when for instance there was a blacksmith shop in a Ford plant and most motor parts were turned out on the premises: now they are usually outsourced. Today's recovered factories are mainly to be found in sectors that require little or no international cooperation, and they rarely involve manufacturing. Upstream, where are raw materials to be found (bought)? Downstream, where are the goods to be circulated (sold)? Self-organized miners would soon be unable to renew their equipment and vehicles. The same applies to farming tools... and computers.

The point of departure is that communist insurgents act outside the workplace and confront society's power centres. Their transformative capacity (such as it is) is not a result of their professional skills, but of the inter-relations created among themselves by the insurrection. True, previous labour experience can help: shopfloor or office struggles breed links and solidarity, and, when it comes to blocking the street with an articulated lorry, the ex-professional driver will be more reliable than the ex-bank clerk. But this is not essential. Insurrection de-socializes and re-socializes. It is as much a break as a continuation of previous bonds and skills.

Whereas the 1871 Paris *communards* blocked themselves behind highly-elaborate barricades because they had to defend a liberated space that they were unable to transform, communist insurgents are mobile and outward-going.

Their first need is to stand up to repressive forces, and the second

is to survive. The insurgents make use of what they find. Everything tends to be diverted from its “proper” use. Brick and metal from a building site are used as weapons, as are many other unlikely objects. History tells us how inventive fighters are, throwing down their own furniture in the street as barricade material, turning everyday objects into missiles, etc.

In insurrection times, cars are used for transport, as barricades, as battering-rams, for fun, destroyed, or left to rot. In 1936 Spain, metal plates were added to lorries to create makeshift armoured vehicles.

At this point, insurrection reaches the watershed where everything switches, or does not. So far, it has borrowed its material bases from the past. Taking hold of streets and public buildings is not enough, nor is mutual help. After a few days or weeks, when all available food has been eaten, the question arises of where and how to produce more.

To create a sustainable mode of life, communisation cannot take mere contingency measures: it must invent new ways of *reproducing* the material bases of society.

As we know, this is what past insurrections *did not* do. Failure was not caused by a refusal to take account of harsh down-to-earth realities, but by a (probably inevitable at the time) propensity to fall prey to false realism. Basically, revolutionaries drew a line between the insurrectionary phase and what was expected next. Insurrection was reduced to getting rid of the enemy. Then an entirely new stage was supposed to begin, when productive activity would resume as if production, consumption, work were inevitable, quasi-neutral realities.

The issue is how the social inter-proletarian relations that can make the uprising a success also enable the people involved to create a new way of life.

For example, there is more in sharing than meets the eye. Usually, sharing is a way of handing out (fairer) portions of personal or collective wealth. In an insurrection, sharing entails **doing** things in common. Whereas sharing used to divide something, it

now implies making it.

In current normal times, sharing is another mode of distributing goods, a mode that keeps the separation between production and circulation, which itself maintains the productive moment as distinct from the rest. As the insurrection unfolds, a new consumption arises, which would call for another word, one that connects “producing” with “consuming.”

Does it mean that people will only eat what is locally grown? No. It means production will be more than merely productive. As we said, during the insurrection motor vehicles will function in a variety of ways, and a lot of other items and activities will as well. The increased number and range of uses, most of them non-productive of value but also of current utilitarian usefulness, means more than fun or make-do: it points to a situation where productivity starts to wane as the main social standard. One of the defining features of work is that it sets apart doing something useful (in our society usually this is to get money) from doing it for pleasure. Work time is split from leisure time. Also, doing something primarily for oneself (usually, to get money for the worker and his/her family) is disconnected from doing it for others as well.

On a larger and larger scale, production will become more than a way of matching resources with needs, and the reality and notion of *need* will change.

Insurgents will stand at the crossroads. What we name “insurrection” covers a long time span, but in the early days its participants have a limited window of time to get on the right track. If they let the opportunity slip, they will be soon forced to stall and backpedal. The unstable and uncertain defining moment cannot last too long. Insurrection is a crisis.

TPTG, *Upheaval in the Land of the Eagles*, 1998

B. Astarian, *Crisis Activity & Communitisation*, 2010, Hic Salta-Communitisation site

See **DAILY LIFE, HABITAT, LABOUR, MONEY, NON-ECONOMY, VALUE, WORK**

JAILBREAK

In 1831, the *canuts* (silk workers) took over the French town of Lyon for a couple of days in support of their demand for a minimum price imposed on silk. While some rioters threw bundles of notes into the Rhône River, others stood watch in front of banks. When prison inmates tried to escape, armed workers helped put them back behind bars. Two looters were shot on the spot (it remains unclear who they were stealing from). “We are not thieves,” the *canuts* protested, meaning it was the bosses who were acting as thieves, stealing from labour what the dignity of labour was entitled to. Their revolt was based on what the bourgeois turned them into, not on what they could turn themselves into. In risings that are both against and within capitalism, respect of property and law is inevitable. To the *canuts*, “Justice” meant fairness in society as it exists: thus, punishment meted out to criminals was justified. *L’Echo de la Fabrique*, a genuine worker paper that stood for worker identity and gave a detailed report on the Lyon events, took the same line. In like manner, 19th century French rioters would often release persons imprisoned for debt and keep common criminals locked in. Predictably, in the repression that ensued, the *canuts* were to be labelled criminals themselves.

Later, Engels wrote on the *lumpenproletarians*: “If the French workers, in the course of the Revolution, inscribed on the houses: *Death to the thieves!* and even shot down many, they did it, not out of enthusiasm for property, but because they rightly considered it necessary to hold that band at arm's length.”

Though we can appreciate the point made by Engels, the

Lumpenproletariat concept raises more problems than it solves and proves as slippery as the middle-class concept is stodgy.

The opening of Russian jails after February 1917 released lots of prisoners. Idle soldiers, deserters, homeless, jobless people, waifs, and strays sometimes swelled the revolutionary crowds and sometimes added to what was resented as public insecurity. To make buildings safer, house committees were set up by bourgeois and lower-class dwellers afraid of losing what little they had. It was a common saying that people of all classes were aggrieved by the lapse in civilized behaviour. Well, selfcontrol never rules everything, even less so in revolution. A time of social storm quasi-naturally develops illegal and outlandish behaviour, law and order is in disarray, with an often thin line between actions that aim to go beyond disorder and actions that take advantage of disorder for the benefit of individuals or groups. It can be hard to distinguish between a gang organised around money-making and a gang veering towards community self-help.

What qualifies as anti-social acts, and what is to be done about them? In his 1776 theory of minimal government, Thomas Paine argued that while society “promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections,” government acts “negatively by restraining our vices”:

here then is the origin and rise of government; namely, a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world; here too is the design and end of government, viz., freedom and security.

Paine is held in high regard by some anarchists because of his belief that the common people have the right and ability to run society. Yet what is “security”? And how does it relate to “freedom”? What we now call and treat as “crime,” Kropotkin wrote, will be regarded as “social disease” by our grandchildren. Certainly, but how do we treat this disease? Are prevention and education enough? According to Kropotkin,

A new family, based on the community of aspirations, will take its

place. In this family people will be obliged to know one another, to aid one another, and to lean on one another for moral support on every occasion. And this mutual prop will prevent the great number of anti-social acts that we see today. [...] The great number of these [anti-social] acts will no longer have their raison d'être. The others will be nipped in the bud.

Even so, a revolutionary period gives rise to all kinds of reactions, tensions, and conflicts. As Emma Goldman says, “every society has the criminal it deserves,” so a very different society would have very different deviants... but would have some. Until then, there could be some sad irony in quoting Lenin in his supposed Spring 1917 anti-State phase:

We are not utopians, and do not in the least deny the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of individual persons, or the need to stop such excesses. In the first place, however, no special machine, no special apparatus of suppression, is needed for this: this will be done by the armed people themselves, as simply and as readily as any crowd of civilized people, even in modern society, interferes to put a stop to a scuffle or to prevent a woman from being assaulted.

It is doubtful “any crowd of civilized people” would spontaneously act “to prevent a woman from being assaulted.” Even so, social relations cannot be *only immediate*, i.e. inter-personal, without the intervention of any organised body. True, when an accident happens, witnesses help, and when a young child goes missing, the locals rally round to contribute to the search. But mediations also play their part, e.g. hospitals and their personnel. Lenin was a bit naïve when he (briefly) believed that all anti-social gestures would eventually die out. Proletarians will have to deal with attitudes that run counter to communisation. Sometimes simple neighbourhood action will see to it, sometimes ad hoc structures will play a part.

Insurrections naturally set free prison inmates. Some so-called criminals and outlaws have been known to side with the rebellion, others with its repression. Both, for example, happened in Egypt in

2010-2011. Those entrenched in the money world have a vested interest in the perpetuation of capitalism, and their managers are used to navigating between illegal and legal business. It is part of their trade to cut deals with the police, and they will try to come to terms with any local or central power that is likely to accommodate them.

However, while a drug baron is perfectly adapted to his own market niche, the illegality of the petty thief (often stealing from the poor) or the street corner dealer is usually a form of forced survival imposed upon the lowest proletarian strata. In a communizing phase, when private property is being broken down, the question becomes whether an attack on property is collective re-appropriation or private re-possessing (as *theft* now is), and we cannot hope for clear social skies every day. The situation will be cloudy and blurred. Gangs will appear to try to hoard, especially as the breakdown of money exchange and the interruption of trade flows will cause scarcity here and there. Besides, the extension of police-free zones might also create no-go areas controlled by thugs. All will depend on the expansion and depth of community building. Then the question is what becomes of crime when property is abolished.

Here again nothing can be taken for granted. Lots of objectionable things can be done in the name of the common good, particularly when so-called community-based control takes the form of today's Neighbourhood Watch, CrimeMapping.com, National Sex Offender Registry, televised Crimewatch, and calls to "report violators."

Communizers will be careful what community they build.

F. Rude, *La Révolte des canuts, 1831-1834*, La Découverte, 2001
W.H. Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge UP, 1980
Engels, Preface to the second edition of *The Peasant War in Germany*, 1870

Th. Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776, Gutenberg Project Ebook, 2008
Kropotkin, *Russian & French Prisons*, 1887, chap. X: “Are Prisons Necessary?”

E. Goldman, *Anarchism & Other Essays*, 1910, chap. 4: “Prisons: a Crime & a Failure”

Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 1917, chap. V, § 2

O. Jones, *Chavs. The Demonization of the Working Class*, Verso, 2011

See CLASS, DAILY LIFE, INSURRECTION

KARL (MARX)

In January 1848, Marx declared that “[...] the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this sense alone [...] that I vote in favour of free trade.” Marx thought liberal free trade destroyed national borders and favoured the progress of capitalism. When in June, he became the editor of the *New Rhineland Gazette*, subtitled “Organ of Democracy,” his goal was to push the bourgeois revolution as far as possible: the more capitalism grew, the closer it got to proletarian revolution.

Later, during the American Civil War, the purpose of the First International’s letter to Lincoln, drafted by Marx, was to help get rid of the horror of slavery, but equally to contribute to the advent of a modern capitalism in the US.

[...] the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class [...] as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.

Marx's last public speech, in 1872, stated that while "in most countries on the Continent it is force that will be the lever of our revolution," in North America, England, and perhaps Holland "the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means."

Let's not wonder whether Marx was a revolutionary or a reformist. It is pointless to engage in a war of quotes. Marx both *criticized* and *supported* "class collaborationist" English labour leaders as well as "gradualist" German social-democrats (the forerunners of the "peaceful transition to socialism"), because he believed that despite their shortcomings they represented the irresistibly-growing worker movement. "[F]inal victory is certain," Engels wrote shortly after his friend's death. The world expansion of capitalism was leading to the rising power of the working class. In that sense Marx was a progressivist: he believed in a quasi-natural historical advance towards completion—worker and human emancipation.

This conception was directly related to how he perceived the content of communism and therefore of revolution.

From the *Communist Manifesto* to *Capital*, Marx left only scattered remarks about communism, sometimes giving us insight by quoting others, like this illuminating extract from P.-Ed. Lemontey in *Poverty of Philosophy*:

We are struck with admiration when we see among the Ancients the same person distinguishing himself to a high degree as a philosopher, poet, orator, historian, priest, administrator, general of an army. Our souls are appalled at the sight of so vast a domain. Each of us plants his hedge and shuts himself up in this enclosure. I do not know whether by this parcellation the world is enlarged, but I do know that man is belittled.

Marx hardly mentioned communism in *Capital*. He only elaborated on this theme in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) where he expounded his scheme of labour vouchers for "the first phase of communist society." Basically, he wished for planned

economic development under worker guidance and in the interest of the masses. The working class would build up to a critical mass, seize political power, and replace bourgeois rule by an association of producers who would engage in a (non-communist) transition period necessary to create the conditions of communism.

Contrary to what his early writings envisaged—the abolition of work—later Marx thought work would be completely different once everyone worked. When he wrote that work would become “not only a means of life but life's prime want,” he was still aiming at a radical change of human existence, but thought to achieve this by putting *production* at the centre.

The only way to go beyond work is for productive acts to be more than merely productive, for production to be part of life: then “life's prime want” will become the whole social activity. This is why we can speak of a **non**-economy.

Marx, *Speech on the Question of Free Trade*, January 9, 1848
Address of the International Working Men's Association to A. Lincoln,
January 28, 1865

Mary Gabriel, *Love & Capital. Karl & Jenny Marx & the Birth of a Revolution*, Back Bay Books, 2012

Amsterdam speech, September 8, 1872 (quoted by M. Gabriel, p. 446, and note 43 p. 659)

Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx. The Story of his Life* (1918), Routledge, 2010

Engels, letter to F. Sorge, March 15, 1883

Marx & Engels, Circular Letter to the leadership of the German socialist party, 1879

Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847, chap. 2

Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875, Part I

Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII, § “Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines, etc.”

See CLASS, POLITICS, UNLABELLED, TIME, VALUE, WORK

LABOUR

In 1643, during the English Civil War, the parliamentarians were preparing to defend London against an attack by the King's army. Fortifications were built around London: "each day a different group of parishes and a different group of trades went and worked on the fortifications." According to a Scottish tailor, they included eight thousand "lusty" tailors, seven thousand watermen, five thousand shoemakers, three thousand porters in "white shirts," one thousand oysterwives, three thousand felt-makers, fishmongers, coopers, five thousand cordwainers, and many others. A continuous 18-mile long line of ditch and rampart linked twenty-three elaborate forts made of earth and timber, armed with cannons. This was the self-defence of labour allied with the bourgeoisie. The royal army in fact did not attack London; it was later defeated, and Charles II beheaded in 1649. Labour as a class was directly acting as a major back up in a democratic revolution.

It might seem that those bygone days are hardly relevant to us, but the 19th and 20th centuries provide ample evidence of genuine labour support for what turned out to be (successful or failed) democracy. Recent examples range from Poland's Solidarnosc in the 1980's to the Arab Spring. Worker insubordination and wildcatting often spark a social movement that later slips out of proletarian hands, and the reason cannot be a question of numbers: far from acting in an auxiliary capacity, the working class provides the bulk of the troops, but the workers exert mere countervailing pressure and let themselves be channelled into rallying bourgeois demands.

By doing so, do the proletarians lose sight of their own

interests? It all depends on what is meant by interests. Labour is the inevitable enemy of capital insofar as labour fights for higher wages and better working conditions. However it also has a substantial common stake with the bourgeoisie in the development of an economy that provides jobs and income. Getting rid of capitalism is not the *sole* interest of the proletarians. When they engage in collective bargaining, they are not mistaken or deceived: they have an objective advantage in trying to get as much as possible from the other side.

Something quite different is at stake when the labour/capital relation gets blocked because capital does not hire labour any more. This new situation opens up the possibility for the workers to do more than defend their condition *as workers*, it gives them the possibility to attack the capital/wage labour relationship.

The issue was irrelevant for Marx, who by and large equated the *working class* with the *proletariat* and regarded the rise of the worker movement as the main factor and indeed the guarantee of a future successful proletarian revolution.

Is what is called *worker identity* a possible lever for communist assault on capitalism? Or is it only fit for claiming labour's share within capitalism?

Worker collective identity conflates a lot of conflicting elements. In the "we and them" or "we vs. them" opposition, *them* meant the bourgeoisie of course, also white collar labour, possibly union or party bureaucrats. It implies that factory workers recognition themselves as creators of wealth, a belief in the dignity of labour, a rejection of intellectuals, and a distrust of bourgeois "culture," but it also comes with a commitment to mass spontaneity.

Identity is what we do, what we are, how we are defined by what we do, and how we define ourselves, individually and collectively. It is inevitable that workers identify to some extent with their job and consider fellow workers as similar to them. There is at least as much work identification among academics

(whether Marxist, mainstream, or critical) as on a factory shopfloor. Marx said one of the hallmarks of North American labour was a “complete indifference to the specific content of labour,” an “ability to transfer from one branch to another.” Yet what Marx called North American “variability” is no proof of a deeper critique of capitalism, but more of a forced adaptation to having to move from one trade and workplace to another. Freewheeling nomads are not the (new) historical subject capable of making the revolution that the (old style) workers never attempted.

It has become commonplace to speak about overlapping boundaries and fragmented liquid identities. Certainly they do overlap and are fragmented and liquid. We can also assume that the Bangladeshi textile assembly line operator associates herself less with her job than does the British Telecom software engineer. But that is not the core problem.

Identity is neither a fulcrum nor an obstacle.

A long time ago, wobblies used to joke that the “I.W.W.” letters stood for “I won’t *work*,” while of course they were developing *worker* struggles. There is more to it than a play on words. Nothing can warrant an automatic link between the condition of the worker (employed, semi-employed, on the dole, or jobless for life), her/his collective endeavour to improve her/his lot (in or out of a workplace) **and** the social revolution that will do away with work. This contradiction we cannot dodge. Communist insurrection will have to solve it.

M. Manning, *The English People & the English Revolution*, Bookmarks, 1991

R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*, 1957 (now a Modern Penguin Classic)

Economic Works of Karl Marx 1861-64, Draft of Chapter 6 of *Capital*, “Results of the Direct Production Process”, §6, marxists.org

MONEY

During the 1934 Asturian rising, in La Felguera, a small town with four thousand workers, and a CNT stronghold, the people abolished money. When offered the keys of the banks, they refused; only one company was raided. (Some neighbouring towns took or accepted the money, though.) The vouchers issued by a Distribution Committee were not an account of labour-time, but a way of organising access to supplies with a ration system and allocation by family size. When the Felguera people had to buy sheep from Extremadura, however, money was temporarily brought back.

Burnett Bolloten deserves to be quoted at length.

In many communities money for internal use was abolished, because, in the opinion of Anarchists, 'money and power are diabolical philtres, which turn a man into a wolf, into a rabid enemy, instead of into a brother.' 'Here in Fraga [a small town in Aragon], you can throw banknotes into the street,' ran an article in a Libertarian paper, 'and no one will take any notice. "Rockefeller, if you were to come to Fraga with your entire bank account you would not be able to buy a cup of coffee. Money, your God and your servant, has been abolished here, and the people are happy.' In those Libertarian communities where money was suppressed, wages were paid in coupons, the scale being determined by the size of the family. Locally produced goods, if abundant, such as bread, wine, and olive oil, were distributed freely, while other articles could be obtained by means of coupons at the communal depot. Surplus goods were exchanged with other Anarchist towns and villages, money being used only for transactions with those communities that had not adopted the new system.

Money has always been viewed—rightly—as a symbol and

instrument of the ruling classes. The rich is the one who can exploit you. Money and oppression are inseparable. “I am a piece of paper. I control your life.” Although somehow unrelated to the material reality of life, money dominates us and true freedom implies getting rid of it. In the Asturian rising, the end of traditional respect for money signified a deep break with bourgeois order.

What to do with money?

Mostly, when insurrections have had time to develop, they have promoted mutualist forms of trade, co-operation, and exchange and kept money in one form or other as a necessary distribution instrument of goods that do not exist in abundance.

In 1922, Errico Malatesta opposed the bourgeois use of money, whereby banks speculate and bosses exploit, to people’s control over money, which prevents accumulating and hiring labour.

Money is a powerful means of exploitation and oppression; but it is also the only means [...] to regulate production and distribution [...] rather than concerning oneself with the abolition of money, one should seek a way to ensure that money truly represents the useful work performed by its possessors.

For the Italian anarchist, “superabundance” is a myth, so choices have to be made, and a fair labour time-count will regulate the circulation of goods from one sector to another.

Other schemes suggest the use of money, not between individuals, but instead between production units to adjust the use and allocation of resources. For example, since a house is made of very different components—bricks, pipes, wood, and labour—it might seem logical to plan the building by *quantifying what is common* to all elements.

At the other end of the political spectrum, moderate reformers advocate a credit economy based on real value contrary to the present false value of money. Money would only function as a means of payment and would circulate without accumulating. “Local Exchange Trading Systems” imply a recording of time spent, i.e. of

labour cost, but participants believe it cannot be or become exploitative, since it stays only within the community of LETS members. Similar plans wish for goods to be free if they are abundant (inexpensive, in other words). Otherwise, priority access is to be established by common agreement decided upon by a local committee elected by the neighbourhood, like a school run by the school board. Democratic money, in other words. Some other schemes are already implemented, like the use of local currencies that enable people to buy and sell, usually on the small scale of a town and for a limited range of items and services.

These projects give the participants an impression of regaining some control over their lives. Paradoxically, one of the reasons for their popularity is the fact that money is everywhere now, compared to the 1950s when few working-class people had a check book. It is so pervasive that it becomes dematerialised. Most payments are now electronic in Sweden and soon modern regions or countries will live cash *free*: virtualisation is freedom. The omnipotence of money allows it to adapt even to self-managed, anti-establishment forms. None of the reform plans mentioned above is likely to compete with mainstream money, but the deficiencies of the financial world are bringing about a whole range of grassroots ways of managing value, from local currencies, vouchers, systems inspired by self-limited and self-regulated tribal barter, to peasant-craft barter.

All these plans fail to understand money as the commodity to which all other commodities are related, and the substance of which is value, i.e. labour-time accounting: “[...] non-accounting is more fundamental than gratuity alone, provided that the nature of this activity for which there is no accountancy is better defined.” (B. Astarian) This is what communisation is about.

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christiebooks.com

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Revolution, 1991

E. Malatesta, "Money & Banks," 1922, in *A. Malatesta: His Life & Ideas*, Freedom Press, 1965, on libcom

B. Astarian, *Crisis Activity & Communitisation*, 2010, III, §2, Hic Salta site

See also NON-ECONOMY, TIME, VALUE, WORK

NON-ECONOMY

While they disagree on everything else, nearly all social theories share one common starting point: every society has to match needs and resources. Therefore the social solution is to find the best coordinated system of assessing needs, allocating products and services, and regulating implementation.

Common sense sometimes is our most deceptive ally: it hammers in the idea that after defeating the State, we must re-start production in order to fulfil real and pressing needs. Not in a capitalist way, of course: obviously we must self-organise an economy with no boss, no profit, no value accumulation.

The assertion seems indisputable: there is so much to do, and often the first thing that comes to mind is hunger: the underfed or starving billion. So it is a matter of urgency to set up an efficient supply and demand world food production and distribution system.

No-one denies the mass reality of hunger. Food deprivation has not been eradicated since 1946 when Josué de Castro wrote the first edition of his *Geography of Hunger*.

Let's go back to the outbreak of insurrections.

Hunger is indeed present. When Cairene proletarians took to the street as they did in 2008 because bread was unaffordable or unavailable, feeding oneself and one's family was of course an incentive. But if eating, and therefore saying alive, had been their

main driving force, they could have looked for safer ways of finding or receiving food rather than risk being shot by a police bullet. Rioting is not a good meal ticket for the hungry prole. Rioters wanted and achieved more than bread; they became part of a fighting community. The media term *food riot* is short-sighted: it brings the situation down to an unorthodox *economic* event when demand meets supply, except the consumer has no money to buy the commodity and so tries to get it by force.

It is not a matter of empty stomachs aiming at being fed, but of creating social relations with fellow proles. The insurgents' first need is to come together to arm themselves with whatever weapons are available. Only in extreme cases do men and women want to eat only to stay alive, and it is in these cases, starving in a concentration camp for instance, that social bonds are the most disconnected. Otherwise, the first human need is the need for another human being: the theoretical difficulty is to divest this principle of its usual idealist mindset.

It is not enough to emphasize the relativity of needs in time and space, nor to pinpoint their artificiality, to oppose sobriety to excess and natural pleasures to mistaken pastimes. The foundation of the concept must be addressed.

Today, need has a negative connotation: it is a near synonym for *lack*: what I don't have and would like to have. The gap between the two is said to be as natural as the unavoidable reality that you can't have sunny weather all the time. In fact there is more at play here than nature. Nobody expects every desire to be fulfilled. It is hunger and homelessness we are talking about, and these are social realities.

Some have a private home while others sleep in the street. Some are very rich and own a lot more than most. True, but inequality is an effect, not a cause. We live in a class society. The bourgeoisie have a monopoly over the means of production, therefore they have the power to hire and fire the members of the other class and put them to work for their own benefit. Work gives the money to

rent or buy a lodging. The out-of-work person lives in want.

If property breaks down, the now-perfectly-normal fear of *not* having—going hungry or sleeping in the rain—fades away. Obviously this does not mean that everyone will inhabit a palace if he should wish to. It means need is no longer a synonym for want. Desires are not all or immediately fulfilled, but they are no longer cut off from fulfilment. Today producing (a dwelling or food) is separate from consuming: first, we have to get money by wage-labour, then we spend it to get what we need. This is why handicraft and gardening are so popular: they are one of the few ways of being personally creative. Though communisation will not turn everyone into a builder and gardener, building a house or growing vegetables will no longer be productive work separate from inhabiting and eating.

“In communist society, productive activity will lose its strictly productive character.” (*A World Without Money*)

Therefore the *need* to eat will change. For the malnourished, hunger equals pain, even more so because he knows he is likely to get no or too little food tonight: he is desperate to satisfy his hunger pangs, and has no time to delight in anticipation. For the person who is no longer afraid of going hungry, the waiting can be an added pleasure, like foreplay is an enjoyable part of lovemaking. “[...] why shouldn’t hunger be enjoyment as well, like desire during the preliminaries to lovemaking, which is actively involved in the satisfaction of the lovers’ need?” (B. Astarian) *Gastronomy, or gastrosophy* to use Fourier’s word, is a lot more than eating.

A World Without Money: Communism, Les Amis de 4 millions de Jeunes Travailleurs, 1975-76

B. Astarian, *Value & Its Abolition*, 4.5.2., 2015

See DAILY LIFE, HABITAT, LABOUR, TIME, VALUE, WORK

OBFUSCATION

In a time of troubles, when the impossible suddenly seems at hand, radical options coexist with reformist ones, and distinctions between them are not obvious. Communisation will face the counteracting force of “alternativism:” replacing social normality by alternative forms of life or lifestyle. For instance, dozens of moneyless schemes will be implemented and will change a lot but leave the essential—that is, value as a ruling social mechanism.

One of the prominent obfuscators is already at work: the multifarious *commons theory*.

Its central plank is all about dispossession and repossession.

Commons theorists’ critique of globalized privatization reconstructs contemporary capitalism as a planetary modern version of the *enclosures* that were a condition of the rise of the capitalist system. Hundreds of millions are being cut off from their means of existence, plunged penniless into the money world, and forced into precarious and low-paid wage-labour. This is quite historically true. Except *commons theory* turns condition into definition: it reduces capital to deprivation, and logically its solution is to create a *disownership* society by reclaiming what was ours. Or **is** already ours: hightech service sector jobs are said to be virtually mutually and cooperatively managed, and in less-developed areas many people are said to have kept solidarity and community values and habits. Capitalism is regarded as a loss of individual and collective control over ourselves, so let’s regain control.

In New York, let’s expand open-source activism into a full-blown sharing-and-meshing non-profit economy. In the Andes, let’s develop the self-sustaining kinship units of the *ayllu* with its reciprocal obligation habits.

The linchpin in this theory is the idea that present society contains a “common,” a social wealth, a common practice: if we

liberate this social element, we'll liberate ourselves.

This conceptualization misunderstands current struggles as a fight for the resurrection of former community ties or the extension of already existing ones. Yet when the Latin American inhabitants of a destitute neighbourhood mobilize against land privatization, they may rely on old community links, but they are acting as proletarians who were driven out of the countryside and deprived of their livelihoods. They are now resisting capital, not defending past or re-emerging ways of life.

In so far as they are willing to admit exploitation as the fact of being forcibly put to work by a bourgeoisie for a profit, commons theorists treat it as one among many levels of disempowerment and constraint. The white wage-labourer is exploited by his boss, the boss by the banker, the woman banker by her husband, the sick husband by medical power, the coloured head of the clinic is discriminated against in the street by a racist wage-labourer, all in an endless domination circle. Class and capital concepts have been so enlarged that they are now devoid of meaning. Capitalism is never addressed except as a big dispossessing system against which we ought to reclaim what used to be ours or what we are now communally and collaboratively producing.

Whereas traditional political reform has lost credibility, *commons theory* plays upon our desire for grassroots social change, and its appeal comes from its ability to resonate with effective piecemeal transformations worldwide. It presents the—now inevitable—limit of change, as the ultimate objective of change. Commons theorists are popular because they paint reform in revolutionary colours: people veer to the most gratifying version of social change, the one more in tune with the illusion of a force within capital but somehow untouched by it, a force that could grow and take over. Commons theory is communism made easy: isn't ninety nine percent of the world population dispossessed and ready to act? Safety in numbers. Old socialism has gone out of fashion with the

decline of the Western labour movement, but a new-style reformism also promotes incremental steps to a better world, similar to the Gramscian strategy of the permeation of civil society.

In insurrectionary days, such views will be attractive because they will appear as practical and communal DIY options, and seem to offer a tangible lever for action, with no shortage of reasonable alternative suggestions.

D. Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, New Society Publishers, 2014
Wildcat, *Commons, Common Wealth, Commonism* series
(wildcat-www.de)

See **DAILY LIFE, REVOLUTION, ZOMIAS**

POLITICS

The communizing process by which the proletarians take their lives into their own hands is both spontaneous *and* organised in bodies, councils, collectives, circles, units... knowing that no problem is solved by getting rid of pejorative words like *institutions*.

Organization means more than the all-powerful general meeting (which cannot go on permanently, or its participants would be doing nothing else), and more than an *ad hoc* body (set up merely for one single task). Whatever organization there is has to give itself a minimum of fixed forms and provide for some distribution of tasks. Not everyone does everything at the same time, but everyone is expected to be able to do anything some of the time, from sweeping the floor to speaking in public.

No rule of conduct, no bylaw will ever be a perfect safeguard from “institutionalization”: the most democratic organisation can become independent from the rest of the movement, perpetuate itself, and even survive the demise of the revolution.

In Spain, in July 1936, the worker uprising defeated the military putsch in more than half of the country. Proletarian autonomy had been achieved by armed action: now it could only be consolidated by further action, this time against the bourgeoisie and State, by a decisive break with capital and wage-labour. This did not happen. Though there were lots of changes, they did not cut deep into the social fabric.

The result was a step-by-step loss of proletarian autonomy. In the following weeks, the main body that the Barcelonan workers gave themselves (or accepted: the process might be different, the outcome similar) was a Central Committee of Antifascist Militias, which included delegates from the CNT, the FAI, the UGT (socialist union), the POUM, the PSUC (product of the recent fusion of the CP and the socialists in Catalonia), and representatives of the Catalan regional government. This structure served as a bridge between the workers' movement and bourgeois political forces, to the extent that it included the State, namely the Catalan commissar of public order. The workers thought they had gained a foothold in political power when in fact they had let the enemy in. It is no wonder the Central Committee of the Militias quickly began to unravel.

The smothering of the revolutionary momentum took months before it was finally completed in May 37, but it originated in the summer of 1936. When communist measures were left aside for later, politics occupied the field and installed social shock absorbers. CNT and POUM acted as buffers between the masses and the bourgeois, and when this was done the CP finally took control and the State cracked down on dissent.

Politics functions like a lock chamber, a social-tight terrain where social division is neutralized, so that all classes allegedly cooperate in the running of society. From Ancient Greece to the first general elections in post-colonial India to the end of Eastern Europe bureaucratic regimes, democracy is a multidimensional

form, adaptable to a large variety of situations where social groups have to bargain and people have to let off steam. Politicians wage war with words instead of swords, but swords (in police and army hands) are always in the background, and their presence is enough to put a damper on protest and if need be to grind rebellion into submission. In the 21st century, democracy has not run its course, and it will endeavour to channel transformative energy into debate and institution.

Communisation can only be done by the proletarians themselves, but how will they achieve self-organization? How we decide what to do depends on *what* we do. Collective mastering of our conditions of production is a condition of mastering the general evolution of society. It is obvious that a nuclear power station cannot be community-run. And what about modern industry? A worker at the ILVA Taranto plant was saying: "I've been there for fifteen years, I still don't understand anything about what's going on, it's too huge." Lots of tasks were performed by computers with the workers watching screens: their decoupling from the operative process made it incomprehensible how steel was made.

Communisation will not aim at creating a global government. Establishing an Earth parliament, Fourier's World Congress of Phalanxes, a world workers' council, or federation of communes would be bottom-up social engineering.

The global/local relation has to be rethought. Of course communisation can never succeed as an addition of isolated areas. But it will develop by a succession of knock-on effects and threshold effects. Only a non-economy can start localizing production: that is how it functions. The key is to be able to start and develop locally, not on the principle of self-sufficiency but of maximum possible self-control of the initiatives by the people involved. To be concrete, the aim is not to eat only what we grow, but to stop depending on a mega-machine for survival. Communisation will carry the day by proving its ability to improve the existence of the proletarians

here and now, not in some remote future when all the conditions of communism have been met. Or else people would turn against the revolution, some actively, most in a passive way.

Marx's early writings initiated a critique of primarily *political* revolution. He also questioned democracy as the condition of true emancipation and left us with a still largely untapped source of inspiration. This line of investigation was later discarded or ignored, including by Marx himself. Communisation will reconnect with it practically. Communizers would be doomed if they waited for adequate public administration and decision procedures to exist before implementing change.

J. Keane, *The Life & Death of Democracy*, Simon & Schuster, 2009
Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, 1843
Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.
Introduction, 1843

See DAILY LIFE, INSURRECTION, KARL (MARX), MONEY, NON-ECONOMY

QUERY

As the situationists wrote in 1966,

A dialectical book in our time is not only a book that presents a reasoning dialectically; it is a book that recognizes and calculates its own relationship with the totality to be actually transformed.

Radical theory is only consistent if it cares to reflect upon itself and contains its own potential critique. Otherwise, instead of contributing to transforming the world, it keeps busy transforming words.

In the last few years, as a quick Internet search will show, “communisation” has become a novelty on the intellectual market.

Now that the USSR is gone and the Red Scare over, exit

“communism.”

Enters *communisation*.

More often than not the reader is left with the impression of having stumbled through the wrong door.

The concept of communisation denies the necessity of an in-between transition period that would be neither capitalist nor communist. This describes a future revolution, not something happening at present.

However, it is too often interpreted as if that process was already on its way **now**: “no transition” is mistaken as infinite persistent reform instead of revolutionary break. “We want the world and we want it... Now!”, the Doors used to sing, but there is a difference between lyrics and historical change. The confusion makes for the popularity of the communisation concept, which is often degraded into a blanket term for the theory and practice that cumulative change (especially in the daily life sphere) naturally leads to structural change. In that sense, “communisation” is so extremely revolutionary that it dispenses with the need for a revolution: communisation theory is communism made accessible to all.

Further and equally damaging obfuscation is when specific aspects of communisation are played up (like immediacy), and others (like class) downsized to the point of dismissal. The complete de-coupling of the *proletarian* from *worker* results in the explicit disconnection of *revolution* from *class*:

The notion of a ‘contradiction between classes’ appears to be of strictly Maoist lineage. [...] We can find no reference in Marx’s work to a contradiction between ‘capital and labour,’ or ‘capitalists and workers’.
(Endnotes)

What started as an effort to update class finally buries it. This has more to do with post-modernism than with communist theory.

Radical thought always undergoes a process of neutralization. Communist theory transmutes into ideology when its parts are disjoined from the whole and transferred into an altogether

different mental mapping. In former times, for millions of people, socialism/communism embodied hopes of a fraternal community via substantial planned economic development. Meanwhile, Marxism was “a guide to action” for the vanguard.

The objective is more modest and inward-looking these days: mixing old references (*capital, value, labour...*) with new ones (*communisation, identity, gender...*) to provide suitable material for a whole array of critical specialists. No writer’s block here. There is no limit to the further spread of “communisation” as an ambiguous word expressing the promise of panoramic, cover-all, irresistible change.

Whenever the concept of communisation swallows up the rest of communist theory, it is sure to gain quick and wide acceptance. Beware.

“Investigation Without a Guidebook,” *Situationist International*, # 10, 1966

“Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations”, *Situationist International*, # 11, 1967

Endnotes, # 3, 2013, Editorial

See OBFUSCATION, REVOLUTION, UNLABELLED

REVOLUTION

Rather an ill-chosen wording: “revolution” refers to a body going round on an axis before completing its course where it started. First, overall transformation; then back to starting point. Cynics contend this applies perfectly to Russian history from 1917 to present times. The more things change, the more...

“Revolution” also casts a verbal spell—for the activist, it calls upon the true subversive spirit of the proletariat; for the pure

theorist, it conjures up the hidden meaning of universal history. Word extremism is a trap.

So why insist on *revolution*? Because history is not just a succession of long evolutionary trends: cut-off points rupture the continuum, and a break from the past is always a destructive/constructive process. Non-violence may be a respectable principle but it is historical nonsense. No major change or even improvement has ever been brought about without some degree of antagonism, agitation, rioting, and destructiveness. Social passion is never serene. Even democracy cannot be fought for and won in harmony (and the only revolutions acceptable to democrats are past or present democratic revolutions). A historical breakthrough is not a debating society, it is a trial of strength between conflicting interests.

It is contrary to reason and experience to maintain that mass popular pressure will be enough to peacefully deflect State action and neutralize bourgeois counter-violence. Occupying the street, a public building, or a workplace is illegal, and violators will be dealt with to the full extent of the law, prosecution, or worse. Modern police are equipped like an army ready for civil war. The ruling classes have repeatedly resorted to guns and tanks to defend their interests, and they will do it again, with an addition of public and private forces: in a social earthquake, the official “monopolist of violence” never minds delegating some of its powers to unofficial militias.

Communisation cannot be all bread and honey. States will face the situation by whatever means available. The bourgeoisie usually hope that a social storm will spend itself without much damage to their position. Politics is amazingly apt at channelling social change into the creation of institutions that achieve minimal change and postpone real change to a supposedly better day. This, however, may not stand up to the challenge. Not everything can be solved by prevarication and delaying tactics. Revolutions have their days of reckoning.

A historical discontinuity cannot be peaceful. This was true of

the advent of the parliamentary system. It applies even more so to communist revolution.

Communisation will depart from revolutionary imagery of revolution, and will base a revolution on different grounds. No need for self-dramatizing rhetoric. Communisation will be impossible unless social disruption undermines the reliability and efficiency of law enforcement agencies. Past insurrections did not fail because they used too much or too little violence. Rather because

In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity always remained unscathed and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, whilst the communist revolution is directed against the preceding mode of activity [...] (Marx)

Marx, *German Ideology*, 1845, Part I, D

See INSURRECTION, OBFUSCATION, UNLABELLED

SEX

A rupture with capitalism must be accompanied by an overcoming of the reproductive labour system, i.e. of what family has been up to now.

In Argentina, as early as the 1990s, when women initiated road blocks, they took care to integrate demands related to daily (i.e. women's) life. In 2005, the Movement of Unemployed Women (MMD) was born as a self-organisation for women. Law and order tried to fight back on the same level: in January 2006 the police sent in woman cops to clear a road blocked by *piqueteras*. When that failed, the army was called in. (Interestingly, in London in the 1980s, when female nurses occupied a hospital, the police chose to have them evicted by woman PCs.) In the words of Marta, a *piquetera*:

The biggest change was the relationship with other people in the neighbourhood, the development of friendship, and the possibility of sharing [...] Now I live in a large family, my neighbours are my family.

In 2006, the city and region of Oaxaca, Mexico became un-governable for seven months. It all started with an apparently modest demand: the removal of the State governor, compounded by a teachers' strike. The eviction of striking teachers from a camp in the city centre (June 14) sparked the insurrection. The creation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) added an indigenous Indian dimension to the movement. APPO wished to reclaim and extend traditional local Indian autonomy. Community ties and customs acted as an asset... but also as a drawback.

Against the (imposed) myth of female non-violence, one of the main aims of the women was to be accepted as fighters. Canal Nueve was taken over and controlled by thousands of women (August 1 to 6). They set up TV programs, patrolled at night, and barricaded to protect the transmitter. In fact, several Oaxaca barricades were all woman.

A woman was reported as fighting on a street block with an arm that had been broken by her husband (it remains to be known whether he was an insurgent who was also a male chauvinist, or simply hostile to the insurgency). APPO debated for an hour (which does not seem much for such a sensitive issue) on the question of representation on its *consejo* (directive body). Women asked for fifty percent, or thirty three percent at minimum, which they eventually got. Men argued thirty three percent was enough: according to them, there had been fewer woman participants in the movement, so fifty percent would have been unfair to all. This reasoning was highly debatable, since for instance in many demonstrations there were mostly female marchers. And who was voting in the first place? Was it a majority of *men* who voted in favour of male majority representatives? The whole procedure was off track: when representation prevails over action, it shows the

movement is stalling.

Luz, a woman aged 40, later said: “We told them we weren’t here just to cook their food at the *plantons* [protest encampments] and wash the dishes [...] We demonstrated that we can take actions as part of the movement ourselves.” Some challenged the men to perform so-called female duties. On the whole, the separation (and hierarchy) between private and public spheres, between reproductive and productive domains, was questioned but not transcended. Collective self-support was rarely more than poverty-sharing: solidarity is not enough to question production relations.

It is therefore predictable that there were fewer woman occupiers after a while.

Some women reacted by creating their specific Coordination of Women of Oaxaca (COMO, August 31). A number of participants later split from it, mainly housewives employed in the informal sector who thought COMO was over-influenced by women with more education and better jobs. Class reasserted itself in COMO.

The insurrection had run out of steam when it was put down in October by police and armoured vehicles.

As seen in this short survey, fighting alongside is not enough: the question is what men and women do together, what respective roles are played or denied. In Albania, 1997, although in the early days women took an active part in the demonstrations and the looting of the barracks, they became far less visible afterwards. Albanian patriarchy managed to hold the fort.

The involvement of women in an insurrection is a clear indicator of its depth or limitations. Woman insurgents shatter the relations (and mental blocks) that lock them into submission. (To a lesser extent, this is also true of children: insurrection re-socializes them away from the minor role where they were previously confined.)

Class structure does not explain everything about sex inequality: masculine domination also exists in classless “primitive” societies.

So, overturning the reproductive labour constraints implies some degree of confrontation, along the lines of sex, between proletarians.

“I couldn’t go to the picket because my husband beat me up and locked me up,” said a *piquetera* interviewed in 2004–2005. Another man burnt his wife alive. “He couldn’t stand her going out. Why? Because going out changes your life. Going out is a revolution,” Juanita explained.

In Argentina 2002, when Assemblies of Women Piqueteras were set up, domestic violence was a pressing issue, which meant **conflict** with a number of male fellow proletarians. Battered women’s shelters were organized.

Within the movement, though women were a majority in the members and the organisers, they often found themselves confined in “the material reproduction of the organization,” i.e. menial manual and administrative chores. So they took action for task-sharing.

They also realized that the movement set itself priorities that endorsed and perpetuated male domination: demands related to poverty (regarded as “general”) would rank higher than demands related to the female condition (deemed “partial”). Often *priority* is another word for (boss, bureaucrat, expert or husband-led) hierarchy. One of these women declared

“Sometimes we are running behind emergencies—of children’s meals for example—but if one of our mates is beaten by her partner, that is also urgent, isn’t it?”

As one woman said: “they think that we join to defame them, but we are not only working for women... now I can explain to my daughter what a contraceptive method is, at other times I would have felt very ashamed of doing so.” (In Argentina today, abortion still is legally a crime, only allowed for health reasons for the mother or in case of rape.)

The final word to Eva, an Oaxaca housewife: “Then we were fighting two different fronts, the system and the men inside our

own movement.”

After millennia of male rule, for an age-old prejudice to dissolve into a new desire, man/woman conflict is not just inevitable, it is necessary, and not unbridgeable. In the process men will feel the need and desire to discard their dominant role. Otherwise the continuation of the conflict would signify the insurgents’ inability to solve it, and prove to be one defeat among others.

The sexual division of labour is an integral part of the social division of labour. We will not get rid of the latter as long as the former carries on. Equally, the sexual division of labour—and male domination—will persist while the social division of labour exists, i.e. as long as *work* remains. That will be a litmus test.

B. Calamity Peller, *Women in Uprising: The Oaxaca Commune, the State & Reproductive Labour*, readthenothingwordpress.com

S. de Castro Sanchez, *Looking Back on the Oaxaca Rebellion*, 2008, libcom

Kellen Kass, “This is What Recuperation Looks Like: the Rebellion in Oaxaca & the APPO,” *A Murder of Crows*, # 2, 2007

C. Cross, F. Partenio, *The Construction and Meaning of Women’s Spaces in Organizations for the Unemployed*, 2011, justiciaglobal.mx

A. d’Atri, C. Escati, *The Piquetera/o Movement of Argentina*, 2009, communit.com

See AUTONOMY, FAMILY, INSURRECTION, WORK

TIME (IS OF THE ESSENCE)

“[...] he liked to get rid of time. By doing that he could concentrate on important things without interruption.” This was written in a novel by Philip K. Dick in 1977. It is significant that the plot (set

in 1994) should revolve around drug trafficking: an author's note specifies that drugs are to be regarded as the "metaphor" of the growing trend of "a speeding-up, an intensifying of the ordinary human existence."

About forty years later, we work more to get more free time to work faster, and so on.

Time-count and time-minimizing are vital for capital. The clock on the wall is now complemented by software that records times spent on each specific task. On labour's side, fighting for fewer working hours and less productivity constraints is a constant of the worker movement. From Taylor's stopwatch to the digital age, worker insubordination or resistance has had to be kept in check: a century ago, when meters were added to typewriters to record the number of keystrokes, time-rebel typists reacted by doing more strokes, using the space bar two, three, or four times more than previously.

Capitalist speedup now extends to daily life.

[...] the need to make sure that work time is filled with as much work as possible creates, on the other side, a need to make sure that leisure time is filled with as much leisure as possible. [...] We feel cheated if we just rest up on the weekend, so workers go to the pictures or a match, eat out, pay a visit to the shopping mall, etc. (The Housing Monster)

For the first time in history, a common *work* tool (the computer in its various incarnations, from desk PC to portable smartphone) has become the near-indispensable omnipresent object in everyday life.

Technology, however, is not its own driving force: object processing and *people* processing are two peas in a pod.

In 1988, Barbara Garson analysed the evolution of airplane ticket purchase by telephone. The American Airline clerk would slice his talk into four compulsory phases (opening, sales pitch, probe, close), and then be given thirteen seconds of recuperation

time (sixteen with Canadian Airline) before the next call. Every phase was of course monitored. How banal that all seems today. "In a sense, the computer-aided clerk is merely a transition toward a machine." True: today's traveller books a *virtual* ticket on-line. Says a 1988 employee:

the customers [...] are getting programmed [...] They are getting [...] used to dealing with machines [...] [the bosses] will replace us with machines [...] We know we'll be phased out in the next few years.

"Control is what the system is all about," Garson concludes. Not only does "the system" know what everyone is doing every second; even more, every gesture has been subdivided into so many meaningless parts that the global comprehension of the whole evades our understanding and consolidates the command of capital over labour.

Rather than lamenting the past, let's wonder what control really is about. According to official figures, between the 1980s and 2005, the hourly unit labour cost (as the percentage of US new car costs) has gone down from twenty six to fifteen percent. For Nike shoes manufactured in Asia and sold in America, the part of the Asian worker's wage in the overall cost is much lower. So why bother always cutting down costs more?

Downsizing has its merits and shortcomings: direct labour brings in new value. The fully automated factory is still a bourgeois dream. There has to remain a work force and it must be made as productive as possible. Unlike middle managers, ad men, and machines, workers are able to resist and are prone to strike. One of the best ways for the boss to have maximum power over labour is to regulate working time and production rates. Contrary to what Garson writes, it is not control "for the sake of control," rather it is for the sake of profit.

Communisation will break away from the logic that gives precedence to result (product) over process (productive activity). Sometimes this will be done with the help of computers and robots,

sometimes by a return to (and a reinvention of) craft techniques. We might be reluctant to go back to the ancient scribe's habit of writing seventy five words per minute, but surely we will experience a mutation of our relation to time.

Communizers will try to do something quite different from what the *Grundrisse* advocated: though Marx's deep insight was to perceive time as key to the problem, he wanted to keep time as a measuring rod and to minimize work time (thanks to automation, particularly) while increasing free (extra-work) time to a maximum. This maintains time as the great social regulator.

In present society, time constraints mean a lot more than just being aware of the passing of hours and minutes. The market compares the amounts of time taken by different producers to produce an item, and eventually selects the best cost-cutter, viz., time-cutter. To avoid being driven out of business, each producer is therefore compelled to be the best time-saver. This is called productivity (or efficiency).

Saying communication will switch from a *quantitative* to a *qualitative* approach sounds fine but highly idealistic. Words are flawed by what they inevitably mean today. We may prefer quality but it is rarely accessible (and is expensive, organic food for example), so we now have to make do with mass production. Quality may appear more realistic when seen as part of an insurrection process, which will make quantity and quality less of a contradiction.

Insurgents do not count how long it takes them to seize buildings, vehicles, or goods; to use or transport them, divert them from their previous use, or destroy them. When they transform or reproduce what they have taken over, what matters is the material and psychological satisfaction obtained not just by the product, but also by the productive activity that these objects result from. To put it another way, what will regulate production will be more than production procedures, it will be the social relation experienced by the participants. Sharing becomes not just giving to other

people (e.g. a shelter to the homeless), but acting together: e.g. the homeless may be involved in building houses. Organizing, resisting, and fighting imply places to meet, eat, sleep, produce, and repair. When social relationships integrate what is now distinct—what is called producing and consuming—time-count and its coercion are ignored. Since objects are not made to be exchanged according to the average quantum of time necessary to make them compared to other competing objects, there is no point in keeping track of minutes and seconds. People take their time, literally. It hardly needs saying that some people will be slower than others and that people will rush to do something urgent: time of course matters, but it no longer rules as the universal quantifier. “The idea that time is something that can be lost or gained [would be] itself somewhat odd.” (*A World Without Money*) The now self-evident separation between workshop and warehouse (a supermarket is simply a warehouse where you pay) goes. Once again, this is not saying that we would only eat and use what we grow and make as individuals or as a local group.

On the first evening of the Paris 1830 insurrection, “the dials on clock-towers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations” (W. Benjamin), as reported by an eyewitness who wrote about “firing on clock faces to make the day stand still.” Nowadays, primitivists sometimes refuse to wear a watch and won’t arrange a meeting time at 10 a.m. or 4 p.m., only at sunrise or sunset. A future society may still prefer to use watches, street clocks or sundials, but the 1830 insurgents had an insight of the coming tyranny of computed time.

Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, 1977

The Housing Monster, PM Press, 2012; also on prole.info

Barbara Garson, *The Electronic Sweatshop. How Computers are Transforming the Office of the Future into the Factory of the Past*, Penguin, 1988

Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII, § “Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines, etc.”

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (written in the late 1930s or in 1940)

See KARL MARX, MONEY, NON-ECONOMY, VALUE, WORK

UNLABELLED

Like name tags display the wearer’s name, political discourse is an ideological marker. *Communism*... now *communisation*. We do not know how communist insurgents will call themselves, most likely not “communist.” The 20th century has given communism a bad name.

Every revolutionary theory has had to invent its own terms, the situationists wrote, It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it [...] Words forged by revolutionary criticism are like partisans’ weapons; abandoned on the battlefield, they fall into the hands of the counterrevolution. And like prisoners of war, they are subjected to forced labour. [...] Concepts of radical critique suffer the same fate as the proletariat: they are deprived of their history, cut off from their roots. [...] To deny ourselves the use of a word is to deny ourselves a weapon used by our adversaries.

“Communism” is not the only word subjected to forced labour. In 1974, an Ulster **Workers’ Council** coordinated a general strike led by Ulster loyalists opposed to concessions to Irish nationalists, in fact in support of Protestant privileges over the Catholics. It was not improper for it to call itself a *Workers’ Council*, since a lot of Protestant workers took part in the strike (there were one hundred Catholics out of a ten thousand-strong labour force in the Harland & Wolff shipyards, then the biggest industrial company in Belfast).

No need to dwell on the misfortunes of a term like “freedom;” Orwellian newspeak and contemporary softspeak compete to fill it with and empty it of meaning.

When socialism was born, what it meant was not that clear anyway. For many people, it expressed their opposition to the individualist evolution of modern times. For some, like Saint-Simon, it meant making the world consistent with the historical evolution launched by the Industrial revolution: doing away with out-of-date ruling classes and promoting a democracy of producers and entrepreneurs. This agenda was fulfilled by capitalism, which was busy *socializing* the world in its own way. Though the social-democrat “socialization programme” was only really put into practice after 1945, by the beginning of the 20th century socialism had started being devoid of content. Confusion reached a logical peak when liberals said “We are all socialist now” and the far-right called itself *national socialist*.

As socialism was cheapened and degraded, “communism” came to mean *the real thing*, to be achieved by mass parties that are opposed to class collaborationist labour and unions. Leninism and then Stalinism did not appeal because of their emphasis on violent revolution as opposed to peaceful reform: Communist Party supporters did not want insurrections any more than Labour voters. What attracted them most was the Communist Party’s full commitment to a planned development that would truly benefit the common people. As the CPUSA used to say, “Communism is 20th century Americanism,” the great facilitator and maker of history. Millions supported Stalin because he had defeated Hitler, as well as because of what they thought to be Russian economic success, demonstrated by the Red Army’s victory in 1945. For them, communism was modernity as well as fairness, with a deep belief in community based on technological progress. In post-1917 Russia, electricity was at the same time a “*modern energy source*” and “the emblem of triumph over the dark forces of ignorance, superstition,

religion, and disease.” (R. Stites)

Now the utopian scientific myth is over. If “communism” is as devalued as “socialism,” it is not just due to the Gulag: the chimera of growth-induced happiness has withered, and the consumer dream has soured. People in the 21st century do not fantasize about mastering nature, they reject Francis Bacon and Descartes, and their own wonderland would be quite different: small scale sustainable Earth-friendly industry capable of providing the benefits of growth (computers and high-performance medical care) without its disadvantages (global warming and NSA surveillance). If they still believe in “common,” they want it *now*, and “commons” theory suits them, in its radical or moderate versions.

So, if it’s not *communism*, and is unlikely to be *communisation*, what will it be labelled? Maybe insurgents will be weary of what Victor Klemperer called the “depreciation of the superlatives.” Maybe they will prefer to experience the darkness of a missing word, and they will make do with off-target terms, until they complete the phrase.

To quote the SI again, “words are insubordinate,” which is just as well.

Mustapha Khayati, “Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary,” *Situationist International*, # 10, 1966

T. P. Coogan, *The IRA*, HarperCollins revised edition, 2000

J. Grandjonc, *Communisme, Kommunism/Communism, 1785-1842*, Ed. des Malassis, 2013

R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions & Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, Oxford U.P., 1992

V. Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013 (1st edition, 1957)

See GIOTTO, INSURRECTION, KARL (MARX), OBFUSCATION, QUERY

VALUE

“Value” is a term we hear all the time: *value* creation, *VAT*, market *value*, etc. What the economist calls value, however, is something that everyday business deals with in three forms: profit, interest, and rent, which appear at the bottom of the balance sheet, and the reality of which is validated by the fact they can be bought and sold. That is the self-understanding that each capitalist needs to compete with other capitalists and to manage his labour force.

Marx’s notion of value is unavailable for direct verification by figures. Because of that, Marx is accused of metaphysics.

It is worth emphasizing that value does not compute, since some communist theorists have tried to make use of value as a proletarian management tool. More on that below.

The fact that a certain social reality shows up in visible forms but can only be approached as an abstraction does not mean this reality is a fiction. Prices are visibly accessible figures, but what do they result from? Two centuries ago, the most perceptive classical economists explained that the value of a commodity was not determined by what is *paid* for the labour that produces it, but by the relative *quantity of labour* necessary to produce it. The analysis was moving from manifestation to substance. The concept of value points to the pivotal role of labour, productive labour and labour time.

Now, since value is obviously related to the market, what exactly is the relation? Is value created by the market? And consequently, if we replaced independent producers or companies with associated producers, would everything become different?

Herein lies the difficulty.

Whether producers are companies or individuals, value can only be understood from its origin in production. Though it manifests itself in the moment of exchange, it is born out of production; because the production we are dealing with is not production in general, is not just production of objects, but is determined by

the imperative of average minimal time. The exchange moment is essential because the market is where the respective amounts of value meet to be compared and assessed.

Value is the form of exchangeability of items according to the average labour time necessary to produce them. Time is the substance of value.

The need to measure the “labour content” in time of goods derives from the need to produce goods in the shortest possible time and to standardize their manufacture. Time-counting comes with the imperative of time-saving, viz., having the lowest possible labour costs. No stopwatch expert will ever know the exact average labour time necessary to manufacture any specific object. What every manager knows is that he must bring his company’s particular production time down to the lowest possible level.

For this reason, schemes (such as the councilist one by the GIK in 1930) that base a communist society on labour-time accounting are founded on a misunderstanding of what value is. Value **is** labour time. Therefore replacing money by time as the regulator of production would be tantamount to creating a worker-led capitalism.

The purpose of running production and circulation *directly*, by computing the amount of labour necessary to produce goods, without the mediation of money, is to have an economy (and therefore a society) manageable by the workers themselves; the assumption is that nobody knows better than the associated producers how much labour time is necessary to produce goods.

Unfortunately, this amounts to maintaining value—albeit only as a management tool—and companies as the focal points of production. The advocates of this model contend there will be *no competition* between companies, therefore no pressure on labour to speed up the pace of work: if there is no need to undercut competitors, there is no pressure on labour. In other words, producers could make the best of productivity without becoming a slave to it. The rub is, productivity is no servant: it masters the

producers. Who is naïve enough to believe that the pressure for ever more “worker-managed” efficiency would apply only to *machines*? Calculating the number of hours necessary to manufacture anything means knowing the time required to perform the required tasks. Productivity inevitably comes with labour-time reckoning. Instead of providing a blueprint for communism, the GIK theorized a backslide into capitalism.

Either time-counting helps achieve maximum input/output ratios, which cause systematic cost-cutting at the expense of the producers, or producers don't care about maximizing yield, but then why keep track of every productive minute and second?

In fact, this is what “communizers” will do; instead of time-counting and time-saving, they will take their time. Imagine a place where people are making clay tiles. Needless to say, communizers will not mind being slow and stopping for a chat or a game of tabletennis. But they will do more. They will leave the work-place for a while to do something else: take part in an occupation, a debate, a riot, or engage in another production. Meanwhile, people not yet involved in tile-making will come to the factory and spend some time helping, learning the trade... More decisively, people will walk in with desires and suggestions about the kind of roof they'd like, get hands-on experience in tile-fabricating, and make the tiles according to where and how they live. Breaking with standardization is a step towards the end of value. As a result, the tile factory is no longer a *work*-place: we are at a loss for words here, all we can say is that it is becoming one of the places where people live. This is what communisation is about: the end of work as such. Time is not ignored (how could it be?), but ceases to act as the main regulator of production, therefore indirectly of life.

Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, chapter 1

Bruno Astarian, *Value & Its Abolition*, 2015, chap. 2

Group of International Communists of Holland (GIK),

See **DAILY LIFE, HABITAT, MONEY, NON-ECONOMY, TIME, WORK**

WORK

The labour movement wished for everybody to share the burden of work (alleviated by modern technology): when we *all* work, we'll work *a lot less*; that was the plan.

Though Marx in his youth advocated a revolution that “does away with labour,” later he was one of the main proponents of the universal extension of productive work. His stand did not result from a love of labour: “the true realm of freedom [...] can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.”

This indeed is the most common criticism of work: how to get as much free use as possible of one's time? Basically, there were two answers to that question. The first was to make work a lot less physically painful and psychologically stressful by using what was supposedly the best of capitalist legacy: machines, automation, etc. The other solution was the revival of craftsmanship, in collectively-managed, human-scale workshops.

Most contemporary post-work imaginaries are not very imaginative: computerised co-ops, networking, collaborative or mutualistic work, team work, leisure mixed with work... these schemes adapt work to high tech and only concern a minority of white collar jobs, not assemblyline operators. They have as much impact on social reality as Friday's casual wear.

On the contrary, radical critique is a definitive condemnation of work as *a crime*, an alienation that cannot be redeemed. Now, if work is a constraint—which it is—why is it? The bourgeoisie

who wants ever more profit merely plays his part in a structure that compels him to make money hand over fist. Saying that work is *class* is only relevant if we see how class functions. For work to benefit the interests of the bourgeoisie, it has to be a production that is only production, a productive activity separate from the rest of life, determined by norms, which means time-counting and time-saving.

Communisation does not turn work into play, nor does it systematically try to avoid manual labour. Doing away with the rule of productivity involves questioning separations that are now taken for granted, particularly the one between a need and the object that will fulfil this need, i.e. between the need and the activity that produces the object.

The concept of communisation is not a utopian project. Though nothing today communizes the world, present endeavours indicate how the breakthrough could take place. Anti-work practices are not a first step on a gradual path to communisation: they are caught in a contradiction that only revolution can solve.

There is no automatic move from fighting against working conditions to doing away with work. In Italy in the 70s and in Asia forty years later, wage-labour often defends itself by a permanent disruption of production, wrecking the premises or even setting the plant on fire, thereby destroying its conditions of employment. Here the class struggle reaches its culminating stage, just before breaking point, yet this is still class confrontation, not the beginning of the destruction of the capital/proletarian intertwining. Communisation would take opposition from a negative to a positive level by transforming the production site—which could mean pulling it down, leaving the place, and doing something else.

In that case, what would prevent the proletarians from reviving *work*? Realists will undoubtedly champion a pragmatic resumption of production to meet urgent needs by all efficient acceptable means. The only answer to this “politics of effectiveness” is that doing

away with work, i.e. with value, that is to say with productivity and standardization, will be the most efficient way for the insurgents to produce what they need to live and fight. This is the only viable option, actually. Standardized production is as impossible for them as resorting to banks to finance rioting equipment. The insurgents' predicament will not be how to manufacture helicopter gunships that would outperform those of the military, nor to develop a people's agro-business, nor build row after row of uniform housing.

Marx, *German Ideology*, Part I, D, "The Necessity of the Communist Revolution", § 3; and *Capital*, vol. 3, chap. 48, § III
Els van Daele, "*De Moker*" Group, Roofdrukk Edities, 2013
(contains H. Schuurmann's *Work is a Crime*, 1924)

M. Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris & Barcelona during the Popular Fronts*, 1990 (Univ. of California E-Books Library)

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P. Herman, *The Strike at Lordstown*, 1972, prole.info

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics & Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke U.P., 2011 (also as a pdf on libcom)

See INSURRECTION, NON-ECONOMY, TIME, VALUE

XENOPHILIA

Capitalism has never swept away divisions and frontiers. Globalization in the 21st century does not unify humankind any more than the international flows of trade and investment pacified the world before 1914. As long as capitalism exists, it will bring some countries and areas into a unit and break up others. The

Ukraine is a case in point. The “national question” is far from over, and border conflicts will flare up when we least expect them. Ethnoreligious factors cut across class lines. In the Near and Middle East, Islam offers a surrogate community when traditional ties are shattered and capitalist relations too unstable. Globalization creates new national, religious, “ethnic” rifts and revives old ones. The present world seems to go through a time-warp where reactionary backlash feeds off exacerbated modernity.

How do insurgents go beyond identity barriers?

Community is possible when people are not passive. History gives us as many examples of proletarian solidarity as of xenophobia.

In the May ‘68 general strike in France, though French workers were not immune to racism, the anti-strike forces did not manage to make much use of racism to divide the strikers.

Later, as the proletarian tide was ebbing, a number of French-born workers began to act and think of themselves as distinct from non-national or migrant labour. Only struggling can develop what is common to all. “The working class is not weak because it is divided [...] it is divided because it is weak” (Anton Pannekoek). Apart from revolutionary periods, the proletarian class is no less conservative than others. Internecine violence among the exploited is not a temporary aberration. A banal example is cross-border strike-breaking.

Although all proletarians share a common dispossession and a separation from the means of living, that commonality is negative, and if it is experienced passively, it is not enough to rally the proletarians against capitalism. For Israeli and Palestinian workers to fight a joint battle will require more than the exploitation of all of them by capital: until they realize their deep common interests, calls to solidarity are likely to fall on deaf ears. Actually even solidarity limited to *helping* each other is not yet *acting* in common.

The sharpening of class conflict is not enough. Serbia in the 1980s went through intense social struggles, enough to paralyze

the State and the rulers for a while, until nationalist energy finally prevailed over social unrest. The ruling class exploited ethnic faultlines under the guise of securing the rights of “the (Serbian) people” against threatening outsiders (Croats, Albanians, Moslems, etc.). The success of Milosevic’s regime did not result from an absence of class conflict, but from the inability of the proletarian community of struggle to turn itself into a transforming power. Inner protest in fact continued in the workplace and even in the army, but Serbian nationalism managed to divert tensions and grievances toward exterior enemies.

Only doing away with present society will bring the proletarians together: among other examples, there was an effort in that direction in Greece, 2008, when native-born and immigrants (from Albania, especially) acted together.

Human nature only exists for the biologist. We are what we make ourselves; the question is *how*. Nothing is irreversible or eternal. The struggle for life is a myth, so is universal love. Fourier’s fanciful and insightful plans had at least the merit of not aiming to create a new perfect man; on the contrary, they were based on the versatility of human beings.

Communisation will not be built on a definition of what the human species is or should be. For a prehistoric hunter-gatherer, humankind was restricted to those who were part of his group. Arabic peninsula Bedouins and South American Guayaqui did not know what a State was, but a lot of their energy was devoted to war.

Communizers won’t be travelling back in time anyway, nor will they appeal to an abstract humanity or dissolve the individual in the community. In Alexander Bogdanov’s science-fiction utopian novels written a few years before 1914, communist Martians live in such close harmony that gradually all different languages fuse into one. Bogdanov was a Bolshevik. We can find more roundabout ways to universality.

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T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler & Stalin*, Basic Books, 2010
A. Pannekoek, *Party & Class*, 1936, marxists.org
TPTG, *The Rebellious Passage of a Proletarian Minority through a Brief Period of Time*, 2009
P. Clastres, *Archaeology & Violence*, 1977 (MIT Press, 2010)
A. Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevnik Utopia* (1908 & 1913), Indiana U. P., 1984

See CLASS, INSURRECTION, REVOLUTION

YESTERDAY

[...] *many of us Communists for our part are willing to admit that the communisation of the means of production will inevitably lead to the communisation of the products of labour also, and that [...] it is a programme sufficiently big to put before the people of our generation [...]*

This is how William Morris defined co-operation and community in 1887, as opposed to centralization “in the tutelage to the state.” His platform, however, included no rejection of money and did not inquire into value.

In 1920, when a French communist/anarchist paper spoke of *communisation* (because “socialization has become an ambiguous word”), it basically meant the “taking over by the proletariat of all wealth and all power.”

Only recently has the word begun to denote more than a set of real communist measures; it defines a practice that would evolve out of the proletarian experience but not build up a work community. And the action verb *to communize* puts the emphasis on communisation as conscious human activity.

Our entries have borrowed examples from history, while making frequent use of the future tense, as if communism were moving further away into a time yet to come. Why is it difficult to speak of communisation in the present?

In Marx's time and later on, communist theory had no such trouble. Although Bordiga wrote "we are the only ones who found our activity on the future," he titled a long series of articles *The Thread of Time*, dividing each one into three parts: "Today—Yesterday—Tomorrow." For Marx anyway, communist theory went parallel to the power build-up of the labour movement. For him, in spite of all their shortcomings, socialist parties and trade unions were "the real movement," the often inadequate but forward-going vehicle of a class struggle that would finally (quasi inevitably) take over society and create a working community of associated producers. In a nutshell, the proletariat was identified with the working class, and revolution was the last decisive step in the evolution of the class struggle. Therefore there was an obvious linkage between the ups and downs of the present and its future outcome. There were recesses (the 1850s), highlights (1871) and crushing defeats, but the growing social and political power of the working classes prepared for their turning the world into a workers' world.

In the 20th century, especially after the 1920s, communist minorities found themselves in dire straits, but, for instance, the German-Dutch councilist Left was able to maintain a straightforward connection between present and future. If communism is equated with worker management in the future, present worker attempts at self-management of struggles are to be interpreted as positive steps towards a revolution to come. The problem is for the working class to really take and keep power and not give it up to a bureaucratic class, as happened in Russia. Boiled down, this view amounted to the central tenet that worker autonomy is essential today and must be promoted as the key to emancipation tomorrow.

The 1970s surge, particularly when Italy hovered close to civil

war in 1977, was a major milestone in the shifting of this viewpoint. A historical breaking point was forcing us to sharpen our focus.

Though today as much as yesterday the world is structured by class, there is an inadequacy in the core theory of class as we used to know it.

If communism is not the liberation *of* work from capital, but of the workers *from* work, if revolution is the destruction of work by the workers, revolution cannot be equated with the *working* class seizing the world. So communism is not simply the ultimate step in a long series of uphill and downhill labour vs. bourgeoisie struggles. It is that and it is more than that. The link between resistance to capitalism and social revolution is no longer direct. No wonder present and future are not as clearly coupled as before.

The class struggle is the only terrain we have, yet up to now the class struggle has sustained itself without giving birth to communist revolution. No dialectical twist can evade that.

An era is drawing to a close and we are still unable to read the signs of the new eruptive period.

Communisation is a concept, not a whole theory. But the concept of a different epoch, ours.

W. Morris, *The Policy of Abstention*, 1887

Le Soviet, # 3, March 1920 (archivesautonomies.org)

Amadeo Bordiga, *Sul Filo del Tempo*, 1949-55, sinistra.net (in Italian and French)

Italy 1977-78: Living with an Earthquake, Red Notes, 1978 (on libcom)

L. de Mattis, "What is Communisation?" *SIC* # 1, 2011

See KARL MARX, QUERY, WORK

ZOMIAS

The word *zomi* (“highlander” in several local languages) is used to designate an area overlapping the borders of Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Southwest China, where about one hundred million people live on the fringe of—and in resistance to—states and empires. “Zomia” is made up of mostly egalitarian and often nomadic peasant societies. It has been conceptualized by James Scott as a semi-autonomous zone where, over the centuries, the population has managed to evade (most) of the evils of civilization: slavery, taxation, forced labour, war... Money exists but no overall merchandization of life. This concept has aroused controversy. Critics contend that it idealizes societies that are not immune to division and conflict. Kinship probably allows for more humane relations than State rule, but comes with women’s submission. The individual may well be the bourgeois form of liberty, but traditional community lords over its members. Collective myths may seem to us Westerners more palatable than established religions but can be equally oppressive. Finally, some groups (for instance the Hmong in the Indochina wars) have had to side with one State against another to retain their autonomy.

Leaving controversy aside, from a communisation process point of view, Zomia warns us against the tendency to smooth the jagged path of evolution into a straight line. By the measure of history, the time of the so-called modern proletariat—a couple of centuries at the most—has been quite short. Zomia also cautions us against Eurocentrism or industry-centred communism. Our goal is not to develop or help develop “poverty-stricken” or “pre-capitalist” areas. When we are told that the Dallas Cowboys football stadium consumes more energy in a year than the whole of Liberia (2013 figure), are we to conclude that we should equalize their respective levels of consumption?

Lenin defined communism as “Soviets plus electricity.” Radicals now would rather have “Autonomy plus ecology,” with

universal Internet access to the remotest recesses of Africa. The same person is adamantly against fossil fuels and nuclear power, yet wishes everyone had a mobile, without questioning the bedrock of cutting-edge technology. Where do electricity—and rare metals—come from?

What Zomia's inhabitants can contribute is not their communal ways of life as they are now (or were until recently), but as they could be both revived and deeply altered by social revolution in the whole region. The Russian peasant commune (*mir*) was significant enough for Marx and Engels to write in 1882 that "If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development."

In their anti-populist polemic, Lenin and other socialists were led to deny the relevance of the issue: for them, socialism was based on industrial growth. In any case, a communist revolution would not have developed the *mir* as it was: regular land redistribution and cooperation were supervised by the *pater familias*. Self-administration meant the rule of the elders. Pre- or even anti-capitalist brotherhoods are inclined to conformism and usually exclude women. Extended kin networks and neighbourhoods are *bonds* in both senses of the word. Community raises the question of which "common" is concerned.

What we reject is the philosophy that opposes free will and determinism. This separation reflects the opposition between man and the world, and between the individual and society. It is an expression of the anomie of the individual and his inability to understand his own needs in order to satisfy them. (A World Without Money)

Governments are now manipulating indigenous traditions, for example incorporating traditions such as *sumak kawsay* ("good living" in Quechua) into Ecuador's constitution in 2008. As the Western productivist model dysfunctions, time-honoured customs

become useful political props. Part of it is good intentions. Part is a ploy to divert attention from the contradictions of Latin American militant reformism.

So-called pre-capitalist areas will take part in communisation in so far as they will achieve a lot more than reasserting their traditional ties; they will use and supersede these ties at the same time. Obviously this is impracticable in isolation, and only possible if social breakthroughs occur elsewhere. This is not to forget that “Zomia” zones also exist within so-called modern countries: there is more than one Zomia on this planet, hence the plural in the title of this last entry.

James C. Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale U.P., 2009

Lenin, *Our Foreign & Domestic Position & Party Tasks*, 1920

Marx, first draft of his letter to V. Zasulich, 1881

Marx & Engels, Preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1882

F.Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of Populist & Socialist Movements in 19th Century Russia*, 1959 (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001)

Carlos Zorrilla, *Earth Day 2014 - Sumak Kawsay, A New Conservative Force, or a Farce*, 2014, decoin.org

See DAILY LIFE, HABITAT, INSURRECTION, KARL (MARX)

Whereas traditional political reform has lost credibility, *commons theory* plays upon our desire for grassroots social change, and its appeal comes from its ability to resonate with effective piecemeal transformations worldwide. It presents the—now inevitable—limit of change, as the ultimate objective of change. Commons theorists are popular because they paint reform in revolutionary colours: people veer to the most gratifying version of social change, the one more in tune with the illusion of a force within capital but somehow untouched by it, a force that could grow and take over. Commons theory is communism made easy: isn't 99% of the world population dispossessed and ready to act? Safety in numbers. Old socialism has gone out of fashion with the decline of the Western labour movement, but a new-style reformism also promotes incremental steps to a better world, similar to the Gramscian strategy of the permeation of civil society.



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