

The Use of Free Time

Published in **Internationale Situationniste** #4, 1960

The most superficial and constantly reiterated platitude of leftist sociologists during recent years is that leisure has become a major factor in advanced capitalist society. This platitude is the basis of countless debates for or against the importance of a reformist rise in the standard of living, or of workers' participation in the prevailing values of the society into which they are becoming increasingly integrated. What is counterrevolutionary about all this verbiage is that it equates free time with passive consumption, as if the only use of free time was the opportunity to become an increasingly full-time spectator of the established absurdities. The illusions manifested in a particularly ponderous symposium of these sociologists (*Arguments* #12-13) were soundly refuted in two articles in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* #27. In the first, Pierre Canjuers wrote: "While modern capitalism constantly develops new needs in order to increase consumption, people's dissatisfaction remains the same as ever. Their lives no longer have any meaning beyond a rush to consume, and this consumption is used to justify the increasingly radical frustration of any creative activity or genuine human initiative — to the point that people no longer even see this lack of meaning as important." In the second article, Jean Delvaux noted that the issue of consumption has not superseded the qualitative distinction between the poor and the wealthy (four out of five wage workers still have to constantly struggle to make ends meet). More significantly, he pointed out that there is no reason to worry about whether or not the proletariat participates in the prevailing social or cultural values, because "*there no longer are any such values.*" And he added the essential point that the present culture, "increasingly separated from society and from people's lives (painters painting for other painters, novelists writing novels read only by other novelists about the impossibility of writing a novel) — this culture, insofar as it has any originality, is no longer anything but a constant self-denunciation: a denunciation of the society and a rage against culture itself."

The emptiness of leisure stems from the emptiness of life in present-day society, and it cannot be filled within the framework of that society. This emptiness is simultaneously expressed and concealed by the entire cultural spectacle, in three basic forms.

The "classic" form of culture continues to exist, whether reproduced in its pure form or in latter-day imitations (tragic theater, for example, or bourgeois politeness). Secondly, there are the countless degraded spectacular representations through which the prevailing society presents itself to the exploited in order to mystify them (televised sports, virtually all films and novels, advertising, the automobile as status symbol). Finally, there is an avant-garde negation of the spectacle, a negation which is often unconscious of its basis but which is the only "original" aspect of present-day culture. The "rage against culture" expressed within this latter form ends up arriving at the same *indifference* that proletarians as a class have toward all the forms of spectacular culture. Until the spectacle itself has been negated, any audience watching the negation of the spectacle can no longer be distinguished from that suspect and unhappy audience consisting of *isolated* artists and intellectuals. When the revolutionary proletariat manifests itself as such, it will not be as a new audience for some

new spectacle, but as people actively participating in every aspect of their lives.

There is no revolutionary problem of leisure — of an emptiness to be filled — but a problem of free time. As we have already said: "There can be no free use of time until we possess the modern tools for the construction of everyday life. The use of such tools will mark the leap from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art" (Debord, "Theses on Cultural Revolution," *Internationale Situationniste* #1). The supersession of leisure through the development of an activity of free creation-consumption can only be understood in relation with the dissolution of the traditional arts — with their transformation into superior modes of action which do not refuse or abolish art, but *fulfill* it. In this way art will be superseded, conserved and surmounted within a more complex activity. Its traditional elements may still be partially present, but transformed, integrated and modified by the totality.

Previous avant-garde movements presented themselves by declaring the excellence of their methods and principles, which were to be immediately judged on the basis of their *works*. The SI is the first artistic organization to base itself on the radical inadequacy of all permissible works; and whose significance, and whose success or failure, will be able to be judged only with the revolutionary praxis of its time.