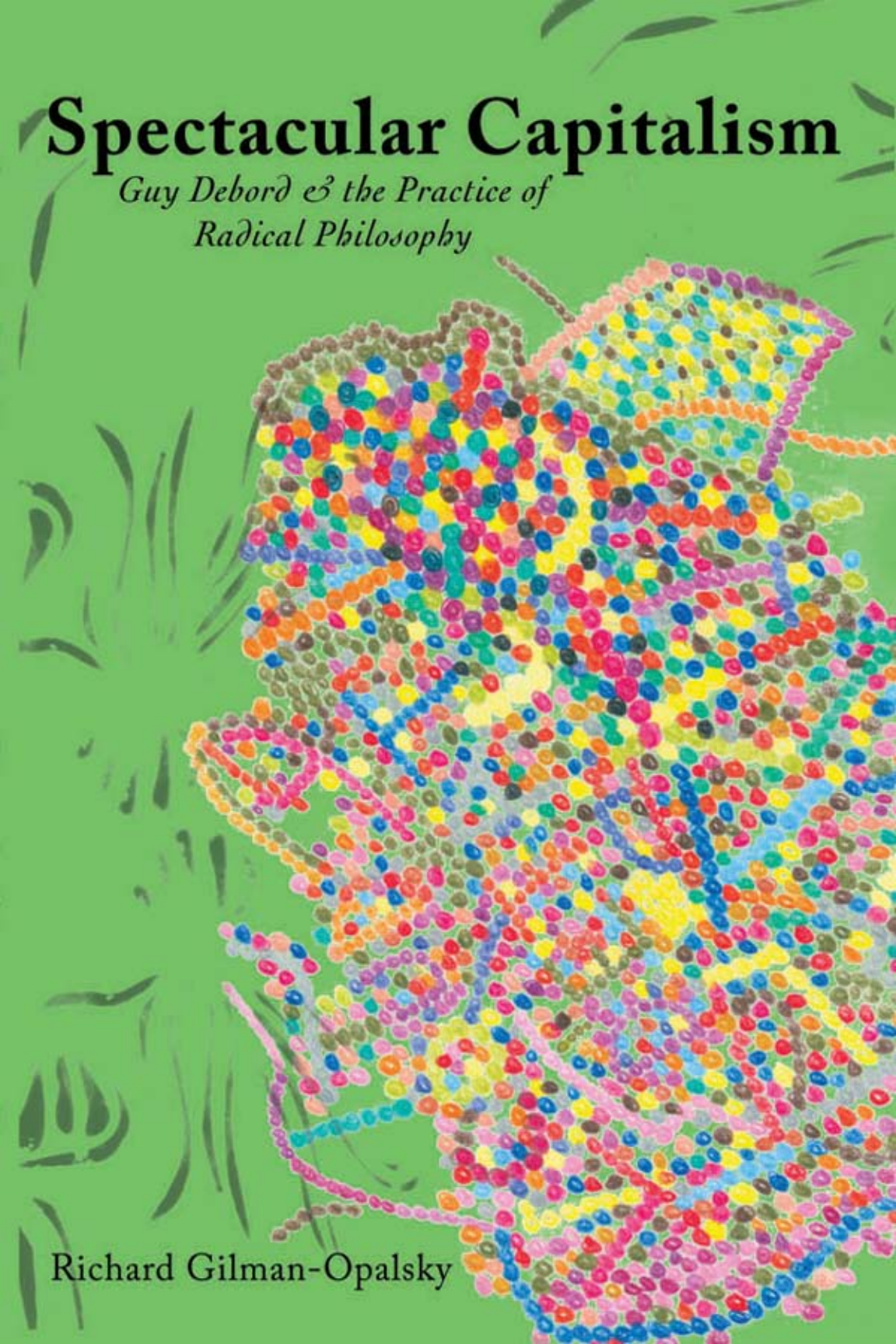
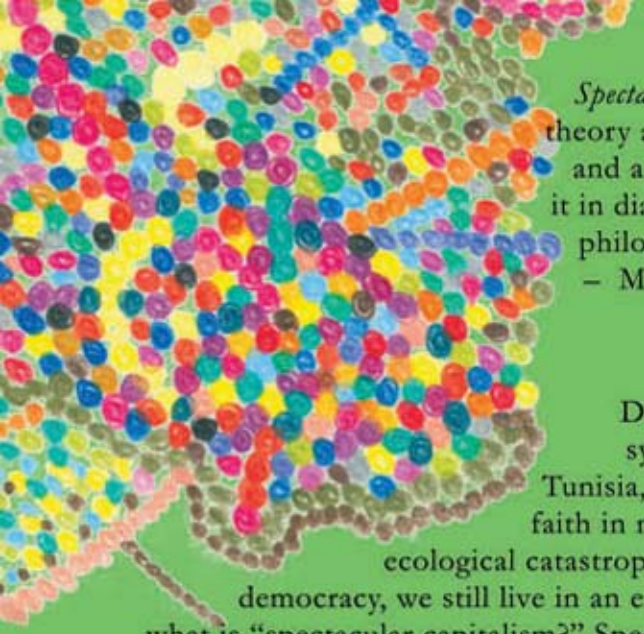
Spectacular Capitalism

Guy Debord & the Practice of Radical Philosophy



Richard Gilman-Opalsky



"Richard Gilman-Opalsky's *Spectacular Capitalism* rescues Situationist theory and praxis from merely antiquarian and art-historical commentary and puts it in dialogue with the project of a radical philosophy for leaving the 21st century."
– McKenzie Wark, author of *A Hacker Manifesto* and *Gamer Theory*

Despite recent crises in the financial system, uprisings in Greece, France, Tunisia, and Bolivia, worldwide decline of faith in neoliberal trade policies, deepening ecological catastrophes, and global deficits of realized democracy, we still live in an era of "spectacular capitalism." But what is "spectacular capitalism?" Spectacular capitalism is the dominant mythology of capitalism that disguises its internal logic and denies the macroeconomic reality of the actually existing capitalist world. Taking on this elusive mythology, and those who too easily accept it, Richard Gilman-Opalsky exposes the manipulative and self-serving narrative of spectacular capitalism.

Drawing on the work of Guy Debord, Gilman-Opalsky argues that the theory of practice and practice of theory are superseded by upheavals that do the work of philosophy. One could ask: Who better raises questions about public and private spheres of influence and control, Jürgen Habermas or the water war activists who made a rebellion in Cochabamba, Bolivia in the spring of 2000? Or, has any sociological theorist done better than the Zapatistas to reframe and raise questions about indigenous identity? *Spectacular Capitalism* makes the case not only for a new philosophy of praxis, but for praxis itself as the delivery mechanism for philosophy – for the field of human action, of contestation and conflict, to raise directly the most irresistible questions about the truth and morality of the existing state of affairs.

Richard Gilman-Opalsky is Assistant Professor of Political Philosophy in the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Springfield. He is the author of *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory.*

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Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy

Richard Gilman-Opalsky

Minor Compositions

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Email: info@minorcompositions.info

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Email: info@autonomedia.org
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Acknowledgements & Dedication

In connection with this book, and the development of the ideas herein, I have had many stimulating and helpful discussions with students I've worked with at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Two graduate students in particular, Heidi R. Johnson and James Brown, made substantial contributions to my revision of the manuscript. Heidi provided excellent critical remarks on Chapter 4, which undoubtedly made it better. I have taken all of her suggestions. James reviewed Chapters 2 and 3 and provided valuable editorial assistance. John Gruntfest did the artwork for the cover of this book. By my estimation, John is one of the greatest saxophonists and composers, and one of the most significant figures in the history of creative music; his unprecedented contributions have yet to be properly measured. Seek out his work. I also want to thank Stevphen Shukaitis of Autonomedia/Minor Compositions for his thoughtful comments on the manuscript and especially for his profound confidence in this project.

This book is for radical students everywhere who populate protests and rebellions, who lend their energies and solidarity to those who struggle from below for a better world. While I teach philosophy, you raise the best questions. You are not animated by the "delightful insanity" of youth, but rather, by an appropriate sense of justice that spectacular society will try to wear away. Stay roused.

I also dedicate this work to my partner, Robyn, and to my son, Roscoe. If what I have written in these pages brings some enrichment, joy, or resolve, please know that much of my own enrichment, joy, and resolve come from Robyn's love and solidarity and Roscoe's ecstatic unruly spirit. While I alone should be blamed for the faults of this book, it would not exist without them.

Introduction: A Priori

Stretched to its absolute limit, ideology disintegrates: its supreme form is also its absolute zero: the night where all ideological cows are black. –
GUY DEBORD, 1967[1]

When a great man set out to give your economic emancipation a scientific basis you let him starve... You did not understand that his sociology wanted to protect your society against your state... Of all that a great mind and a big warm heart had poured out, one word remained: dictatorship... Only one word, which had been unhappily chosen though well meant, stuck with you: dictatorship! –
WILHELM REICH, 1945[2]

We do not have any personal experience of living in a Marxist world, an anarchist utopia, or a communist society. Of course, worlds, societies, and utopias have been imagined or suggested following these ideas, but the ideas themselves have only ever seen roughshod and piecemeal implementation, and have mostly been betrayed (rather than *realized*) by their material transposition.[3] And despite the fact that I shall argue that capitalism is everywhere triumphant, both materially and ideologically, indeed as ideology materialized, one could also say that we do not have direct experience of capitalism. That is, we do not experience the capitalist world as a thing outside of ourselves, as an object with a physical address that we come into contact with, but rather as a set of organizational principles that shape and mediate our experience and our original comprehensive understanding of the world. Capitalism is not an object or an event or an era that we pass into. We can, intellectually, explain how certain experiences are more or less governed by the logic of capitalism (i.e. legroom as a commodity on airplanes, healthcare, outsourcing and downsizing, etc.), but capitalism itself is more elusive. It is not possible to attribute all of what we associate with Marxism, anarchism, communism,

and capitalism to experiential knowledge of each. And beyond the experiential vacuum is a vacuum of thought; we can hardly find any philosophical interrogation of these terms and concepts in the world, having long since arrived at a historical moment when most people feel that they can take the meanings of these words for granted. In a sense, then, our understanding of these ideological frameworks is *a priori* – not in a Kantian sense to be sure, but in the sense of existing already in our understandings prior to and independent of experience and philosophy. After a while, all ideology works *a priori*.

Many ideological frameworks are no longer identifiable as such because they have become trigger mechanisms for our normative instincts. The frameworks we oppose have become concretized representations, invoking certain pictures and meanings quite removed from their etymological, philosophical, political, and historical genealogies. It is indeed the case that we live in a world of conflicting "isms," yet we hardly comprehend the philosophical prehistory of the distinctive doctrines and practices we adopt or associate with opposing ideologies. In Chapters 3 and 4 of this book I make an effort to differentiate philosophical from ideological modes of thinking, and to emphasize the importance of that difference for politics.

But to begin, let us think for a moment about some of the frameworks whose meanings we take for granted: capitalism, socialism, anarchism. The last of these, anarchism, is taken less seriously than capitalism and socialism around the globe, although it has surely been in the minds of many in Greece who have come out of Exarcheia and elsewhere with black and red flags since 2008. And there was roughly a century, from during the life of Karl Marx up until the Second World War, when anarchism was a common currency in political discourse. There are numerous indicators that it may be making a comeback.

But let's begin with capitalism. The "ism" always indicates a particular ideological framework or worldview, always implies a doctrine of some kind, typically one on which systems of human association and action can be based. For example, "conservatism," "liberalism," "feminism," "Marxism," "existentialism," and so on, all indicate worldviews that can be used as the basis for human association and action. After spotting the "ism," we must look next at the root, which anchors the framework, and which in this case is "capital." So, on the most noncontroversial level, capitalism indicates a worldview based on or oriented around capital. If you are a capitalist, the center of your worldview is capital. We need therefore to determine what capital is. The worldview means something quite different depending on the meaning of capital. Is capital simply money? Or is capital a (stored up) power to consume and produce, as Marx argued? Is capital always a private property, or can it be a public property

too, as in the term "social capital," the shared or collective wealth of the society?

While this list of possible meanings is by no means exhaustive, we will always go farther towards understanding capitalism when we think about capital instead of caricatures, such as the picture of the dense tourist nerve center of Times Square in Manhattan, or better yet, Wall Street, or high-tech labs in research facilities, "futuristic" modes of transportation and new breakthroughs of information and communications technologies and media devices. These things are merely iconic features of the idealized landscape of capitalist societies, but they do not reveal as much as they disguise the internal logic of capitalism itself. For example, one might conclude, based on the mass production of hybrid and electric cars or compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), that capitalism develops ecological technology as necessary. But the technological capacity to develop such products existed long before the products did. The innovation is driven by the emergence of viable consumer markets for hybrids, electric cars, and CFLs, not by environmental or ecological concerns. Such products are manufactured as "alternatives" to their less ecological counterparts, the latter of which continue to be manufactured by the same companies in order to seize diverse markets (as long as the markets remain viable). Production would cease in the absence of viable markets regardless of real ecological imperatives. Wherever they do not coincide, production will always follow market logic over "eco logic," and this more accurately reflects the internal logic of capitalism.

However we define capital, the capitalist is in favor of accumulating it, not losing it or taking it away. Capitalism, by its own internal logic, is about the accumulation of capital. One thing to notice about capitalism is that when we speak of property – whether capital is a private property (i.e. individual wealth) or a public property (i.e. collective wealth) – it is something extrinsic to persons themselves, belonging to persons through some form of ownership. If capital is simply money or a power to consume or to produce or privately or socially held, it is nonetheless something that is collected, hopefully multiplied, and the aim of capitalism is precisely to collect and to multiply capital. In this way, all of the other benefits of capitalism, besides collecting and multiplying capital, are accessories to the system of accumulation. Of course, capitalists often insist that all of the other benefits are themselves effects of capitalism, thus establishing a causal link between the things we enjoy (which are not capital) and capitalism.

Capital is one of many things a person may possess. Being good at mathematics or sports or music or being honest or creative or having a good sense of humor or direction are, for example, virtues or talents, which one may possess regardless of whether or not they possess any

capital at all (although capital can help acquire the training optimal to cultivate natural proclivities). So, capitalism identifies a particular thing, which is not perhaps even a virtue or a talent, as the central thing that a society should try to maximize. And, the argument runs, virtues and talents will be maximized as an inevitable side-effect of capitalism; politically, democracy will also be enriched as capital proliferates around the globe. This is the argument at the heart of the moral discourse of capitalism.

Following this, theorists and proponents of capitalism can in good conscience, as those from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand have recommended, look out for themselves and inadvertently produce a world of good side-effects for others.[4] Thus, one need not be terribly concerned with altruism, the welfare of others, or charity, since these things inevitably flow from the successes and surpluses of capitalism.[5] How, capitalists ask, can a person with barely enough for him or herself have anything left over for others?

The root of socialism is "social." So, on the most noncontroversial level, socialism indicates a worldview based on or oriented around society, the social body, a social instinct, or the social dimension of human life.[6] If you are a socialist, the center of your worldview is society. We need therefore to determine what society is. The worldview means something quite different depending on the meaning of the social. Is the social society itself? Is society merely conceptual, a category in which we group together really existing communities? Or, is the social a human proclivity – such as in the sociological sense that we are all social animals – from which all association flows? Is the social something besides and beyond the individual, or is it precisely the requisite backdrop within which individuality takes shape – the place where individuals can discern themselves as such?

Of course, there is far more to consider than this. But whenever we think about the social and its various possible meanings, we do far better than when we simply jump over the internal logic of the concept to a caricature, say of Soviet Russia, of Lenin and Stalin, or Ceauşescu, long waiting lines to purchase blue jeans in Moscow, rationing health care, bleak standardized housing, terrible bureaucracy. These things are merely iconic features of the vilified landscape of socialist societies, but in no way do they communicate anything about the logic of socialism itself.[7]

However we define the social, the socialist is primarily concerned with the well-being, the overall health of the society. The socialist could not have an interest in harming society without betraying the normative content of the socialist worldview and its own internal logic. One thing to notice about socialism is that the private interests of individual persons are not the central focus. But this is because the concept of society imbricates the individual person, since nothing that is very good for a

society can be very bad for too many individual persons within that society. Some individuals, to be sure, may lose, but if very many lose, then the society loses too, and socialism is thereby betrayed. So socialism aims to safeguard the individual in an aggregate sense, which links its qualitative concerns to a quantitative measure of social well-being. Socialists would therefore point out that the best things about life in a capitalist society are the least capitalist experiences – those that are least mediated by and through capital and all of its transactions. This runs contrary to the capitalist insistence of a causal link between the things we enjoy and capitalism. Intimacy and joy and human solidarity and democracy all assert themselves by way of an instinct for the social, for other people than oneself.

Anarchism is more difficult because its root is not a familiar term. Anarchism derives from the Greek root, ἄναρχος, or *anarchos*, which means "without rulers." Historically, anarchism has manifested as a critique of capitalism distinguished from others by its deep and categorical distrust of rulers and their offices in the state. The rejection of power centralized in such offices, or in the hands of rulers and representatives, is the centerpiece of anarchist worldviews. From an anarchist point of view, one is always suspicious of powerholders, and even when rulers do something good, it is only good within the limits of what the powerful can be trusted to do, which is not very much at all. Anarchists therefore do not celebrate the election of rulers who more closely reflect their substantive moral and political positions, because rule itself – which implies representation, mediation, and hierarchy – always creates subjects (now citizens) and is thus always a disempowering process of subjection. From William Godwin through to the end of the 20th century, anarchism has embodied the most antagonistic *logos* to the Hobbesian conception of sovereignty, the latter of which evolved in the Westphalian development of the modern nation-state.

Unlike capitalism and socialism, anarchism's root identifies, not a thing itself, but the absence of the thing it despises. In this sense, anarchism does not stipulate any positive content in-and-of-itself, but rather a negation, and an implicit invitation to imagine the alternative to a world of rulers. Another and more affirmative way to make this point would be to say that, of the three frameworks discussed so far, anarchism is the only one oriented around a critique (its oppositional centerpiece necessitates critique). *"An"* means *"without"* and *"archê"* means *"sovereignty,"* so without a clear critique of sovereignty, the anarchist position is betrayed.

But what are rulers, and what does it mean to be without them? Are they always states, modes of social and political organization, hierarchical structures, laws, or something else? Michel Foucault, for example, spoke of power in a biopolitical sense, in the valuations of the culture, in the

interpersonal relationships of people on the basis of class, gender, and sexuality.[8] Most anarchists have favored complex modes of social organization and have not been opposed to the idea of there being laws of some kind, although in some cases such laws may be communal and unwritten, unanimous, or a form of natural law. In the simplest and least controversial sense, anarchism is a worldview oriented around a critique of power and powerholders (i.e. rulers and states).

Notice once again the importance of such an analysis. Whenever we think about a radical critique of rulers, power, and sovereignty, we do far better than when we simply jump over the internal logic of anarchism to the caricature of bomb throwers, terrorists, and violent malcontents who advocate "anarchy," which in the main conveys the completely imprecise meaning of chaos and disorder (as if anarchism must mean that we'd all wreak havoc on the world we live in if it were it not for the watchful eye of aldermen, governors, senators, kings, prime ministers, and the White House). The common misuse and abuse of the idea of anarchism has rather clearly come from its adversaries in power attempting to imagine the world without their indispensable good graces.

When we take some time to consider the syntactical and conceptual elements and the underlying logic of these terms, we can see their purposes more clearly, and out from the morass of well over 160 years of ideological muddying. The foregoing exercise does not answer every question, but at least enables us to ask the right questions. More importantly, comprehending the real causes of these worldviews enables us to compare them to particular permutations that function as their faithful representatives in the world. Various permutations of particular values, doctrines, and practices that pass as representatives of these worldviews create a spectacular form of each. This opening exercise, then, frames the overarching contention of this book: that spectacular capitalism, spectacular socialism, and spectacular anarchism are the forms that everyday people and academics accept and work with in discourse and analysis, yet they are not, *in fact and theory*, capitalism, socialism, and anarchism. Given this overarching contention, the reader can understand why Guy Debord is the impetus for this book, for he did more than anyone else to analyze and understand spectacular society, with an open interest in destroying it.

Having made this introduction, you will notice as we go that one of these worldviews will receive more fleeting attention than the others – anarchism. Anarchism will return to play a formative role in the final analysis, but the reason for a shorter and more passing treatment of anarchism throughout the book is the fact that there is hardly a spectacle of anarchism at all. The closest we have to spectacular anarchism is what we might better call general misunderstanding and deliberate

misrepresentation. As we shall see, a spectacle is far more than misunderstanding and misrepresentation. A spectacle is a particular strategic interpretation of the world that functions as an operational logic (i.e. ideology) that effectively organizes society in both structural and superstructural terms. *The world, I shall argue, is organized by the operational logics of spectacular capitalism and spectacular socialism.*

Yet anarchism remains a part of this story (and not only because Debord himself had a complex and ambivalent affinity for it). The anarchist has been viewed as a violent Dionysian social element, a nomadic force in love with chaos and disorder. As it turns out, anarchists have only advocated violence in the most qualified instances, as regrettable necessity to be expected when confronting sovereign powers that invariably meet the anarchist with the far greater violence of the state. Anarchists, it is true, have tried to understand the psychology of political violence in a sympathetic way, to understand crime historically and contextually, and to never accept the virtue of the law as it is written. But anarchy does not mean chaos and disorder to anarchists. What it *does mean* is that we must never accept the relegation of life and its great causes to the few exhausted hours left over after the workday has ended. It means peaceful cooperation as an antidote to ruthless competition. But meaning is difficult here; anarchists hardly ever agree with each other. Indeed, sometimes they regard other anarchists, even rather close kindred spirits, as bitter enemies (an absurdity one inevitably encounters the more one works within the anarchist milieu). Nevertheless, anarchists tend to agree on the rejection of state power, they tend to despise the capitalist workday and herald cooperation, despite other differences. The most we have of spectacular anarchism is the common caricature I have discussed above.

One could however argue that a kind of spectacular anarchism *does* function as an operational logic – in the manner of a constant reminder of our dependence on state power that thereby helps to acculturate widespread acceptance of the "normal person," the "citizen-subject" who is "upstanding" and law-abiding at all times. This is at least how the caricature of anarchism is used, and in this way it *does* lurk behind the whole of spectacular society as a kind of ghost that haunts the system like a warning of the terrible danger that could come from rebellion. The idea of anarchy is abused and deployed as an epithet, not only to discredit anarchism as such, but to reinforce the acceptance of its opposite – the existing state of affairs and its promises of security, and a more moderate political consciousness. That being said, the lifeblood of spectacular society is the hegemonic discourse that flows throughout it daily. Anarchism and its caricature are not such lifeblood, are not the living operational logics in the organization of societies around the world. In spectacular capitalist societies, anarchy appears foundational in the way that the state of nature

was for Thomas Hobbes, and just as the state of nature served as the *raison d'être* for the Commonwealth and the Sovereign in *Leviathan*, our spectacular societies take anarchy as the best reason for themselves. In other words, like Hobbes' state of nature, most would like to be as far and away from anarchy as permanently as possible.

Spectacular socialism is more prominent and central to the arguments in this book. One of the best summaries of the general problematic comes from Jacques Camatte. He argued in 1973 that "[r]evolutionary reformism – the project of creating socialism on the foundation of capitalism and in continuity with the capitalist mode of production – disintegrated between 1913 and 1945. It is the end of what turned out to be an illusion: the illusion of being able to direct the development of the productive forces in a direction that differed from the one they had taken in reality."[9] Camatte's analysis completely contradicts the spectacular Cold War discourse that framed global antagonisms from the end of World War II to 1989. Following Camatte, the opposition that the Cold War presupposed had in fact already disappeared by the time that the Cold War began. Indeed, in Cold War discourse, emanating mainly from the US and its allies, communism, socialism, and Marxism were simple synonyms, each one a hostile antithesis to capitalism and democracy (as if capitalism and democracy always came together). But if Camatte is right, and I think that he is, much of what has passed for socialism, communism, and Marxism in the 20th century (and now again in the 21st century) has in fact been one or another variation of capitalism itself. States making "socialistic" commitments in a capitalist society does not make that society socialist. Rather, it changes the administration of capitalism to make it more in line with prevalent social values within the limits of capitalism.

Indeed, what we have seen in the world are various ways to administer capitalist market economies. These administrative differences, which often amount to bureaucratic modulations in policy position and rhetoric, with varying degrees of efficacy, *have never undermined the logic of capitalism*, the private property system, and the competitive apparatus of the market economy. Camatte describes well the impossibility and the actual failure of transforming capitalism into socialism vis-à-vis reform. One free market that is less free than another free market is hardly socialism. In short, spectacular socialism has been nothing other than the presentation of state-administered capitalism as the vile apex of anticapitalist politics. Spectacular socialism has today led those confused by its twisted logic to declare Barack Obama a socialist, Marxist, and communist, as if it were even possible that an election in the US could lead to the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production by way of a purely administrative sleight of hand, and in the absence of any socialist movement coming from the civil society. Spectacular socialism is a boon for spectacular capitalism: the

latter reifies the former.

Spectacular capitalism consists mainly of a mythology about capitalism that disguises its internal logic and denies the macroeconomic reality of the actually existing capitalist world. We are familiar with the main features of this mythology. Capitalism, the story goes, offers upward mobility for individuals who have the initiative to work hard. Every person can live a comfortable life of relative wealth if they so choose to create such a life for themselves. The main ingredient is ambition. Thus, personal failures and poverty are never due to deficits in the system, but rather to the human error of individual persons making bad decisions. (Marx had a name for this part of the mythology: "*apologetics*.") Spectacular capitalism also says that the sum total of every person looking out for him or herself adds up to the best interest of the whole society. And, free markets tend to democratize the societies in which they operate, reflecting a causal relationship between capitalism and democracy. Global inequalities of every kind will diminish and will eventually disappear the more that capital is allowed to freely move across national boundaries – and national boundaries are an impediment and relic from a Westphalian past that capitalism has far outflanked.[10] Also, the mythology goes, all other systems would be, by comparison to capitalism, not only less "free," but less stable and dynamic. The stability and dynamism of capitalism promises indefinite intergenerational benefits, and a capacity for surviving all crises through innovation. These are just some of the key features of the mythology of spectacular capitalism, they give the system its luster, and yet each one is quite simply and noncontroversially proven false.

Any cursory review of the most widely accepted macroeconomic data – for example, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports and Economic Policy Institute (EPI) research – reveals that most of the world's people are poor, and that the people who often work the hardest (i.e. the most hours, the least benefits, the most exhausting forms of labor), often live a life of never "making ends meet," of barely surviving, of limited opportunities, or dying of easily curable afflictions. And, as it turns out, some of the most capitalist countries have the lowest voter turnout, contested elections, and other poor indicators of democracy. Meanwhile Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, has a lively democratic culture and recent elections (the election and reelection of Evo Morales) with participation levels beyond anything imaginable in the US. Countries that become more capitalistic and free market oriented don't necessarily see spikes in their overall democratic health, both Russia and China being glowing examples. Kellee S. Tsai's *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (2007), provides a clear refutation of the claim of a causal relationship between capitalism and democracy. And the inoculation of capitalism from instability and crisis is thrown into

question every five to ten years when the global system is rocked by unexpected upheavals. In Greece and France, to take very recent examples, both of them capitalist countries, capitalism itself is identified as the cause of the crises. Even in the US, in light of the economic crisis of 2008, the former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, confessed to finding a "mistake" in his free market philosophy, which provided the basis for his 30-year influence over American economic policy. In October of 2008, Greenspan admitted to a congressional committee that his approach towards the banking industry – influenced by the ideas of Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand – was clearly flawed. As Greenspan said in response to a question from Congressman Henry Waxman, "I discovered a flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works."[11]

By insisting on both the existence and the pervasive dominance of spectacular capitalism and spectacular socialism, I am of course presupposing that there are (or that there could be) non-spectacle forms of each. But what is the difference between the thing itself and its spectacle form? And perhaps more importantly, what is the normative dimension of the analysis? Should we aim to create "real" capitalism or "real" socialism or "real" anarchism? For example, in the 1970s Ayn Rand often argued that the US was not living up to the real virtues of capitalism, and that this was precisely its problem – that under Jimmy Carter America was becoming too socialistic. From her point of view in the 70s, we needed to create "real" capitalism in America. Elsewhere, and much earlier (1949), Cornelius Castoriadis argued that "real" socialism needed to assert itself against ***both*** the bureaucratic capitalism that was passing for socialism in the Soviet Union and the free market capitalism prevailing in the US. So the project, as I understand it and shall pursue it, requires a moral and political consideration of the question of finding a new direction, a way out of these ideological impasses. And the impasse is no longer found in the grand antagonism of bifurcated ideologies, but rather, from within a field of multiple ideological and philosophical trajectories and their spectacular versions.

As a preliminary move, we may consider a simple analytical mechanism for distinguishing the thing itself from its spectacular form. The spectacular form of capitalism or socialism is to be found in the context of hegemonic discourses that place each form in critical relationship with the other utilizing ***mythology***. Here, mythology means a set of stories and beliefs deliberately fostered by storytellers who control the means of communication and who (or that) are widely accepted as credible sources. The form itself of capitalism or socialism can be found, to the contrary, in the etymological, historical, and philosophical context in which the terms make sense, as well as in a study of the really existing (rather than

just commented on) condition of capital and society. As Marx put it, "we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh."[12] In the same way, capitalism and socialism as narrated, thought of, imagined, and conceived, in our spectacular societies, only gets us to their spectacular forms. We must cut through all of the ideological narration to the core meanings in order to find the things themselves. One can do this in making sense out of any "ism," feminism, communism, conservatism, anarchism, or indeed any other framework for thinking about the world that can, or already does, function in an *a priori* way.

We cannot deal with spectacular ideological narratives by ignoring them but rather by critically interrogating their logic and purpose. The good thing about hegemonic discourses is that they are the ones we are all familiar with. And, one does not need to go very far in exploring such discourses before discovering the prevalent normative regard for capitalism and socialism in our spectacular society. According to such discourses we know that capitalism (in some form or another) is the dominant model, and that even its spectacular form would be self-consciously preferred by many people over any radical project to make a socialist world – and least of all an anarchist society, which is viewed as a kind of nightmare scenario to all but anarchists themselves. In spectacular form, socialism is still essentially reduced to the political management of capitalism more or less in line with some prominent social values. This moderate project, which Camatte thought had disintegrated by 1945, remains the only living "alternative" in the minds of many so-called socialists, and even rouses the ire of neoliberals who want to defend "pure" capitalism against it. However, the dominance of capitalism is largely due to the congratulatory appraisal and promise of its own *mythology*. In this way, spectacular capitalism sits on top of everything else, even above capitalism itself.

But there is perhaps another, and psychological, reason for this, beyond the spectacle's sheer hegemony. As it turns out, real capitalism has far less to offer than spectacular capitalism. Spectacular capitalism promises nearly algorithmic guarantees of success for all entrepreneurial individuals with the requisite credentials and ambition – and it is far and away more *desirable* than capitalism in its actual form. In a sense, nobody really desires real capitalism, the capitalism pictured in UNDP and EPI reports, besides the tiny global minority who are its clearest beneficiaries. What most people desire is the spectacular form of capitalism where every person is on the road to personal empowerment and relative wealth, or can get on that road if they wish. *If the choice was between real socialism and real capitalism, it is not at all clear that people would choose capitalism, since the current preference is for a spectacular form whose mythology is everywhere betrayed in practice.*

Among political scientists, and particularly in the US, this last sentence is scandalous. Indeed, most of the social sciences have long since abandoned serious consideration of socialism, at least for the last twenty years, and many in the US have a difficult time imagining the existence of other people elsewhere. However, while it is perhaps impossible to measure the position of capitalism in the world, especially using a mechanism like survey data, it seems that global public opinion is not nearly as overtaken by the society of the spectacle as one might think.

For some consideration, we might consider a recent BBC World Service global poll, which found that, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is widespread dissatisfaction with free market capitalism around the globe. An average of only 11% across 27 countries report that capitalism works well. An average of 23% feel that capitalism is not sustainable and that an entirely new economic system is needed – including 38% in Mexico, 35% in Brazil, and 31% in Ukraine. Pictured as a pie chart, those who believe that free market capitalism works well make up the smallest slice of the pie (11%). More than twice as many people (23%) believe the complete opposite – that capitalism is a flawed system that needs to be replaced entirely. In only two countries do more than one in five people feel that capitalism works well as it stands – the US (25%) and Pakistan (21%). Those who are not sure or don't know make up 15% of the people surveyed. The largest piece of the pie by far (51%) believes that capitalism has serious problems, but that they could be addressed through more regulation and reform. Clear majorities support governments distributing wealth more evenly in 22 of the 27 countries – on average two out of three (67%) across all countries. In 17 of the 27 countries most want to see government doing more to regulate the private sector – on average 56%.[13]

French and Germans disagree sharply when it comes to free market capitalism. In France, 47% feel that its problems can be solved by regulation and reform while nearly as many (43%) think that capitalism has fatal flaws. This means that in France, 90% of the population is either unhappy with free market capitalism or wants the end of capitalism altogether. In Germany, however, there is very little support (8%) for an entirely different economic system, yet nearly three out of four (74%) feel that free market capitalism *does* have serious problems that must be addressed through strict regulation and reform.

The strongest consensus that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a mainly positive development is to be found, not surprisingly, in the US, where 81% say the end of the Soviet Union was a good thing. Major wealthy nations like Australia (73%) and Canada (73%) hold the same view. Outside wealthy Western nations, however, there is no such consensus. Seven out of ten Egyptians (69%), for example, say the disintegration of

the Soviet Union was a bad thing. Views are divided in India, Kenya, and Indonesia as to whether it was a good or a bad thing, with many also saying they do not know.

The above data was drawn from a survey of 29,033 adult citizens across 27 countries, conducted for GlobeScan, whose Chairman Doug Miller said, "It appears that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 may not have been the crushing victory for free market capitalism that it seemed at the time."[14]

Now, I am by no means agreeing with this poll's possible implication that the Soviet Union was some kind of alternative to capitalism, and I certainly reject the claim that it was a case of actually existing communism. It is more precise to consider the Soviet Union, following both Castoriadis and Debord, a case of bureaucratic capitalism – and admittedly *not* the free market capitalism heralded by neoliberals today, nor the free market capitalism invoked by the GlobeScan poll. Also, I am not suggesting that this poll somehow demonstrates the truth that hides behind the projected façade of spectacular capitalism. Polls are never reliable indicators of the truth, and as should already be clear from this introduction, I am not at all interested in resuscitating some kind of awful choice between American free market capitalism and the state administered capitalism of the USSR. However, if anything at all can be taken from this data it is the fact that *the mythological luster of spectacular capitalism has not obliterated all sensibility about the thing itself.*

The survey data above does tell us something. It tells us that capitalism is still a conflicted ideology – even without any viable contender visible anywhere on the horizon – and that capitalism is still susceptible to critique, that its stability as the dominant system is not at all beyond reproach. This data, like all data, is a shadow cast by the system itself, telling us something about it in a rough-shaped yet discernable and cautiously useful way. This book was written on the premise that the existing system is not as permanent as it might appear or as it wishes to be, that it is not impervious to philosophy and critique, and that social and political upheavals often make the best philosophers.

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In *Spectacular Capitalism*, I provide a critical synthesis of the social and political theories of Guy Debord in the service of a new philosophy of praxis. My overarching aim is to address wrong turns in socialist theory and praxis, to develop a radical critique of the current era of spectacular capitalism, and to think through the prospects for vital new countervailing forces to capitalism and its culture. One of the foundational premises of this book is that capitalism, contrary to the faltering global reception

pictured above, has actually strengthened its material and ideological position in the midst of current crises. For example, it is still the case that in the face of every crisis we appeal first and foremost to the promise of spectacular capitalism (perhaps in the absence of anything else), asking it to come up with and implement solutions to the most catastrophic social, political, environmental, and economic problems. In June 2010 it appeared that no one else but the private company BP, along with the far less innovative assistance of the state, could possibly save the Gulf Coast, connected waterways, and endangered wildlife, from the worst oil "spill" in US history (by the end of May, well over 20 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico). Hence both BP and the state were appealed to for the solution, deferred to for all authority, and inscribed with the ultimate responsibility for a crisis that would not have existed without their combined recklessness and complicity. And it is not simply a question of culpability and responsibility, and certainly not a question of a particular administration, *but more importantly*, it is a question of possibility. Who else besides BP could have possibly risen to this challenge? Even if ideas come from other places, BP is ultimately expected to implement them.

We are thus confronted with a seemingly intractable problem – the crises of capitalism call for the remedies of capitalism. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than with environmental crises (although countless vivid examples could also be found in problems of public health). Any viable critique of capitalism must understand this premise and its circular logic, that capitalism not only survives crises, but also manages all of the machinations that create and solve them, and often emerges from the crisis in a stronger position. This is in fact the central premise of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2008), in which she clearly documents case after case of "shock therapy," where economists working with businessmen, and often with states, plan crises in order to create "golden opportunities" for investment and development.[15]

But the material economic reality of the world we live in cannot be severed from the mythology that provides all of its pretexts, justifications, and an ongoing rationale of support for the existing system of accumulation. The ideological and mythological strength of spectacular capitalism comes, *in the first place*, from the plaintive appeal of people, from mass deference, and the public inscription of authority (i.e. BP). Therefore, we must understand what gives rise to this mass appeal and deference and that the spectacle itself can be undermined by a philosophy of praxis that works against persisting ideological forces that encourage such a plaintive stance. As important as ideology is, we must always keep in mind that the spectacle seeks to self-perpetuate for the sake of the material order of things in the world – for real control, real influence, and to command *really existing* resources (both human and natural). Ideology

matters precisely because it can be materialized. It functions in a biopolitical way, in that we carry it around in our heads, which direct the world of bodies, which make and remake the world each day.

The spectacle of socialism is the counterpart to spectacular capitalism, both of which rose to prominence in the second half of the 20th century. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that the spectacular forms of each have not existed for as long as their respective philosophies. Adam Smith would perhaps be no less offended by spectacular capitalism than Karl Marx would be by spectacular socialism. The spectacle of socialism during the Cold War took the shape of the specter of communism, which carried within its maligned and abused form an amplified sense of terror, fear, and paranoia. This spectacle once again frames debates today. The Cold War paradigm has been resuscitated in the US and is now being applied (in as strange and inappropriate a way as ever) to the administration of Barack Obama. The specter of communism has proven to retain its indispensable and intergenerational value to capitalists everywhere, and especially in the US. This latest example is certainly not the last we'll see of it.

I draw largely on the works of Debord to confront and to dispense with prevailing discourses on capitalism and socialism – discourses that were hegemonic during the Cold War and that have been carried in various ways into the 1990s and the new millennium. I contend that we have not yet, but that we must, transcend the limitations of the socialist and capitalist discourses of the previous century in order to consider revolutionary alternatives to revolution, and to develop a critique of capitalism capable of reframing the debate and setting the stage for new contestations. Towards these normative and constructive ends, I find valuable and neglected resources in the works of Debord, and in particular, I find impetuses for imaginative and innovative forms of collective action and civil disobedience in his notion of situationist praxis.

Debord's work, which has too much appeared in footnotes to the May-June 1968 events in France, has garnered growing attention over the past two decades and even to some surprising repute in 2009 when, in order to prevent the selling of his archive to Yale University, the French Ministry of Culture officially declared it "a national treasury."[16] Despite this, Debord has mainly remained under the treatment of artists, biographers, and activists who have variously misrepresented his work, its intentions, and who have grossly ignored its political core for the sake of playful and aesthetic commendations of him as a *cause célèbre* of the intellectual left.[17] In a sense, then, I am motivated by the fact that Debord has largely been celebrated by all the wrong people, and for all the wrong reasons, and I conceive of this project as a kind of rescue mission, one that is less concerned with the person and his biography than with his ideas and

arguments (that is, with the praxis of radical philosophy). I mean to treat Debord as the serious and rigorous thinker he was without betraying (or obscuring) the contestatory spirit that animated his work.

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Who's afraid of socialism? It may well be the case that as many radicals on the left now run away from socialism just as fast as the pseudo-libertarians on the right crying out against it in the US. From anarchists to Friedmanite free market fundamentalists, the fear of socialism appears to center on particular views of state power. What is understandable in these views is that, historically, state power has not earned the public trust, and that there is little reason to think it could make good on socialist promises. But, as noted above, the root of socialism is "social" not "state." Following this, I intend to make some critical reclamations of socialism in this book. Socialism, as word and concept, makes a centerpiece out of the social. And the social has, at least since Locke and Kant, and through the works of Hegel and Marx, on up to Habermas and countless others, been clearly distinguished from the state. Out of this trajectory, the social implies a critical autonomy from the state, which is precisely what enabled Locke and Kant to distinguish their political theories from Hobbes, what enabled Hegel and Marx to endorse social upheavals as progressive, and what led Habermas to hang the weight of democracy on the public sphere. Yet, fear of socialism continues the old conflation with statism, a conflation that undermines the very logic of the socialist idea in its most fundamental form. Statist socialism (and the more familiar shorthand "state socialism") is a contradiction in terms. And history, I shall argue, bears this out (which is partly why we confront Baudrillard's theory of history outright).

To remove all speculation, then, and in case it is not yet clear, let me disclose that I am working within a loose field, and certainly a socialist milieu, a post-Marxism informed by autonomist approaches, which distrusts state power, a position from where I view everyday people, including the marginalized and impoverished, as the real locus of power. As you shall see, however, this is not an ideological position, but rather a philosophical one (the difference is articulated in Chapter 3). It is a position worked out in contrast to the caricatures of spectacular socialism and spectacular capitalism discussed above.

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Because it is more sensible to deal with those philosophers who have actually engaged Debord, I begin with Jean Baudrillard, whose work comes out of the situationist trajectory, but goes in the most dangerously wrong directions. Baudrillard's work must be engaged from the onset because it

stands as evidence that Debord's analysis could be developed into a Nietzschean "post-political" philosophy that abandons all normative theory and praxis. Baudrillard, who was far more prolific and far more influential within the corpus of academic scholarship than Debord, must not be taken to have expanded Debord's theses on spectacular society to their inevitable conclusions.[18] It is not until after rescuing praxis from the wreckage of Baudrillard (Chapter 1) that we can move on to the constructive tasks of this book.

Although Baudrillard has always generated controversy, it is not controversial to acknowledge the importance of his work for social and political philosophy. Baudrillard challenged and developed many of the core observations of post-World War II Continental philosophy in striking new directions and towards surprising conclusions, such as when he famously proclaimed that "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" (1991).

Chapter 1 focuses on the central ways in which Baudrillard's work poses problems to the philosophy of praxis. Despite early structuralist and more clearly post-Marxist works like *The Mirror of Production*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Consumer Society*, Marx and his intellectual heirs become the clear targets of Baudrillard's work from the 1980s until his death in 2007. Baudrillard comes to repudiate Debord too. In the last and most productive decades of Baudrillard's life, his critiques of structuralism, materialism, history, and science take center stage. Ultimately, according to Baudrillard, the world can only be understood in various and incomplete ways, or endured, but never programmatically intervened in with theory and praxis. Hence, Baudrillard repudiates Debord for one of the main reasons I centralize the importance of his work – because Debord advances a critical theory of high-tech postindustrial capitalism without abandoning normative theory and praxis.

I argue that while Baudrillard's work is indispensable for the evolution of a critical theory of capitalism and its culture, his attack on the viability of all socialist projects and normative theory must be refuted. In short, any new philosophy of praxis today calls for both an engagement with and a refutation of Baudrillard's work. I maintain that it is possible to recognize the failure of revolutionary projects *without* abandoning revolutionary theory, the meaning of reality and history, and the prospects for collective action.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Debord's critical analysis of capitalism, elaborated in his work from the 1950s and 60s, retains special and growing importance today. Debord's work offers a major reformulation of Marxist theory that can be found nowhere else, and is yet typically unaccounted for by students of social and political philosophy. But his work is serious, philosophically rigorous, and historically informed, and therefore long overdue for treatment by academics interested in 20th century social and

political thought. Also, Debord's answer to the question of why revolutionary socialist aspirations in advanced capitalist societies dwindled after World War II, and what could be done to reinvigorate revolutionary criticism, is quite convincing and translatable into a philosophy of praxis.

Debord was a much more serious political thinker than Baudrillard for many reasons, not the least of which being that he believed in the possibility of politics, formulated praxis, and organized a movement with an international activist orientation. Indeed, Debord does something that Baudrillard would never do – he suggests a course for political action that can redirect revolutionary theory for an era generally uninterested in revolutionary schemes. It is this normative core of his work that I aim to recover in Chapter 2.[19]

The chapter begins with a consideration of the depoliticization of radical projects in the period after World War II. This was an era that starkly confronted the revolutionary optimisms of Debord and his generation, for it was an era where anticapitalists could find no viable movements embodying their aspirations for the transformation of society and politics. This led Debord, along with many other French theorists (such as Foucault and Kristeva) to think about revolutionary alternatives to revolution. In Debord's case, and the case of many other radicals of his generation, such a rethinking was eventually aided not only by the events in France in May-June 1968, but also by the situation in Italy from roughly 1968 to 1979 involving *Autonomia* and the Red Brigades. In other words, as the classical Marxian model of class conflict and proletarian revolution seemed more and more untenable, radicals could either rethink the meaning of revolution or abandon it altogether. While Kristeva's and Foucault's answers (and also those of the existentialists) received far more attention, Debord's conception of situationist praxis warrants further critical attention. Indeed, Debord's work clearly prefigures and affirms some of the best elements of the autonomist Marxist trajectory, which I regard as one of the most promising contemporary milieus. While I criticize Debord's particular recommendations (i.e. architecture, the dérive, and psychogeography), I seek to recover the general idea of the construction and seizure of situations that Debord articulated in the foundational texts of the Situationist International.[20]

In Chapter 3, I draw on the work of Debord to critically rethink prevailing narratives on the fate of socialism in the 20th century and beyond. There are critical differences between the spectacle of socialism (or socialism as ideology), on the one hand, and socialism as philosophy or political theory, on the other. While the spectacle of socialism is real in material and ideological terms, it is not *really socialist*. On this basis, I contend that the future of any socialist politics depends, at least in the first instance, on philosophy. I aim to show, not only how Debord's work helps

us to see the revolutionary value of philosophy and political theory, but also, how his ideas on situationist praxis can help us to think through current impasses for political action.

The chapter begins with an effort to deconstruct the spectacle of socialism, or that which has concretely passed as "socialist" in the 20th century, and which still passes for socialism today. This deconstruction, I argue, is the necessary and inevitable outcome of thinking about socialism philosophically, instead of ideologically. In other words, when we consider "the social" as the centerpiece of socialism, and when we consider socialism as irreducibly antithetical/antagonistic to capitalism – as it has been articulated in philosophy, and which also reflects and preserves the internal logic of the ideas of capitalism and socialism – then we can no longer accept the notion that either state (bureaucratic) capitalism or welfare policy is socialist. Drawing on substantive philosophical differentiations I argue that any program that is complicit and compatible with capitalism is not socialist. These terms and their substance are fully worked out in the first part of the chapter.

Towards the end of this chapter, I apply the philosophy of praxis discussed in Chapter 2 to the task of critiquing and moving beyond both spectacular capitalism and spectacular socialism. The general direction I outline here suggests that we need to "practice radical philosophy" in order to retrieve and revitalize the meaning and purpose of socialism as a countervailing force to all of the trends of privatization fostered by capitalism (in cultural and political as well as economic spheres).

The key to the practice of radical philosophy is to transpose critique onto the visual, sonic, and symbolic terrains of the world we live in.[21] The practice of radical philosophy aims to make socialist critique resonant within the public spheres of the world, which means that it can no longer operate within the limitations of text and speech – it must move beyond the boundaries of books, breaking free from the domain in which it has been fatally trapped. If, as Debord says, spectacular capitalism maintains its hold "by means of its seeming incontrovertibility" and through "its monopolization of the realm of appearances," then its destruction (or at least its controverting) must also inhabit that realm, and other non-textual realms that Debord himself did not account for.[22]

In the fourth and final chapter, I present eleven theses on Debord very much in the spirit of Marx's attempt to move beyond Feuerbach. Having finished the critical work of the book, this last chapter aims to extend the constructive work vis-à-vis the thesis on the practice of radical philosophy introduced and explored in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I emphasize that we cannot simply return to Debord, or simply use his work as a guide. Indeed, the rescue mission executed in this book is for the sake of something else quite beyond the works of Debord – for a new approach to the

construction of situations and a different kind of détournement. We must take flight from Debord, utilizing the best elements of his work as a catalyst, as a launching off point for a new philosophy of praxis. I argue not only for philosophy of praxis, but for praxis itself as the delivery mechanism of philosophy, that is, for the field of human action, of contestation and conflict, to raise directly the most irresistible questions about the truth and morality of the existing state of affairs. No text can any longer expect to be as provocative and compelling as collective action that seizes attention and ignites imaginations, that forces discussions that would not otherwise take place. We have not yet read the new mobilizing manifestos, and we will probably never read them. We will more likely see them and hear them, whereas others – the spectators, commentators, and academics charged with making sense of revolutions – they will do most of the writing.

In the 1992 preface to the third French edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord wrote "This book should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society."[23] It is fair to say that the present book also reflects that purpose, but takes issue with the formulation, "doing harm to spectacular society." I agree that existing society must be critiqued and challenged to reveal its structural deficits and ultimate unsustainability, and to reveal the possibility and desirability of working towards something else. But in addition to diagnosing our ongoing society of the spectacle, and doing it all due harm, I would also like to make some small but useful contributions to imagining *how* something else could become more possible than what already is. I do not want to, nor do I think that we need to, merely look forward to a different stage in the development of the spectacle with only some kind of desperate hope that a virus or a glitch might destroy it (like Baudrillard's "optimism"). Unlike Debord towards the end of his own life, when he was most pessimistic, I see living inroads for social and political transformation in the new millennium, and I intend to explore such inroads throughout this book. That being said, to relieve any bated breath from the very first pages, let me be clear that *how* is not the same thing as *what*. I do not offer any detailed pictures of that something else towards which we must work. To do so, in fact, would be a contradiction of the general view applied here. It is more useful to focus on processes, not end states, especially when every "end" is itself an unfinished project – and always ought to be treated as such. There is always somewhere further to travel, and one cannot have a complete itinerary for the journey. The routes themselves are made and change in number and nature as we go.

Therefore, the practice of radical philosophy implies a process – a kind of stretching out, reaching for, thinking through – that reveals moral dimensions of problems and practical knowledge that is inaccessible from

the vantage point of spectacular capitalism. Spectacular capitalism does show us more than one side, but all sides reinforce its "uninterrupted monologue of self-praise."[24] Spectacular capitalism is like a Möbius strip, where even the other side is a part of it.

In the very first claim of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says: "All human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing."[25] In spectacular capitalist societies the practice of radical philosophy can help us to stretch ourselves out towards knowing beyond the narrow limitations of ideology – limitations that delimit education, debate, and the whole political sphere. Beyond its critical goals, however, this book was also written to elucidate some of the necessary processes whereby such a stretching out can occur, for the sake of making a different world to live in, an objective that lies beyond the epistemological aims of philosophy.

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, *A Sick Planet*, (Seagull Books, 2008), p. 72.
2. Wilhelm Reich, *Listen, Little Man*, (The Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 44-46.
3. This is not to suggest that liberatory experiences with communist or anarchist modes of intersubjectivity are ever wholly impossible. Such experiences, while temporary and aberrant are real and possible. Indeed, they remind us that capitalism cannot totally foreclose the multifariousness of everyday human life. Such experiences, however, must not be mistaken to embody or reflect the operational logic of the existing society any more than an unexpected raise in wages should be mistaken as evidence for an upwardly mobile society.
4. To be fair to Adam Smith, (a) his work consistently expresses a concern for the general welfare of others and (b) he is more open to government intervention in the market for the public good than is typically represented. His concern with the general welfare of the society is expressed, among other places, in his famous discussion of the "invisible hand" in Book IV, Chapter II of *The Wealth of Nations*. This discussion is one of many where Smith posits that the welfare of others is an inevitable and inadvertent product of the pursuit of self-interest. His cautious and qualified allowance for government intervention can be found, among other places, in Book IV, Chapter IX of *The Wealth of Nations*.
5. Ayn Rand wrote a book called *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Signet, 1964) in which she argued against all altruisms and identified selfishness as a "virtue," the most important of all virtues in fact, and compatible only with the capitalist system. Rand wrote book after book attacking all forms of collective concern and organization and defending the selfishness intrinsic to real capitalism. It is not inconsequential that Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve and major architect of US economic policy since 1974, was a part of Rand's inner circle, an associate of hers since the early 1950s, who praised her objectivist philosophy.
6. I mentioned communism above. Now I am defining socialism. Lest the two be conflated, "socialism" is the broader term, encompassing communism (i.e. every communist is a socialist but not every socialist is a communist). Libertarian socialists, for example, are socialists but they are a variety of socialist that views communism and state socialism as synonymous, dangerous dead ends. On the other hand, self-identifying communists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their *Empire* (Harvard, 2001), who share the company of many anarcho-communists and autonomists, oppose statism and place none of their hope in "big government." Some thinkers make a completely different and most reductionist treatment of socialism as a strictly economic or transitional program administered by the state. So, the analytical distinctions can be and have been drawn differently, and there is some real history of using the terms synonymously. But clarity comes from thinking through the logos of the concepts themselves. The root of socialism is society and the root of communism is community (commune) or the commons. Society and community are not the same, and the basic difference is instructive. A society consists of a multiplicity of communities. That is, one community does not make a society, whereas one society is comprised of multiple communities. Since community is the constitutive element here, and

since the quality of community can be lost in society, one might choose communism over socialism as a way of getting to the root causes, or substantive part, of social problems. Still, society and socialism are the more encompassing terms – society always already implicating community and the commons, and socialism the field within which communists and anarchists distinguish themselves.

7. In one very common caricature, socialism is seen as necessarily (and dangerously) statist. But, returning to the root of the concept, the social – not the state – is the centerpiece. If the state displaces the social as the central feature of socialism, the logic of socialism is undermined, not borne out.
8. See *Power/Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1980).
9. Jacques Camatte, "The Wandering of Humanity" in *This World We Must Leave* (Autonomedia, 1995), pp. 61-62.
10. Many capitalists want to obliterate all border impediments to capital, yet build walls and reinforce borders against immigration. But the increased flow of capital across national boundaries drives an increased flow of people across national boundaries. Saskia Sassen brilliantly exposes and analyzes this contradiction in *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (Columbia University Press, 1996).
11. This quote was cited in numerous sources documenting the proceedings of the US Congressional Committee, i.e. *The Guardian*, Friday, October 24, 2008 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/oct/24/economics-creditcrunch-federal-reserve-greenspan, Accessed 12/30/2010).
12. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* in *The Portable Marx* (Viking Penguin, 1983), p. 169.
13. BBC World Service Poll conducted by the international polling firm GlobeScan, together with the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland (http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc2009_berlin_wall, Accessed 12/30/2010).
14. This Doug Miller quote, along with the data cited above, also from the BBC World Service Poll conducted by the international polling firm GlobeScan, together with the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. GlobeScan coordinated fieldwork between June 19 and October 13, 2009. In total 29,033 citizens in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America were interviewed face-to-face or by telephone. In 9 of the 27 countries, the sample was limited to major urban areas. The margin of error per country ranges from +/-2.2 to 3.5 per cent, 19 times out of 20 (http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc2009_berlin_wall/, Accessed 12/30/2010).
15. See, for example, Chapter 8, "Crisis Works", in *The Shock Doctrine* (Picador, 2008).
16. The French state authorized an injunction on January 29, 2009, signed by the Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel, who said that Debord's archives are "a great importance for the history of the ideas of the second half of the 20th century and for the knowledge of the still-controversial work of one of the

last great French intellectuals of the period."

17. Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord* and Andy Merrifield's *Guy Debord* are two books that perform the work of intellectual biography. Jappe's is the more serious account, even dealing rather well with Debord's philosophy, yet remains clearly within the biographical milieu. Vincent Kaufmann's *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* also does some of the work of Jappe's book, but Kaufmann's is a most unconvincing effort to present Debord as a poet, which he wants to contrast to being a serious theorist. Kaufmann even submits as evidence for his view that Foucault paid no attention to Debord, as if Foucault's attention decides the question of theoretical seriousness. Len Bracken's *Guy Debord: Revolutionary* is another biographical treatment, which is a useful resource but ultimately quite unnecessary in light of Jappe's book. In addition to these, there have been numerous articles reviewing the significance of Debord's films in *ArtForum*. McKenzie Wark is one of the only theorists today taking Debord's philosophy seriously and at great length in dedicated works of his own, both in his *A Hacker Manifesto* and *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*. However, the first of these books mainly takes Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* as a stylistic catalyst, a book of theses, that makes its debt to Debord explicit in several places; the second of these books provides commentaries and analysis on Debord's life and ideas from the point of view of cultural and media studies. Prior to Wark, there was an excellent book by Sadie Plant entitled *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. (Full publication information for all titles mentioned here is listed in the Bibliography.)

    In my view, Plant's book provides the best philosophical secondary source treatment of Debord. To be clear, hers is not a book about Debord as much as it is about the general theories of the Situationist International as a whole. Still, like my book, I see Plant's book as a sort of rescue mission. The problem is, her book was published 19 years ago, and her call for the sustained attention of critical theorists has clearly not been heeded. This book, like Plant's, helps to partially fill an enormous gap in the literature. I recommend Plant's book enthusiastically. The present book, however, treats Debord *as a political philosopher*, and treats his works as primary sources with the seriousness that philosophers have afforded Marx, Gramsci, and countless critical theorists in the French and German traditions. But this book is also a critical theory in and of itself, as it ultimately aims to go beyond Debord in a more resolutely political way than Baudrillard has done.

18. It is necessary to emphasize that when I invoke the differential influence of Baudrillard and Debord I am referring specifically to the serious attention of professional academics working in the English language. Within that context, Debord's influence has been marginal indeed and is even dwarfed by the influence of Baudrillard. In the French corpus, however, Debord and Baudrillard are cited roughly equally. Moreover, it is not at all clear to me that Baudrillard has been more influential than Debord in a social sense, for example, with regard to political activism and within certain radical milieus (i.e. anarchist and autonomist).

19. When I say "recover Debord" I do not mean "recuperation." By "recover" I mean to find lost or neglected elements of Debord's work for the sake of their critical consideration and possible development in new directions. No part of

this book is interested in a new Situationist International, a "pro-situ" movement, or a literal defense of Debord's work from all malice and misinterpretation (although I would not necessarily object to any of those things). If it is not yet clear from this introduction, it will be perfectly clear in Chapter 4 (and particularly Thesis VII), where I treat Debord as Marx did Feuerbach, intending to critique and surpass his work for the sake of something else.

20. Beyond the construction and seizure of situations, I maintain that détournement is the most promising principle of situationist praxis.
21. By "world we live in," and in general, by "world," I do not mean the whole world as a unified singularity. I mean, rather, "lifeworld," and this also implies Weltanschauung, or "worldview."
22. See Thesis # 12, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1999).
23. See the preface to *The Society of the Spectacle*.
24. Thesis # 24, *The Society of the Spectacle*.
25. Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book I (Book A), (980a 21), trans. Joe Sachs (Green Lion Press, 2002).

Chapter 1: Selectively Forgetting Baudrillard

> *It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.* – MICHEL FOUCAULT, 1971[1]

1.1 A CRITIQUE IN BROAD STROKES

I would not want to say "forget Baudrillard" in the spirit of Baudrillard's 1977 essay *Forget Foucault*, unless I could command selective memory. Much of what Baudrillard has done is worth remembering, and against his own advice, some of it is even worth using as the *Autonomia* movement in Italy has.[2]

Jean Baudrillard was intimately aware of the work of Guy Debord, influenced by the student revolt in 1968, and his early work made contributions to situationist theory, particularly in the journal *Utopie*. I could not confidently assert that Baudrillard's work was directly influenced by or developed in response to Debord, but the two thinkers certainly shared many influences (i.e. Henri Lefebvre) within a common milieu (both historically and philosophically). And Baudrillard makes reference to Debord and the situationists at countless junctures throughout his voluminous work. More importantly, Baudrillard's subject is the same (even if he does not name it as such) – *the society of the spectacle*.

Much of what Baudrillard does philosophically can be found in more moderate variations elsewhere. The various forms of simulation that occupy a central and recurring focus in Baudrillard's work had been addressed by Friedrich Nietzsche, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, in Georg Lukács' analysis of reification, by Julia Kristeva and other

semioticians and members of *Tel Quel*, and by Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, among others (including Jean-Paul Sartre). Perhaps what is immediately interesting from my point of view is precisely that this band of radical thinkers is "more moderate" than Baudrillard.

Indeed, Baudrillard distinguishes himself from all of the above, and from other luminary French contemporaries such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, in that his epistemology is the most radical: his rejection of the fundamental terms and concepts of philosophy the most complete. For Baudrillard philosophy is a transvaluational game; reality is always enmeshed with unreal elements, with simulacra, history becomes a toy, and "[t]he secret of theory is that truth doesn't exist."[3] That is the reason why I am singling Baudrillard out here, for he is in fact already singled out, from the larger yet incomplete list above.

It is important that I open with some contextual clarification about the critique of Baudrillard presented in this chapter. In no way do I wish to attack him in any categorical manner, and I would, in fact, defend his works against critics like Douglas Kellner and Christopher Norris. I teach Baudrillard with much sympathy and respect, and I mean for that to come through in this chapter. My critical disposition is not unusual as a general approach. I maintain that a critical reading of Baudrillard must be selective in the way that one might make a critical reading of Nietzsche. One cannot apply a systemic critique of logical argumentation to a thinker who does not aim to systematize anything and who has no particular interest in the limitations of logical consistency. Such an endeavor is worse than difficult; it may very well be impossible and misguided.

But what is the other side of this problem? Any attempt to make a critical (and political) reading of Baudrillard is immediately susceptible to the charge of being "too simplistic." It is true that Baudrillard's writing is elusive for criticism, and we can only pin it down in parts, not like a whole cloth that is woven together. We can hold fragments up to scrutiny, but much of the rest remains free and unattached. It would be easier, then, to abandon critique as moot or misplaced in the case of Baudrillard. But can there be nothing in between positive appraisals and passing over him in silence, on the one hand, or total rejection and passing over him in silence on the other hand? What follows in this chapter assumes that there is a space in between these rather common and easy extremes. And that is the space I intend to occupy.

My critique of Baudrillard aims mainly to shift the ground back to some of the normative commitments of the traditions he came out of. I largely agree with Baudrillard's critique of high-tech spectacular capitalism and its consumer society, an agreement that is all the more clear in the larger context of this book. And I do attempt to apply his analytical framework to recent events in Iran, the Iraq War, and American

democracy, which reflects my own sense of the applicability of his work to the political field.

In the Introduction to *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, Sylvère Lotringer tells the story of Baudrillard's response to the title of that volume. Baudrillard, Lotringer recounts, did not like the name as it "sounded too old-fashioned." But Lotringer rightly comments that "capitalism hasn't disappeared. Its repercussions are even more momentous than before, but no one can seem to grasp them."[4] Baudrillard's quip and Lotringer's reflection get to the heart of my main contention with Baudrillard's work, which could be summed up as follows: Capitalism and its spectacle continue to define not only our world, but its most serious problems. The old ways of "hating capitalism" cannot and should not be resuscitated, but that hatred itself – or whatever it really is, exactly – should not make us bristle with discomfort as if it were some relic from the past that no longer applies in the present or the future. I maintain that much of the task in understanding society and politics today involves grasping the meaning of capitalism in the present era and its new momentous repercussions, not to shuffle all of that old-fashioned concern into the dustbins of history.

Baudrillard's work is within a trajectory, coming out of the Second World War, and particularly in Continental social and political theory – this is a trajectory concerned with and coalesced around the development of post-industrial capitalist societies in the 20th century. The trajectory is informed with the perspectives of psychoanalysis and social psychology, and struggles with the legacy of Marx and historical materialism – and even in trying to abandon and/or destroy the Marxian philosophy, theorists in this trajectory end up "recognizably working through a set of problematics which is common to the tradition of Western Marxism."[5] All of these thinkers are, in various ways, concerned with the problems of capitalism within the framework of what Jean-François Lyotard called "the postmodern condition" in 1979.

Baudrillard's work ends up (although it does not begin so) in total renunciation of elements and assumptions that all of his contemporaries, in varying ways, continue to accept. And, more than his contemporaries, Baudrillard extends and applies Debord's theory of the spectacle, which too many have glossed over or ignored.[6] However, Baudrillard's expansion of and revision to the theory of the spectacle leads him to conclusions both imprecise and dangerous. While Baudrillard sees theory as a game largely for his own pleasure, Debord sees theory as the first and indispensable substance of revolutionary praxis – the practice of theory and the theory of practice.[7] According to Baudrillard, the world can only be understood in various and incomplete ways, or endured, but never effectively intervened in with theory and praxis. Much of the detritus of

philosophy lies in the wake of Baudrillard's work, but we can rescue praxis from the wreckage.

One of the problems here, which is perhaps not Baudrillard's fault, is that he is far more influential and widely read than Debord. True, Baudrillard is often completely and unfairly discarded and even neglected without the slightest serious consideration or mention.[8] But other times, he is a celebrated figure of the postmodern and post-Marxist left who has breathed much life into cultural studies programs throughout the US and whose work sits at the center of important and contentious debates about war and terrorism. From either point of view, his work has been both polarizing and significant in its impact. Yet, it is my contention that Baudrillard makes, in a very general sense, a wrong turn. His work is a scenic route indeed, with some eye-opening views and flourishes of insight and argument, and makes major contributions that have significantly defined the postmodern milieu.

But there is a proverbial fork in the road for radical politics. Baudrillard has himself said that he has "maintained a position of distrust and rejection. That's the only 'radicalness' I can claim."[9] From the early 1980s up until his death in 2007, Baudrillard not only abandoned any extant or conceivable radical politics, but also, he wrote books full of arguments against all normative theory, against latent impulses for it, and against any interest in emancipatory transformations of the world. By radical politics I should remind the reader that I mean to indicate a loose socialist field, a post-Marxism informed by anarchism, which places me on a similar terrain as many of the other thinkers mentioned above. It is fair to characterize my point of view as autonomist, where "autonomy broadly refers to forms of struggle and politics that are not determined by the institutions of the official left (unions, political parties, etc.)."[10] I understand socialism (as I argue in Chapter 3) as a countervailing force to capitalism and its multifarious forms of privatization. If we follow Baudrillard, we end up with too much of playing games, that is to say, too much of the personal pleasures of intellectual masturbation, too much provocative diversion to sustain any responsible consideration of human suffering, of oppression and of growing fatal inequities, let alone a way forward out of these things.

For a way forward, we must find our way back from Baudrillard. This claim does not rest on a reactionary defense of structuralism, truth, reality, history and collective action. To the contrary, I find much of Baudrillard's criticisms of these convincing – Baudrillard has provided many important correctives that have yet to be properly heeded. So, I do not set out to critique Baudrillard from a purely political point of view (although that is a part of my concern). In addition to the problem of politics, Baudrillard makes certain metaphysical conflations based on false association, and his reasoning and argumentation often fail to convince even Baudrillard

himself. After his *The Mirror of Production* (1973), and aside from occasional self-conscious remarks, Baudrillard's critique is increasingly subsumed by a narrow concern about the condition of privileged peoples in bourgeois societies, and he egregiously fails to account for the worst of suffering in the diverse manifold of human experience. Indeed, what Baudrillard's work ultimately provides is a mirror of bourgeois intellectualism.

While Baudrillard's work is indispensable for the evolution of a critical theory of capitalism and its culture, his attack on the viability of socialist projects and normative theory must be refuted *for both philosophical and political reasons*. As mentioned in the introduction, I maintain that it is possible to recognize the failure of past revolutionary projects without abandoning revolutionary theory and collective action. The abandonment of the latter seems inevitable following the development of Baudrillard's work, and we must not follow it.

Baudrillard, for decades, distanced himself from political action, aiming to demonstrate the exhaustion and futility of all praxis, only leaving a rather unpromising loophole for the possibility for thought to function like a virus. From Baudrillard's point of view, the worst elements of Debord's work were precisely the most political. In a way, Baudrillard was more radical than Debord, but his radicalism consisted in a refutation of all radical projects, including ones that aimed to counterpose human life within and against spectacular capitalism. As Lotringer put it, "While the Situationists sought to reclaim life through their *détournements*, Baudrillard turned to death as an ally."[11] That is, while Debord and the Situationist International considered certain deliberate approaches, Baudrillard hoped for collapses and implosions, none of which could be organized or predicted. In this regard, Baudrillard was a kind of crisis theorist, although one who was self-consciously and resolutely passive about the emergence of crises and the opportunities opened up by them.

With Baudrillard we end up with a politics that borrows more from Nietzsche than from Debord. Baudrillard's aphoristic style in later works reflects more of a growing fragmentary perspectivism than it does a systemic method of argumentation via numbered theses as in Debord, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Enrique Dussel. Baudrillard makes a deep and satisfying critique of the capitalist cultures of the most influential nations of the world, but he is not confident that, nor does he particularly care if, human interventions will transform or deconstruct any of the structural apparatus of the capitalist cultures he despises. It is for this reason, whether he liked it or not, that Baudrillard is rightly and frequently seen as both an iconic postmodernist and poststructuralist.[12]

Baudrillard's early works, particularly the collections published by Telos Press, are immensely valuable works of radical philosophy. The most

important are *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972)[13] and *The Mirror of Production* (1973). If we add to these two the even earlier work, *The System of Objects* (1968)[14], and also, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), we end up with a major reformulation of Marxist theory that effectively addresses key deficits in Marx's thinking. Baudrillard's discourses on signification and sign-value account for capitalism's capacity to move beyond exchange-value. Baudrillard's discussion of the sign-value of commodities is indispensable for any analysis of the signification of serialized commodities and the recodification of the best models of mass produced goods. Baudrillard incorporates the sign and its value into his critique of the political economy of consumer society.

Also, he attacks any romanticization of the proletarian subject position, arguing that this leads to reification of capitalist production as an independent variable. In other words, Marx's conception of revolution *requires* capitalist production, and the whole history of Marxism since Marx's death has been unconsciously trapped in a fetishization of production derived from a distinctly capitalist logic. Marxism celebrates a revolutionary subject that owes its existence to capitalism, and whose special powers are concentrated in them by their immiseration within the producing class. To counter this, Baudrillard draws our attention to the rebelliousness of the elderly, of women, of racial, ethnic, and even linguistic minorities, dropouts, and young people, pointing to other locations for subversion and revolt than the working class. He writes:

> This position of revolt is no longer that of the economically exploited; it aims less at the extortion of surplus value than at the imposition of the code, which inscribes the present strategy of social domination… It is a revolt of those who have been pushed aside, who have never been able to speak or have their voices heard… These revolts do not profile class struggle… The working class is no longer the gold standard of revolts and contradictions. There is no longer a revolutionary subject of reference.[15]

With this, Baudrillard effectively destabilizes the rigidity of certain readings of historical materialism in more orthodox variations of Marxism (I would include Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács here who were both critical of orthodox Marxism yet maintained the working class as "a revolutionary subject of reference."). From another location, not circumscribed by economic exploitation, revolt no longer *"mirrors"* the capitalist fixation on production. But revolt from other places is not concentrated in any certain social group or subject position. It is, therefore, *not* inexorable, *not* determined by political-economic structures, and certainly *not* predictable.

Unfortunately, Baudrillard's work from the 1980s to 2007 is full of (perhaps intentional) misunderstandings about illusion and its role, and the overblown significance of simulacra. Illusion and simulacra make for countless provocative thought projects in Baudrillard's work, which ultimately and tragically crowd out an earlier concern he had for the lifeworlds of the marginalized, the "pushed aside," impoverished and oppressed peoples. He provides poor evidence for assuming his own position of "reality agnosticism," and he recommends, in no uncertain terms, a post-Nietzschean perspectivism for the complete abandonment of normative political philosophy. In fact, his attack on normative philosophy and the philosophy of praxis are the only thoroughgoing commitments that his disparate work can be said to abide. In order to move forward, we must move backward from Baudrillard to recover a theory of the actor and his or her (or its) agency in a political framework. Baudrillard's work not only declares the end of socialist philosophy, but also, of any and all political conceptions of collective action. In recovering these from the wreckage, I ultimately contend that Debord's work is among the most valuable within this post-World War II French intellectual trajectory.[16]

Let me be blunter still. For Baudrillard, theory was a game. Stakes were for others to worry about. He compared theory to gambling: it has no serious purposes, no reliable use-value, beyond that of the pleasure of the theorist and, hopefully, some of his readers. In an interview with Lotringer in 1984-85, Baudrillard said of theory:

> There has to be some pleasure at stake, of course, which is neither the pleasure of prophecy nor, I think, of annihilation (destruction for destruction's sake). A perverse pleasure, in short. Theory must be played the way we said gambling was before… I admit that I greatly enjoy provoking that revulsion. But right away people ask, 'What can you do with that?' It relies after all on an extraordinary deception – in the literal sense of the term. There is nothing to be had from it.[17]

Surely it is nice to know that Baudrillard's pleasure, while perverse, is not for the sake of annihilation, though he does want readers to experience revulsion at his work, to be frustrated that it has no use. And I do think it is sometimes sensible to splendor in the revulsion of one's opponent. The left and right quite enjoy the frustration of failure of the other side when it loses, and atheists, from Proudhon and Bakunin to Marx, took great pleasure in speaking of God as an oppressive chimera, as non-existent, as something that would be necessary to abolish if it did exist. Moreover, there can be no doubt that queer theorists today (Michael Warner and Judith Butler, for example) quite enjoy thrashing the static discourse on gender that has haunted more conservative feminisms and sexual politics.

Surely, critical race theorists took a similar pleasure of engagement. Simply put, anyone who thinks they have a good argument takes some pleasure in its powers of refutation and revulsion. Perhaps a theory that does none of this does not warrant publicity.

If that is the measure, then Baudrillard is clearly successful. However, his own "perverse pleasure" does not aim from one side at another, but at all sides, against all positions, from left to right, in between and beyond. His is a refutation of positions as such. This position against all positions, extant or possible, is grounded in Baudrillard's epistemology, which I shall describe as an "anti-epistemology." And this "anti-epistemology" is, in my view, the only way to properly situate Baudrillard's multifarious writings. I shall now turn to this argument.

1.2 ON SIMULACRA: TRUTH AND REALITY

For Baudrillard, analysis of the world is not a matter of choosing one epistemology over another, since all epistemologies attempt to specify points of view with primacy, which is always an interpretive and unstable task that rests on certain biases. So knowing the world that we inhabit is a fundamental and intractable problem. Baudrillard argued that a complete understanding of the minutiae of human life is impossible. This is even true for a single day in the life of one person. At the end of a day, one recalls only the significant signposts, and if there were none, perhaps a good or bad meal, a phone call, an e-mail, and often one will merely report that "nothing happened." Yet, quite a bit happens each day, even if only in the lives of your neighbors, but we only have access to so much, and that much is very little.

Taken together, this selective constellation of events and experiences, and our particular memories of them, is not enough to give the name "reality." But that is the only reality we can account for. Quickly, the question comes, "whose reality?" And there, the epistemological problem is plain to see. So people are drawn to a "simulated" version of reality, or as Baudrillard put it, "hyperreality." One convenient and stark example of a hyperreality would be "reality television," which presents the most unreal scenarios, staged and edited performances, *as reality*.[18] Yet the footage from which the show's narrative is constructed is real – the players were really filmed saying what they said, etc. Like reality television, hyperreality is both real and unreal at once.

However, most of hyperreality is not as obvious as reality television. If it was, it would not function as a problematic. Hyperreality is problematic precisely because the real and the unreal are supposed to be clearly differentiated, not folded into complex imbrications. Baudrillard characterized many of the defining events of his age as hyperreality. An extreme example of this, and one that made Baudrillard the target of fierce

criticism was his deliberately provocative claim in 1991 that the Gulf War "did not take place." There is an important historical dimension to this claim, which I shall discuss below, but let me explain the basic contention for now.

The Gulf War was a heavily televised war. For the first time people all over the world were able to watch live footage of the trajectories of real missiles hitting their targets and fighter planes taking off from aircraft carriers. Because the camera was assimilated into the military device, this footage speaks in the first person. But allied forces were keen to demonstrate the accuracy of their weapons, and there is simply too much footage to show it all. So the Gulf War was ultimately presented to most of the world as television entertainment, through the lenses of smart bombs and necessarily edited video footage, using the same techniques used in the production of reality television. Indeed, the techniques are precisely the same, since both presentations require the construction of narratives and storylines from a vast unusable surplus of recorded images and events. The footage is real, of course, but is selectively fitted into the production of a particular narrative that cannot recount the whole of what happened. We always and only get strategically constructed narratives, which countless anthropologists, and postcolonial and subaltern studies scholars have proven are different from reality as seen from other points of view. When smart bombs inadvertently land on hospitals and schoolhouses, a decision is made whether or not these will be woven into the fabric of the story – or if they conflict too sharply with the chosen narrative. For example, when CNN refused to air footage taken in 2007 of a US soldier shooting an Iraqi teenager in the back of the head, on the grounds that it was too graphic to air, what was the justification for omitting the story writ large, even without the graphic accompaniment?[19] Is the allegation of a possible war crime, coming from a respected journalist working for CNN, not newsworthy from CNN's point of view?

Another way to imagine this is to think about the radically different presentations of the more recent Iraq War as it appears on Al-Jazeera TV and in the American media. There was an excellent documentary film in 2004, *Control Room*, which accounted for the divergent presentations.[20] Two totally different wars are presented, and the presentations are often mutually exclusive, which again raises an epistemological question about how we can know what really happened. Surely, both may be fabrications designed for their respective audiences in an ideological dispute over the war, and Baudrillard would be the first to point this out. Nevertheless, the Gulf War, precisely, that is, *as we view it and claim to know it*, did not take place. This problem of knowing is found almost everywhere, since most of what we do not experience directly ourselves is already in the format of a story, and even our own experience, for the sake of communication,

must be put into story form – experience is either ineffable, or else, editing is inevitable.

Next, is the problem of simulacra:

> It would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real holdup… Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight; a client of the bank will faint and die of a heart attack; one will actually pay you the phony ransom), in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real… [21]

Here, Baudrillard's imagined game succeeds in illustrating how reality can consist in principle of events that are not "true" or "real" in a classical philosophical sense of truth and reality – that is, as something certain to be properly discerned. In this case, the robbers were actors simulating a robbery, but the simulation passes for the real thing, and the consequences are the same. And, it is a perfect simulacrum because it cannot be treated as a fake, not during or after its instantiation. Can you imagine, for example, when the robbers are arrested, if they claimed that they were just kidding? If they were really given the money and initially got away, they later tell the police that they would have returned the cash because they were only interested in testing the limits of the simulacrum. Or, to take another example, a partner caught by his or her spouse having sex with someone else who claims in defense to really despise this new person, to be engaged in a game testing the limits of simulation. The affair, your lover insists, was just a simulacrum!

But these are still lavish examples designed to paint a picture. The actual presence of simulacra in our daily lives is far more pervasive and elusive. Every one of us engages in various forms of simulation mistaken for reality. Every child, at some point, simulates being sick to get out of going to school. The problem, from the parent's point of view, is that there is no way to spot the simulacrum. We have been ill before, we know what it looks like, and simulation can be achieved rather easily. In general, this is the problem of pain – the reality of pain cannot be tested. Doctors cannot spot the fake. Doctors will look for real causes and physiological maladies, in the absence of which, there may be no diagnosis or treatment, but few doctors would deny the reality of the patient's reported discomfort. Even if a condition is psychosomatic, medical science recognizes that people do suffer from psychosomatic illness.

The child who simulates being sick is not operating in a world of lies, but rather, in the only world that we have. She *really* stays in bed, *really* stays home from school, eats soup and may visit the doctor in the morning. Baudrillard wants us to consider that realty consists of countless discourses and events that are "unreal" in certain key attributes but "real" in others, that there are many simulacra that cannot be discovered as such (indeed, for a simulacrum to exist it must not *be* discerned as such; the moment it is seen as a fake it ceases to be a functional simulacrum). This is the nature of hyperreality.

We do not have to organize a fake holdup or play sick to consider the problem. We are constantly simulating and mistaking simulacra for realities. We pretend *not* to be mad, or to like someone we cannot stand, we act as if everything is OK so as not to have to deal with the reality of revealing our discontent. We interpret the world as we would like to see it, editing out inconvenient realities that disturb our most comforting sense of how things are. Baudrillard wrote that "The modern ideal is to make your life what you want it to be. In reality, that is what you do when there's no other solution."[22] In other words, we choose to accept illusion as reality, either voluntarily or subconsciously, whenever we refuse to acknowledge the reality or possibility of events that conflict with our preferred understanding. Baudrillard makes reference to the example of the German artist Max Ernst who painted a garden, but accidentally left out a tree. Upon discovering this, he had the tree cut down.[23]

This functions on a political level as well, and that is where I find Baudrillard's comments on simulacra most interesting and useful. We watch the news channels that reinforce our already existing worldviews, and there we can always find evidence for our own point of view. Liberals say the real evidence is to be found on MSNBC, conservatives find out what is really happening on FOX News, and radicals refute the veracity of both, favoring instead the alternative sources of information we claim are closer to the truth.

Regardless, no media can help us to form an opinion. Of the media, Baudrillard writes: "It is as impossible for the citizen to form an opinion on the basis of the news media as to form an aesthetic judgment on the basis of the art market."[24] By this, Baudrillard means that the information industry, as a commercial business, packages and sells the news for different markets, always following the directions of market research. There is a market for Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity, and a different market for Jon Stewart and Rachel Maddow. Yet, when we buy what one vendor sells, doing so does not give us better judgment. Tuning to one channel over others does not reflect a capacity for political judgment.

In fact, considering the example of the art market, the formation of opinion and judgment could work in the opposite direction. What shows

in the galleries and what sells in the art market tell us what is beautiful and of value. When we accept such appraisals, and learn how to discern the decisive marks of beauty and value, we have not *formed a conception* of beauty on our own, but rather, we have assimilated the opinion of connoisseurs. Within the gallery, we may take ourselves quite seriously as we parse the comparative qualities of works on the walls, and display a knowledge of history and methodology, but very few decide what hangs there. Our seriousness in the gallery, even as we reject the merits of some of the works on display, already reflects the opinion of connoisseurs. But aesthetic judgment, like moral and political judgment, is capable of starting from scratch, that is, with an examination of first principles, and not with a given, fully formed narrative. We may discourse endlessly on what hangs on the walls of a gallery, *but we did not choose the objects of our discourses* (we found them already on the walls) – the corollary to this in the news media is topic selection and agenda setting.

We are capable of simulating many things without knowing it. For example, in the United States, we simulate democracy with elections. We hold and participate in elections, and this is often taken as the whole activity of democracy, even while the population may be increasingly disengaged from the public sphere, and only interested in politics during the largely media-orchestrated dramatizations of a national election. There may be dismal voter turnout, high roll-off, contested results, and much of the population may vote as an expression of their party identifications, which make their choices a foregone conclusion. But nevertheless, the event of the election passes as evidence of democracy.

The absurdity of this position can be painful to recognize. When we have a contested election in the US, complete with low voter turnout, we accept it as the natural activity of democracy. When a similar thing happens in Iran, and civil society erupts into protest, we take the protest as evidence that democracy is *not working there*. In June of 2009, we learned that Ahmadinejad was crushing democracy – that one of his contenders, Mousavi, had come to catalyze, almost inadvertently, an emboldened movement for "real" democracy. And we wonder if democracy will prevail in Iran. But isn't it precisely the other way around? Isn't the society that erupts in protest, as Iran did for months after the summer election, the one that is *already* engaged in the substantive activity of democracy, while the one that remains passive is the one that reveals democratic deficits? So, we could have asked it the other way around in the US: Thinking of the quiescence of the people and the unbothered peace in the streets, for example, after the 2000 election – will democracy prevail in America? But in America, the question of democracy is not posed inwardly as much as it is about others elsewhere. Why is that the case? The near totality of the simulacrum of American democracy is part of Baudrillard's answer, and I

find this to be quite convincing.

Another dimension of Baudrillard's critique of epistemology concerns the relationship between information and truth. Baudrillard rejects one of the most common claims of our age, an era Manuel Castells calls "the information age," namely, that having greater access to more information helps us get to the truth.[25] Baudrillard's famous short essay on the destructive powers of information is "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media."[26] There, Baudrillard argues that "information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy."[27] It is possible, in other words, for information to lead to the further atomization and passivity of individuals (thus dissolving the social and leading to entropy, not to action or innovation), and to the transformation of citizens into receptacles for constant monological information flows.

Elsewhere, Baudrillard claims that information undermines truth and he links this phenomenon to an assessment of public opinion:

> Opinion polls are neither true nor false… You launch a news item. So long as it has not been denied, it is plausible. Barring accidents, it will never be denied in real time. Even if it is denied later, it will never again be absolutely false, since it has once enjoyed credibility.[28]

I find what Baudrillard is saying here to be quite convincing. In the United States, after the Joe Biden/Sarah Palin debate in 2008, FOX News ran a poll that showed Palin having won the debate by a clear majority. On MSNBC, at the same time, their poll showed Biden land-sliding Palin. To each viewing audience, the results seemed perfectly credible, and were accepted as true. We also saw this with the publication of claims that Barack Obama was a Muslim. Aside from the fact that this ought not to have mattered in the first place, no amount of subsequent refutation, by Obama or by the media, has effectively retracted the claim, which is still considered credible by many Americans today. The claim that Obama is a Muslim will "never again be absolutely false, since it has once enjoyed credibility." Thus, one of the ways that information undermines truth is when credibility displaces and is mistaken for truth; if information is credible, and we have no means with which to falsify its specific contents, we consider it as true.

But, how is this related to opinion polls? Opinion polls claim to present what the public thinks, when in fact they actually *construct* the public using calculations that add up privately held opinions, processed with expedience, through surveys.[29] But public opinion is not the sum total of private opinion. Private opinion reflects the interests of private persons thinking and speaking as individuals, whereas public opinion expresses and embodies a collective interest, collectively assessed. For

public opinion, there must actually be *a cohesive public sphere* that can consider the issues in a public forum of some kind, and can formulate a collective perspective that is distinguished from the perspective of individuals as such. This is an old piece of common sense expressed by philosophers from Plato, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel to Arendt, Habermas, and Baudrillard, and yet our opinion polls continue to ignore the difference. In fact, the social "science" of polling has managed a remarkable trick – it can present us with public opinion in the absence of an actually existing public!

As Baudrillard puts it, referring to the masses (or what he also calls the silent majority):

> All contemporary systems function on this nebulous entity, on this floating substance whose existence is no longer social, but statistical, and whose only mode of appearance is the survey… The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested.[30]

Even with civil society disengaged and withdrawn from the public sphere, opinion polls can tell us what a hypothetical (not actually existing in an associational sense, not expressive, not reflexive) public thinks. And this practice rests on a self-supporting and reassuring circularity because, if polls *tell us what we think*, then we can relieve ourselves of the burden of having to do the hard work of producing public opinion. There is, of course, a twisted logic built into this formulation, for it enables us to wonder what we think and to consult a source other than ourselves in order to find out.

Baudrillard ultimately contends that we are incapable of having any certain knowledge about reality. To be clear, *he does not deny the existence of reality*, but he does regard himself a "reality agnostic," one who reconciles himself with the fact that reality is perpetually unknowable, so to make claims about it is always a desperate, uncertain endeavor.[31]

Before moving on to the question of history, I shall close this discussion of simulacra by providing some general differentiations of truth and reality, since the two terms do not carry the same meaning. By truth, we refer to the status or valuation of discourses, narratives, stories, propositions and other claims. The truth of a claim or story is wholly determined by the degree to which it maps out over reality (that is, how well it corresponds or correlates to what is taken to be real). One cannot speak of truth-values without reality. We say that a story is untrue precisely to the extent that it betrays what we take to be reality. And, there is no expectation for a lie to map out over reality.

Reality, then, is the term with primacy, for it both precedes and

measures the truth. By reality, we refer to what is commonly taken to comprise the common world (i.e. both social and natural) that we turn up in. To describe our reality, we talk about the things in our shared human world – objects, events, persons, beliefs, ideologies – and, inasmuch we agree that such things are to be found in our human world, they make up the substance of reality (reality is thus determined collectively and cooperatively, that is, in an *agonistic* way). It is fair to say, then, that if Baudrillard is a reality agnostic, truth, which is a second-order claim, made in relation to reality, is even further from the realm of the knowable. So, while reality and truth are not the same, to be agnostic about reality is to be *at least* agnostic about the truth, and for Baudrillard, the realm of the knowable may well be an empty space. This is what I mean by the anti-epistemology of Baudrillard.[32]

1.3 A FAREWELL TO HISTORY

As if being agnostic about reality and truth were not enough, Baudrillard also questions history. However, with history, the epistemological problems are further compounded by ontological problems. That is, ***knowledge of*** history may be as impossible as ***knowledge of*** truth and reality, but moreover, the criteria that constitute the historical moment would effectively disqualify much of what is presently regarded as history. For Baudrillard, historic events must satisfy at least two criteria: First, they must be unprecedented in some way, either phenomenologically or in terms of the problems they pose (or resolve). And second, they must be world-historical in scale, which is to say, they must clearly transform relationships between large subsets of peoples, politically, regionally, nationally, internationally, etc. Historic events, in other words, reframe debates and self-understandings, and change relations of power. According to Baudrillard, we have reached a point where history is no longer happening.

> Might one suggest to the people that they storm the opera house and tear it down on the symbolic date of 14 July? Might one suggest that they parade the bloody heads of our modern cultural governors on the end of pikestaffs? But we no longer make history. We have become reconciled with it and protect it like an endangered masterpiece. Times have changed.[33]

So, world history, the history of nations and peoples, does not include the stories of individual persons tying their shoes, of you and your family members living, working, experiencing heartache, joy, and dying. History consists only of events that reflect grand antagonisms – major conflicts that change the course of world affairs.

But what about the first criterion I mentioned, about the

unprecedented status of historical events? According to Baudrillard, history consists only of new antagonisms, not old events reoccurring in different ways and places. So, even if Parisians *did* storm the opera house every July 14, such a symbolic act might be too much of a replay to constitute history. History is not made of everything that happens. In a certain sense, this ontology of the event is not terribly controversial. After all, every history book, of every kind (top-down, bottom-up) reflects that history is a selective construction determined by assessing the signification and impact of certain events. In fact, the basic notion that history is only punctuated by novel events that change the course of human life has been settled in vernacular, which can be observed whenever we use the adjective "historic" to describe something that has happened in our personal lives, like a break-up or an epiphany. Of course, both Hegel and Marx already established their own theories of history that tracked transformative (or revolutionary) moments as the signposts of history.

Following this, we can find some vindication in Baudrillard's contention that the first Gulf War did not take place, because after it was over, Saddam Hussein remained in power, and his regime retained its general geopolitical status with the US, which is part of the reason why George H.W. Bush's son, George W. Bush, could later revisit the mission in 2003. If the first Gulf War *really* happened, that is, if it *really* succeeded in transforming the relationships involved, then how could it have happened again over 10 years later (in a different format and on a different rhetorical stage)? In October 2001, writing about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 a month after they happened, and anticipating the military response on the horizon, Baudrillard wrote:

> There is no remedy for this extreme situation, and war is certainly not a solution, since it merely offers a rehash of the past, with the same deluge of military forces, bogus information, senseless bombardment, emotive and deceitful language, technological deployment and brainwashing. Like the Gulf War: a non-event, an event that does not really take place.[34]

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baudrillard spoke of a long period of events on strike.[35] According to Baudrillard, nothing was happening in the 1990s that had not already happened before in some other version. And, in general, we appear to be quite content to ***not*** make history any more. Regardless of growing poverty and immiseration, we do not want to be agents of historical change, and class position is no guarantee of collective action. In fact, from Baudrillard's point of view, we appear to be more comfortable to be done with history-making, since after all, history is tumultuous and transformative. History cannot leave things as they are. The present must become the past for history to happen – the indefinite continuation (or

preservation) of the present displaces history indefinitely. The present can be rather terrible indeed, but at least it is sufferable, and even the most impoverished often concede to it. This is a key difference between Hegel and Marx, on the one hand, and Baudrillard, on the other. Whereas for Hegel and Marx the end of history was an unlikely but hopeful prospect (universal consciousness or classless society, respectively), for Baudrillard history implodes in the present, without any such grand resolutions or achievements.

In the stead of history is the museification of history, which regards the historic event as something to be preserved and archived, something to bear witness to from behind a screen. So history, like reality and truth, suffers from not being knowable, but more than that, also from not being at all.

1.4 RESCUING PRAXIS FROM THE WRECKAGE

By now, it should be clear that I not only appreciate Baudrillard's work, but also, that I find much of it rather convincing. Yet, I have described his work, and particularly its development during the last thirty years of his life, as a dangerous wrong turn best untaken. In a certain sense, it is very easy to critique Baudrillard, for he does not substantiate his arguments with the formal rigors of traditional scholarship conventional within the social sciences. Yet, in another sense, this same thing makes it very difficult to critique Baudrillard, and to some extent, criticism that parses his words even seems misplaced from the start. This is because a self-conscious fragmentary perspectivism does not offer up a system that weakens or collapses from scrutiny that reveals its argumentative holes and logical fallacies. Therefore, approaching critique in this way is like a "cheap shot" that misses the point. That said, unless we want to follow Baudrillard fully into the debris (which, admittedly, many do), we must be allowed to bring *some* of the tools that he despises to bear on his work. And, if he has effectively superseded such approaches, then it ought not to matter if we try. Nietzsche presents a similar problem of slippery elusiveness. But with Baudrillard, the stakes are higher than with Nietzsche because of the implications for politics. Hence, and despite certain difficulties, I shall now bring my critique of Baudrillard into focus.

Simulacra are, by definition, indistinguishable from real events. Nevertheless, the actual existence and constant possibility of simulacra are not sufficient causes for adopting reality agnosticism. It may be impossible to distinguish the fake holdup and fake sickness from the real holdup and real sickness, but the child has really been sick, and most criminals are not playing. Those involved in staging the act of simulation itself do mostly know the difference. But Baudrillard would rightly point out that, from the outside – for those confronting simulacra phenomenologically (instead

of making them) – our general inability to tell the difference means that we can never be too confident about reality. Reality agnosticism is tantamount to treating every event as a possible simulacrum. This is the same as to treat no events as real. This is precisely what Baudrillard wants to do, yet I think this is a mistake.

Baudrillard presses us to recognize that even suffering and death can be and have been simulated (i.e. the Timişoara Massacre in 1989 in Western Romania, where protestors were gunned down by the army. While the massacre *was* real, it was later disclosed that 27 bodies were exhumed from the Timişoara "Paupers' Cemetery" to exaggerate the massacre for TV effect. This series of events marked the end of Ceauşescu's Stalinist regime in Romania.).[36] However, despite such manipulation, we do live in a world where suffering and death are real. That even suffering and death could be staged, and that we cannot always tell when that is the case, does not mean that we should make such suspicion into an operational logic – there is always the other side, the side of actual suffering and death. Baudrillard makes too much out of the fake, and he errs on the wrong side of the equation. What I mean by saying "too much" and "wrong side," is precisely to raise a normative objection. Wherever we cannot tell the difference (that is, wherever there *are* functional simulacra), I contend that we should err on the side of a different obligation. And this is indeed a moral obligation to take human suffering seriously, an obligation that outweighs the integrity of Baudrillard's skepticism. To put it bluntly, I would rather be fooled into thinking a faked death was real than that a real death was faked, just as I would always prefer the doctor who assumes that my pain is real despite the leap of faith this may entail.

We must also ask, from a political point of view, what it means to be agnostic about reality. Can one act with certainty and resolve against human suffering, against inequality, against growing macroeconomic disparity, against misrecognition, etc., if we cannot know anything with any certainty about these things? It is no misuse or abuse of Baudrillard's work to observe that his arguments do in fact distance us from a political consideration of the material conditions of poverty, war, repression, and oppression. He explicitly intends for his arguments to be – inasmuch as this is possible – incompatible with or unusable for moral judgment and political argument. Baudrillard happily argues for the abandonment of moral argument and normative theory altogether (again, much like Nietzsche, who also intended to think beyond good and evil). For example, Baudrillard writes, "It is no longer a matter here of philosophical morality of the sort that says 'the world isn't what it ought to be' or 'the world isn't what it was'. No, the world is as it is."[37]

Of course, Baudrillard is right that the world is as it is, but what of the role of human action in making it that way? So much of the world is

as it is because of the cumulative effect of collective human action and inaction over time. In light of this, we do have some space within which to consider what ought to be, and what human action can do to move us in that direction. This is a tenuous space indeed, for it promises us nothing and many people already stand in it pushing and pulling in different directions. But, it is in this space of consideration of the impact and the intervening prospects of human action where the possibility for politics remains, and where one hopes that the best heads will enter the fray.[38]

Moving on to the question of illusion, Baudrillard has said:

> So long as an illusion is not recognized as an error, it has a value precisely equivalent to reality. But once the illusion has been recognized as such, it is no longer an illusion. It is, therefore, the very concept of illusion, and that concept alone, which is an illusion.[39]

Written this way, Baudrillard's reasoning appears sound. An illusion is only an illusion if it is mistaken for reality. If a magician tries to make it look like she is levitating, and it does not look at all like she is levitating – if, say, she is laying flat on her back on a table – then there is no illusion there. And if she does levitate, as soon as you discover the trick, as soon as you see the strings, the illusion is destroyed, which is why, for the sake of illusion a good magician hides the strings and protects her secrets.

However, upon closer inspection, Baudrillard is wrong here too, and the error is a general one that belies his reality agnosticism. An illusion that is not recognized as an error *does not*, as he says, have "a value precisely equivalent to reality." Baudrillard's conclusion here only follows from a purely functional assessment of the illusion. Since we are being so playful with reality, let us imagine a person who *really* could levitate. Would we say that such a person possesses a power of precisely equivalent value to the power of the magician who can make it look like she is levitating? Every child who has played sick knows that the simulacrum of sickness has a different value than real sickness. The former is an instrument and, if it succeeds in not being recognized as a fake, it is functional for getting out of school for the day – the latter, the sickness itself, is a condition we suffer against our wills. Sickness is bereft of functionality for its host, besides as an inadvertent biological defense, or as a condition that carries a welcome side-effect such as sympathy.

The importance of this difference can also be illustrated by considering a façade. We know the different value of really enjoying someone's company as opposed to those social situations where we use a façade of enjoying someone's company, or use warm pleasantries, for purely functional reasons. And, many of us have been on the other side of the façade, where we make the painful discovery that someone else has been merely tolerating *our* company. Such a discovery devalues previous

experiences, when we can see that they were only simulacra. Baudrillard is right that this different valuation is wholly contingent upon a discovery that destroys the simulacrum. And he does make the critical qualification that illusion only succeeds as such *for as long as it is not seen as error*. But such discoveries do happen, and they act on our valuations of past events and experiences, not only of the present and the future. One cannot remember the company of a friend as fondly after the "friendship" is revealed as a façade. And the pretentious friend always knew the difference, even before he or she was found out. This, along with the other examples above, leads me to conclude that illusion that is not recognized as error does indeed have a very different value than reality, even though we often cannot discern the difference. In the case of the façade, the discovery only means that we come to understand something that was already understood by the deceptive "friend" – the value is not a new one *produced* by the discovery, it is only revealed for what it was. Because of the functional success of the façade, one's valuation (not the value itself) may change – but the victim of the façade now knows that the friend *never possessed the real value* of a friend.[40]

I also reject Baudrillard's claim that we choose, or even that we *can* choose, to accept illusion as reality whenever we don't want to acknowledge events that conflict with our preferred understanding or worldview. As we have seen above, Baudrillard always critiqued the centrality of class analysis in Marx and in much of Marxism. Even in early works, like *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), he centralized the importance of the manipulation of differences vis-à-vis consumption – one's place in the world of objects. Class assumes the presence of other humans; whereas Baudrillard pointed out that we were increasingly in the presence of objects more than humans. He rather astutely observed the displacement of class identity for the "personalization" of identity in consumer society. There was always an element of choice and illusion to the latter form of identity. But, as I have said, Baudrillard's early works were still rather clearly connected to the Marxist problematic, even inasmuch as they were critiques of Marx, and Baudrillard still drew heavily on Marx and structuralism.

From then on, Baudrillard increasingly distanced himself from class analysis, further extending his critique of the primacy of production articulated in his early works, ultimately and effectively detaching his critique from the Marxist trajectory altogether. In his post-70s work, Baudrillard mostly avoids serious consideration of the material differences between peoples' experiences on the basis of living rich or poor, with comfort, influence, and dignity, or marginalized, exploited, and excluded. Examples of human suffering are increasingly treated in terms of their sign-value or signification, which is to say, as peculiar cases that represent

something of value for intellectual curiosity or critical theory. Simply put, serious regard for real human suffering mostly falls away.

Let us take an example of the kind that Baudrillard most avoided: Extreme poverty is defined as persons living on less than one US dollar a day. Globally, those living in extreme poverty rose from 271 million in 1996 to 313 million in 2002.[41] That's an increase of 42 million people in 6 years; and today, extreme poverty is not on the decline (at least not globally). One of the many consequences of extreme poverty conditions, like lack of access to clean water, is that roughly 6,000 children die every day from water-related disease – that's the equivalent of 20 jumbo jets crashing every day.[42] While much less spectacular and newsworthy than a single jumbo jet crash, these deaths are no less real. For us, indeed, such numbers are an abstraction, what we get from all statistics that attempt to quantify human misery. Still, macroeconomic data *does* make it difficult to deny real and growing disparity, inequality, and human suffering.[43] And I am not at all convinced that people living in extreme poverty can or do psychologically (either consciously or subconsciously) edit out their suffering the same way that Max Ernst edits out a tree he forgot to paint.

While healthy children can play sick, really sick children cannot play healthy. People living in extreme poverty, displaced by war, herded together in refugee camps, or living under falling bombs, may very well try for some semblance of living in different conditions (Roberto Benigni's movie, *Life Is Beautiful*, comes to mind), but when such a semblance is constantly interrupted by the real world, the illusion cannot take hold. Therefore, it seems to me that the social-psychological condition Baudrillard attacks in much of his work is a particular condition and privilege of bourgeois society.

This critique of Baudrillard is, as one might expect, too simple. Baudrillard's critique of bourgeois society is not made for the benefit of the bourgeoisie that it targets. Underneath his critique of bourgeois society, one could say, lies a concern for those who the system robs, excludes, exploits, or marginalizes. I find this convincing. However, there are two elements in Baudrillard's work that problematize and severely limit such a generous reading of his critique. First, he largely leaves the impoverished and suffering nameless, their locations and particular issues of concern are neither well articulated nor treated with sustained interest.[44] The impoverished and suffering are an almost-constant "absent referent" in Baudrillard's work.[45] Or they appear as a kind of footnote to the neurotic system of objects that has colonized the lifeworlds of the bourgeoisie. Second, he goes so far into the subtle intricacies of the social and psychological comportment of people in the consumer society that he traps himself in that narrow comportment – making the space and the object of his critique into a special joy, a pleasure unto itself regardless of

all of the others on the outside.

On the question of history, Baudrillard is right up to a point. History, no matter who is telling it, is always a selective narrative, and is therefore always political. Because we cannot have the whole of history without editing, we must acknowledge that every historical account leaves many things out that could have been included, and that therefore no historical account is an immutable record of truth. We can only "know" history in selective summary form, so the epistemological problem, as I've said above, is carried over from the difficulty of knowing reality and truth. Yet, as with reality and truth, I think Baudrillard draws the wrong conclusions here too.

Baudrillard wants to evacuate history on the grounds that we can make no pretensions to knowing what it really consists of. With Baudrillard's ontological critique of history, he moves beyond agnosticism towards a kind of "history atheism." In some places, as in his essay "The Event Strike," he says: "Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, *this is because History itself has become a dustbin*. It has become its own dustbin."[46] History is thus the name given to a kind of archive (or garbage can), a receptacle into which we place all of the discarded, used up, and worn out human events and ideologies. In other places, he has been more generous and has said, "I don't deny history. It's an immense toy."[47] In the end, Baudrillard vacillates between the contention that history is no longer happening, and the contention that history is something to play with, like a provocateur revisionist who does not take it all very seriously.

However, I can find no argument in Baudrillard to abandon a Marxian conception of history, a conception that differs from Marx's own dichotomous view of history as the struggle between distinct classes, but which nevertheless retains the premise that *history consists of conflict*. In a sense, Baudrillard himself has not completely cast off the Marxian conception, for everything that rises to the level of *being historical* does, even for Baudrillard, represent grand antagonisms and conflicts of world-historical significance. This is why he viewed the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 as putting an end to the event strike that began in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.[48]

Depending on which conflicts you choose to focus on, and how you define them, history tells a different story. For example, if you define the Cold War as a conflict between capitalism and communism, you end up with the historical narrative that most Americans are familiar with and were taught in school. But, if you define the Cold War as a conflict between two different kinds of capitalism, free-market capitalism in the US versus bureaucratic state capitalism in the USSR, then you get a different historical narrative.[49] This seems to me very convincing, and it is important to interrogate competing narratives for ideological corruption

and manipulation. But Baudrillard is not interested in considering various historical narratives; let us not forget that he went so far as to say that "the Gulf War did not take place." We may not know what happened there, whatever happened did indeed leave Hussein in power and major geopolitical relations unchanged (as discussed above), and the story was surely told in various conflicting ways, but to deny *any possible narrative* of the war is irreconcilable with all of the corpses and wreckage. Baudrillard would not deny the physical, human costs of war, but it is worth noting that these brutal details are almost always conspicuously, and I would say egregiously, left out of his discussions of the Gulf War and more recent essays on 9/11. Considerations on the signification of architecture tend to take the place of bodies engulfed in flames. If Baudrillard is a revisionist, carnage is surely one of the things he has taken out.

To be fair, Baudrillard has expressed concern about the dangerous assumptions of a Eurocentric point of view. Politically, in fact, he tends to view the impoverished regions of the world, those countries often viewed as the "global south," for example, as possessing better opportunities for meaningful struggles, for uncompromising assertions of their singularity against homogenizing globalism, and for their own survival. His critique of "the West" is particularly sharp in *Paroxysm*. There, he says,

> At all events, we have to look to other worlds than the Western. The underdeveloped or developing societies are no longer what they were, since the very concept of development has been a damp squib. Precisely in their inability to achieve a coherent democratic (economic and political) principle, these societies are perhaps the foreshadowing of a later state of events, in which all societies, including our own, will have to confront the collapse of all these fine rational principles (but the 'advanced' societies have hardly achieved such a coherent democratic principle themselves, and what they have handed on to the rest of the world has been the failed, caricatured version of the model). This fateful situation is perhaps an opportunity, then. And in this sense, it is *those* societies, in their very confusion, which are in the van, not *our Western* societies, which are so proud of their technological lead and so full also of a fierce and *bien-pensant* evolutionism which prevents them from thinking anything but the world supremacy of their model. That supremacy is merely virtual…[50]

In this remarkable passage, Baudrillard completely inverts the unilinear evolutionary logic of Western capitalism (particularly neoliberalism) and also, of Marx's own prediction in *Capital* that the most "developed" countries were showing to the poorer "developing" ones a picture of their own future. Here, Baudrillard suggests just the opposite – that the poorer so-called "developing" countries are now showing the wealthy West a picture of its future, a future that the Western world is not equipped to

manage with any supremacy, if it could even survive the transition. But this very thought, of the inversion of the logic of "development," is imperceptible to Western societies that are not even capable of seeing their own democratic deficits and caricatured principles, let alone the decimation of their known lifeworlds (although the economic crisis in 2008-2010 perhaps gave some in the West a sense of such a possibility). This is why, when we think of opportunities, we must "look to other worlds than the Western."

Despite his occasional powerful rebukes of Eurocentrism (and the example above is one of the best), Baudrillard's views on history tend to be grossly Eurocentric. When it comes to history, Baudrillard only calls those conflicts that afflict the richest countries of the world "historical." How else could he declare that events went on strike in the 1990s, an implosion of history punctuated by the end of the Cold War and 9/11/2001? In fact, this very framing seems to be worse than Eurocentric for it turns the geopolitical stature of the US into the defining axis of historicity. Certainly, it is true that the rich countries of the West (and the US in particular) have determined the balance of power globally for some time, and this does perhaps justify a differential of critical attention. However, Baudrillard's evacuation of history entails a radical, sweeping thesis that diminishes and even denies eventuality; in Baudrillard's work, it renders the lives of others elsewhere as historically significant only in terms of their relationship with the wealthy countries of the West.

To be sure, when the Zapatistas opposed themselves to neoliberalism and proclaimed that they were *for humanity*, they were relating the plight of indigenous peoples to the present phase of accelerated global capitalism (i.e. NAFTA), and to the oppressed peoples of the world – not only those of Mexico. Still, we must acknowledge that the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) and the Zapatista National Liberation Front (Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, FZLN) have historic signification *within* Mexico, that they have made the invisible visible there, and have effectively transcended a long Mexican tradition of *indianismo vs. indigenismo* politics, regardless of the unimpeded flow of capital, the expansion of free trade, and the failures of Zapatismo on the global stage. Even if the Zapatistas do not meet the world-historical and unprecedented measurements that Baudrillard would use to assess whether or not their rebellion actually took place, it is impossible to deny that something transformative happened in Mexico for many of the years in between the end of the Cold War and 9/11/2001. We could speak of many other historical events of the 1990s, such as the horrific atrocities in Eastern Bosnia, but the Zapatistas alone vividly disprove Baudrillard's event strike thesis.

To conclude, let us now step back from Baudrillard. There is much in

common among many of the thinkers who were part of the era in French theory that was trying to comprehend the unique position of post-World War II highly technological capitalism. Many agreed with Baudrillard that radical movements from the past had failed and were, perhaps, structurally guaranteed to fail given the dimensions of the new system (the system of objects, as Baudrillard would say, or the spectacle, as Debord would say). A new analysis of sign-value and consumption, of post-industrial society was necessary. However, such an analysis, still applicable and necessary today, can be placed in the service of rethinking revolutionary possibilities and praxis. But in order to do this, we must allow ourselves to make claims about reality, truth, and history – we must utilize theory that retains a normative core and a commitment to thinking through the liberatory projects of our time.

As we have seen, Baudrillard refused such claim-making and optimism and viewed all existing and conceivable social and political movements as wrong turns. It is my contention, however, that *Baudrillard is the wrong turn*, and that in order to find our way back from the malaise of the worldview reached by his philosophy, we must retrieve and extend a more contentious theory (not only from Marx, but from those who did better to rethink Marxism, such as Debord).

I hope to have shown that, if we read Baudrillard critically, his work can make us more critical, more analytical, less gullible, and less manipulable. These are good things. But, if we are not careful, Baudrillard's work only confirms the passivity of academics and others who have little to no interest in social movements and an ever-declining interest in radical and revolutionary politics. Indeed, Baudrillard's work offers up a philosophical justification for the total abandonment of revolutionary praxis, making it easier to accept various forms of acquiescence and reconciliation (should it not be unsettling that Baudrillard brings us from a radical situationist position to many of the same conclusions as Francis Fukuyama?[51]). Dangerously, a politics of acquiescence and reconciliation describes well the age of Obama, where elections reassure many (and not just in the US) that they can even give America a black president who is sometimes (somehow) called a "communist," despite the absurdity of that conclusion.[52] We must, therefore, pursue and develop a new philosophy of praxis that counteracts tendencies towards acquiescence and reconciliation. Yet, such a new theory must be cognizant of and must take seriously the sources of those tendencies, whether they come from Baudrillard, or from somewhere else.

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate On Human Nature*, (The New Press, 2006), p. 41.
2. See *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, (Semiotext(e), 1980).
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, (Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 120.
4. See *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, (Semiotext(e), 2001), pp. 15-16.
5. See Charles Levin, Translator's Introduction to Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, (Telos Press, 1981), p. 6.
6. I have written about the enduring and growing importance of Debord's work in two articles. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, "Guy Debord and Ideology Materialized: Reconsidering Situationist Praxis," *Theory in Action* Vol. 1, No. 4 (October 2008): 5-26. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, "Why New Socialist Theory Needs Guy Debord: On the Practice of Radical Philosophy," *Studies in Critical Social Sciences*, 17 (January 2010): 109-34.
7. Guy Debord, *The Real Split in the International*, (Pluto Press, 2003), p. 63.
8. Here, I will just note a few examples of some surprising omissions. Baudrillard is disposed of in a sentence in the introduction to Todd May's *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Penn State University Press, 1994), although Baudrillard's affinity with anarchism is far more salient than that of others in the field of poststructuralism. Jürgen Habermas makes no mention of Baudrillard in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (The MIT Press, 1990), a book devoted largely to reviewing contemporary French postmodernism and poststructuralism. Numerous textbooks and readers on social theory that promise to cover postmodernism and poststructralism leave Baudrillard unmentioned (Ben Agger's *Critical Social Theories: An Introduction* (Westview, 1998) is a very worthy exception). Christopher Norris, in his *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), at least takes Baudrillard seriously enough to evaluate his ideas before condemning them as "absurd" and "ludicrous." Still, Norris's regard for Baudrillard's work agrees with a popular and derisive caricature – that it is uncritical and ultimately ought to be disqualified from sustained serious treatment. To the contrary, I remain critical of both Baudrillard and derisive caricatures of his work.
9. *Forget Foucault*, p. 83.
10. Definition cited in Stevphen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2009), p. 17.
11. *Forget Foucault*, p. 14.
12. While it is true that Baudrillard was more comfortable with the term "postmodernism" (even if he had no particular enthusiasm for that label), I maintain that he was also a "poststructuralist," despite his explicit rejection of the latter identification. Baudrillard's work is frequently associated with both postmodernism and poststructuralism. Baudrillard's foundational works from the 60s and 70s were not poststructuralist. In fact, books like *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, *The System of Objects*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Mirror of Production* were working out structuralist analyses of the object, sign, value, exchange, and consumption. Despite this, there are actually good reasons why Baudrillard is often taken as an iconic

poststructuralist. These have to do with the nature of his more recent and most influential works, those from the 80s until his death in 2007. There is no denying the poststructuralism of the more recent and most influential works. There, we find Baudrillard's radical abandonment of structuralist analysis, particularly of the Marxian kind. Although I use these terms occasionally for their descriptive value, I do not mean to entrap any author with them. At bottom, I treat Baudrillard as a philosopher.

13. Originally published in Paris by Gallimard in 1972.
14. Originally published in Paris by Gallimard in 1968.
15. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, (Telos Press, 1975), pp. 134-140.
16. Julia Kristeva has, like Debord, done better than Baudrillard to analyze and prescribe social and political activity, but she is too individualistic, appropriating psychoanalysis for her theory of revolt in ways I ultimately find unconvincing. Raoul Vaneigem, who can be viewed within the trajectory of French political theory, also retains a notable commitment to collective action and normative philosophy. For example, in *A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings* (Pluto Press, 2003) he clearly states and explicates distinct moral and political principles in a way (universalistic) hard to find among postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers; and yet, his early work, and particularly *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Rebel Press, 2003) was very influential on those movements. One could in fact devote a similar study and rescue mission to Vaneigem as I have devoted myself to with Debord. I have preferred Debord for philosophical and historical reasons. Debord's work is more rigorous philosophically, and in general, less polemical. Debord enters more seriously into dialogue with the history of philosophy, with Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and others. Moreover, Debord has been more abused and appropriated by artists and biographers; and while it could be said that Vaneigem has been more neglected, at least he has lived to correct the record with his own works.
17. *Forget Foucault*, pp. 119 and 123.
18. Reality television is too stark of an example to get to the heart of "hyperreality." As we shall see, hyperreality, as Baudrillard intends, is never such an easily discernable fabrication – it is much more elusive.
19. Citations for this case can be found in numerous mainstream news sources abundant on-line, as the story eventually became international news – despite CNN's decision – when the prominent Australian war correspondent, Michael Ware, went public with the information. Ultimately, even CNN's own Howard Kurtz criticized his network's decision on his television show "Reliable Sources."
20. Directed by Jehane Noujaim, written by Julia Bacha and Jehane Noujaim.
21. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 20.
22. Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, (Verso, 2007), p. 74.
23. Ibid., p. 63.
24. Ibid., p. 34.
25. See Manuel Castells' trilogy on *The Information Age* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 1997, and 1998).
26. This essay appears in two books: Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, (Semiotext(e), 1983) and *Simulacra and Simulation*, op. cit.

27. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, p. 100.
28. Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm*, (Verso, 1998), p. 73.
29. James S. Fishkin has attempted to address some of the common deficits in traditional polling through his approach (whose name he has legally trademarked) of "deliberative polling." Beyond the peculiar move to establish the private ownership of his public opinion polling method, Fishkin has indeed improved polling practices. Nevertheless, his approach is still a far distance from viewing public opinion as the culmination of un-administered and autonomously forming collective action in the public sphere. In fact, his highly controlled and moderated form of "deliberative polling" could be said to produce the ultimate simulacrum inasmuch as it attempts to simulate, more perfectly than traditional polls, what a public sphere really does and looks like. But, indeed, it is not an actual public sphere, it is only a simulation, highly constructed and managed, in order to "present results of a poll with a human face" (cited at www.stanford.edu, The Center for Deliberative Democracy, http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/flyers/deliberative-polling-flyer-en.pdf, Accessed 8/12/2010).
30. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, pp. 19-20.
31. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, (Berg, 2005), pp. 87-90.
32. We could also call this "anti-epistemology" a "radical epistemology," but I prefer the former since the very subject of epistemology, human knowledge, is thrown into question.
33. Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, (Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 23.
34. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, (Verso, 2003), p. 34.
35. See "The Event Strike" in *The Illusion of the End*, op. cit.; also see Baudrillard's discussions of history in *Paroxysm*, op. cit.
36. Baudrillard wrote about the Timişoara Massacre in *The Illusion of the End*, op. cit., pp. 54-61.
37. *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, p. 26.
38. This political space is not meant to indicate an institutional political space, although that may be part of it. I prefer to think of the political space in terms of civil society, the public sphere, and the movements these give rise to.
39. Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, (Verso, 2008), p. 53.
40. I am using a very simple example of the façade here. In fact, sometimes friendship is much more complex, and its true nature could indicate a hyperreality consisting of genuine longing and mutual respect mixed with elements of tolerance and pretentious pleasantries. A façade can be integrated with elements of real friendship, and this is much more difficult to unravel. However, the elements do sometimes reveal themselves, say, in the heat of an argument.
41. *The Guardian Weekly*, 2005, cited in David Lester, *The Gruesome Acts of Capitalism* (Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2006).
42. *The Guardian Weekly*, 2004, cited in Lester, David, op. cit.
43. For a further illustration, consider that the US alone spent roughly 10 billion dollars a month throughout 2006 and 2007 fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while it would cost less than that a year (7-8 billion dollars) to provide primary education for everyone in the poorest countries in the world

(US Department of Defense and Lester, pp. 44 and 70).

44. As we shall see below, there are some notable exceptions of this in Baudrillard's work. However, none of the exceptions reverse the general tendencies of his work to fixate on the peculiar afflictions of the rich.
45. I borrow the term "absent referent" from Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Continuum, 1990), pp. 40-48.
46. *The Illusion of the End*, p. 26.
47. *Forget Foucault*, p. 123.
48. See *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, op. cit.
49. I discuss and argue for this alternative account in Chapter 3.
50. *Paroxysm*, pp. 15-16.
51. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (Avon Books, 1993).
52. After all, in Bolivia, even with an *actual* leftist head of state in Evo Morales, social movements don't retire, they articulate new rival visions.

Chapter 2: Reconsidering Situationist Praxis

Crime belongs to the concept "revolt against the social order." One does not "punish" a rebel; one suppresses him. A rebel can be a miserable and contemptible man; but there is nothing contemptible in a revolt as such – and to be a rebel in view of contemporary society does not in itself lower the value of a man. There are even cases in which one might have to honor a rebel, because he finds something in our society against which war ought to be waged – he awakens us from our slumber. – FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1887[1]

The traditional trial in the courtroom has become irrelevant in the face of the imaginary trials (i.e., enacted by the imagination) staged by the mass media. What cannot be penalized in physical terms is instead penalized by means of a universal sacrificial rite, that is, the symbolic trials which the mass media stage in the imagination of the collectivity. It is the imagination which is actually on trial. The trial is aimed at creating certain attitudes and insights, at forcing indeterminate social beings to assume, autonomously and of their own accord, an identity defined for them by the courts. – FRANCO "BIFO" BERARDI, 1980[2]

In this chapter, I argue that Guy Debord's critical analysis of capitalism, elaborated in his work from the 1950s and 60s, remains of special importance today. The value of Debord's work, at the very least, is twofold: First, his work offers a major reformulation of Marxist theory that can be found nowhere else, and is yet typically unaccounted for by students of social and political philosophy. But Debord's work is serious, philosophically rigorous, and historically informed, and therefore long overdue for treatment by theorists interested in 20th century social and political thought. Second – and this is the point that requires more argumentation and evidence – Debord's answer to the question of why

revolutionary socialist aspirations in advanced capitalist societies dwindled in the decades after World War II, and what could be done to reinvigorate revolutionary criticism, is both novel and useful. Simply put, a man who has garnered the attention of myriad biographers, artists, and historians must be recovered by philosophers and activists, and his work, which is not the same as a chronology of life events, must be treated seriously, critically, and at long last.

Inasmuch as aspects of Debord's analysis can be found elsewhere, particularly in the classical Frankfurt School of critical theory, certain moments in French existentialism, Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, and some of the thinking of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, his recommendations for political action remain as unique today as they were over fifty years ago. And although Jean Baudrillard has pursued similar lines of inquiry as Debord, and to much wider renown, Debord was a more serious political thinker for many reasons, not the least of which being that he believed in the possibility of politics, formulated a praxis retaining a normative theoretical perspective, and organized a movement with an activist orientation.[3] Debord's major work, 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*, is still largely convincing and remains strikingly applicable, and while the particular measures Debord recommended for political action are often unhelpful, he outlined a vital general direction that has not received sufficient attention. Unlike Baudrillard, Debord suggests a course for political action that can redirect revolutionary theory for an era generally uninterested in both theory and revolution.

Beyond the definite aims of a critical redeployment of Debord's contributions to theory and practice, I also wish to present his work as a corrective to and an extension of Marx's political philosophy – beyond the limitations of the latter, revealed in the light of the 20th century. Indeed, many post-Marxist theories that have addressed deficits in classical socialist philosophy have failed to fully comprehend the unique stability of highly technological capitalist society and its innovative means of managing crises. Debord addresses this failure, as well as the deficits of Marx's political philosophy.

2.1 SPECTACLE AND DEPOLITICIZATION

It is rather noncontroversial in academic discussions to state that no democracy is finished. Countless others have pointed out that every existing democracy could benefit from further democratization, and that procedural (i.e. formal or electoral) democracy is necessary but insufficient at its best. The ideological position of the electorate, the level of political engagement of the citizenry, the frequency and scale of legal or illegal collective action, the presence and activity of the public sphere, the response of the state to dissent and civil disobedience, and the

responsiveness of institutions to public criticism in general are all factors in measuring the depth and deficits of existing democracy in substantive terms. In light of these criteria, we can measure where democratization is most needed. In any discussion about the relative apathy of the public and the existence, function, and manipulation of mass consciousness – in short, in any discussion about the depoliticization of civil society – there is much to be gained from attention to the work of Debord.

Yet, as mentioned above, such attention has remained in the margins of political philosophy, in scarce footnotes to academic discussions of culture and politics, and as a spotty residue in the domain of political action. While it is possible to imagine that Debord would have liked it in the margins, such a claim is ultimately untenable. Fundamentally, he believed that highly technological capitalist societies are structurally incompatible with principles of social and economic justice, fairness, and a robust, vibrant, creative and contentious democratic culture. The irreducible internal logic of capitalism, that is, the accumulation of capital in the hands of private individuals, provides no wide promise of a good life, of a critical, thoughtful, and enriching life, or democracy. Debord's contention is supported by the unparalleled rise of material inequality in most of the world's countries. Disparities between the richest and the poorest have never been greater than they are today in the US, China, Sweden, India, Russia, and Brazil. On a transnational scale, the differentials of power in economic, political, military, and cultural terms, between the global north and the global south stand starkly at odds.[4]

You may be familiar with the statistical picture:

> In 2003, 18 countries with a combined population of 460 million people registered lower scores on the human development index (HDI) than in 1990 – an unprecedented reversal. In the midst of an increasingly prosperous global economy, 10.7 million children every year do not live to see their fifth birthday, and more than 1 billion people survive in abject poverty on less than $1 a day. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has inflicted the single greatest reversal in human development. In 2003 the pandemic claimed 3 million lives and left another 5 million people infected… In human development terms the space between countries is marked by deep and, in some cases, widening inequalities in income and life chances… The twin scourges of poverty and inequality can be defeated – but progress has been faltering and uneven… Today, someone living in Zambia has less chance of reaching age 30 than someone born in England in 1840 – and the gap is widening.[5]

The United Nations also reports that the

> world's richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million. Beyond these extremes, the 2.5 billion people

> living on less than $2 a day – 40% of the world's population – account for 5% of global income. The richest 10%, almost all of whom live in high-income countries, account for 54%.[6]

In 2006, global access to water was identified as a defining crisis of the 21st century:

> There is more than enough water in the world for domestic purposes, for agriculture and for industry. The problem is that some people – notably the poor – are systematically excluded from access by their poverty, by their limited legal rights or by public policies that limit access to the infrastructures that provide water for life and for livelihoods. In short, scarcity is manufactured through political processes and institutions that disadvantage the poor.[7]

Over a decade ago, the United Nations noted:

> Intergovernmental policy-making in today's global economy is in the hands of the major industrial powers and the international institutions they control – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Bank for International Settlements. Their rule-making may create a secure environment for open markets, but there are no countervailing rules to protect human rights and promote human development. And developing countries, with about 80% of the world's people but less than a fifth of global GDP, have little influence.[8]

This remains an accurate description of the administration of global capital today. *Data attesting to the rise in global disparities of wealth and power may be far easier to ignore in the global north, but they are overwhelming when considered, and it is easier to ignore this inequality than to produce evidence to the contrary*.[9]

To be clear, Debord would not see the consolidation and exacerbation of the above disparities as natural outgrowths of deregulated free market capitalism. If he held *that* view, he would be capable of suggesting a remedy through regulation. But Debord was a radical socialist, whose ideas prefigured much of the autonomist tradition, and for him, the problems causing, associated with, and caused by inequality cannot be resolved through the reformist management of capitalism. During the years of the foundation of the Situationist International (SI), from 1957-1960, Debord wrote frequently about the necessity of creating a real revolutionary movement and about the absolute poverty of "reformist rubbish," arguing that capitalism was "incapable of abolishing the fundamental reality of exploitation, and therefore incapable of peacefully making way for the superior forces of life called for by its own material development."[10] This passage, along with many others in his early correspondences about the SI, makes clear the loose Marxist trajectory

out of which Debord's work was developed.

And today, reformism points to a space increasingly dominated by neoliberal initiatives to remove trade regulations; the neoliberal scheme pursues equality and democracy only as an aftereffect of policies that enable capital and business to flow unimpeded across national boundaries. Those opposing neoliberalism make the case that governments could and should, given the political will, reign in capitalism and work towards the re-regulation or ethical governance of economic activity. Debord could not throw his weight into arguments for the ethical governance of capitalism any more than Marx could, since both resolutely held that the tendencies and internal logic of capitalism would inevitably trend towards greater inequality and the subversion of democracy, and that governments are already wholly felicitous with or subordinate to the interests of capital. Debord wanted more than a desperate plea for institutions of governance to reclaim long-lost regulatory and redistributive functions. After all, governments did not lose these functions in a battle against privatization, but rather, directly facilitated the privatization of the historically public functions of government. Debord was a revolutionary who had no hope for revolution in the classical sense of a mobilized proletariat organizing the takeover of state apparatuses. In the 1950s and 1960s, Marx's theory of revolution appeared to him impossible, flawed, and undesirable. But, if we reject both reformism and any classical or Marxian form of revolution, what position can we take? For Debord, it was precisely this problematic that guided his theorization of a situationist politics.

The realization that reformism is insufficient and that all the old revolutionary schemes are untenable reveals an impasse that must be brought into stark relief. We must recall that, in an era when Stalinism and totalitarianism were increasingly mistaken for communism, and capitalist societies managed to convincingly present themselves as the best of all possible worlds, revolutionary alternatives to capitalism appeared increasingly implausible, undesirable, and dangerous. In the decades after World War II, to the culminating events of 1989, it is not so much that capitalism prevailed in normative philosophical terms – that is, as the most moral and just political-economic order, but rather, that no other order seemed possible. In fact, 20th century decolonization opened up new discussions of "development" that began by presupposing the paradigm of development in the advanced capitalist societies of the global north. Still today, it is not an easy task to speak of development without all at once invoking urban centers like New York City and Paris as the units of measurement. That development could be something else is not at all a new idea (just ask any number of indigenous subsistence communities, as many anthropologists have done), but it is one that remains effectively trapped in highly specialized academic discussions of postcolonial

studies.[11] Hence, it is fair to say that within multifarious global political culture, even in so-called third world countries, revolutionary aspirations were marginal where they did persist, and dwindling everywhere.

What remained, then, were various discourses on reform, as the depoliticization of radical projects for social and political change were being reconsidered out of circulation. It is precisely within this context that Debord was different. He was different than the post-Marxist critical theorists who lamented the decline of individuality in the face of the standardization of the culture industry, which led thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to a general pessimism.[12] He was different than the existentialist philosophers who tapped into some of the same psychological and emotional crises of advanced capitalism, in that thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, for all their great differences over the question of political violence, did not start with society and politics, but arrived at these eventually (even if inevitably). Debord began with society, was optimistic in his early years and works, and conceived of his work within a very certain political framework. When, in 1992, Debord reflected on *The Society of the Spectacle*, he wrote that "This book should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society."[13] He always conceived of this work, and his works from the 1950s, as impetuses for (or precipitators of) contentious and creative social movements and many actually credit his work for inspiring, at least in part, the rebellion in Paris in May-June 1968. Debord's theory, indeed, prefigured the theory of radical democracy later fleshed out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, although these latter theorists acknowledge no debt to Debord, and perhaps do not have any direct cause to do so.[14]

Debord was the most prominent theorist of the Situationist International. His political philosophy provided the main impetus for the organization and movement of the SI from 1957 to 1972. He and the situationists combined ideas from Marxism and anarchism with a politics of civil disobedience and "cultural warfare." The name "situationist" derives from a foundational 1957 text by Debord in which he argued for the need to create or to seize situations that foster critique and rebellion where they would not otherwise occur.[15] Some situations, for example, in the revelation of betrayal or dishonesty, are more likely than others to give rise to critique and rebellion. Following the notion of creating or seizing situations as catalysts for critique and rebellion, Debord outlines what appear to be desperate and hopeful schemes, such as the radical redirection of architecture to produce "emotionally moving situations."[16] This was an unabashedly lofty proposition: *what if we could design a city*? Debord himself ultimately abandoned these recommendations, moving more towards analysis and farther from prescription in his later works.

But I would argue that, forgetting Debord's aspirations for architecture, there does remain a dire need for situations that foster critique. Civil society does not simply turn from privatism to political engagement, like an on/off switch, in response to convincing arguments for a robust public sphere. *Something has to happen*. And if we don't know how best to create such situations (and I do not profess to know), our ignorance is not tautological with a rejection of the fundamental thesis. Indeed, it would be a mistake to identify Debord's particular suggestions vis-à-vis architecture and avant-garde art as whimsical or impractical and thus to abandon the situationist position altogether. Abandonment of the situationist thesis is not just evidenced in Debord's own work, where beginning in 1967, and ultimately in the 1980s, he distanced himself from suggesting (without ever fully revoking) the possibility for the creation or seizure of situations. The situationist thesis is also abandoned in the biographical approach to studying Debord's work, which focuses more on his mysterious, charismatic personality, and his relationship to the May-June 1968 events in France, yet generally neglects the seriousness of his political theory. This seems to me a mistake, and that Debord's early notion of the construction of situations must be reconsidered instead of glossed over or thrown out.

Still, we need a better idea of Debord's understanding of capitalism and the particular capitalist societies that flourished after World War II. Debord's most incisive and complete portrait and analysis of highly technological post-World War II capitalist society appears in his work, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

The basic idea of a society of the spectacle rests on the claim that there is a causal relationship between dominant ideology and the general worldviews of everyday people. Debord's theory is, at its core, a theory of hegemony that must be clearly distinguished from that of Gramsci. According to Debord, the triumphant ideology of spectacular capitalism produces the worldviews of everyday people by determining what we *see* in the world, and indeed *how the world is physically constructed*. Our worldviews are not totally determined by the society of the spectacle; such totality would actually undermine spectacular society's own mythology of a wide range of freedom of choice. Thus, in addition to an ever-increasing field of particularized consumption patterns that distinguish our individuality and lifestyles, we can also adopt worldviews that embody the comprehensive doctrines of specific religions, or we are free to reject religion altogether.[17] Despite the diversity that comes from this field of choice, the fact is that we can only ever understand ourselves within the context of an already existing social, political, and economic environment, a world that we are born into and from which we cannot extricate our self-understandings – this is a basic sociological premise.

But what Debord presses us to consider beyond this premise is that we neither observe nor direct the formal construction of the world we turn up in, and because of this it is difficult to grasp that our world is a product of intentional design, that it is the material realization of particular ideologies. Debord holds that the world as we know it is ideology materialized, and yet that we typically mistake it for a kind of natural environment, with all of the neutrality of a forest into which wolves are born and raised. Surely, we insist that we're better than wolves, but we think that ideology is only carried around inside of our heads, that the world outside of our heads is as non-ideological as the wolves' forest. But spectacular society is not like the wolves' forest – it is not the organic outgrowth of (human) nature, and the environment we turn up in is always already ideological.

Nevertheless, the society of the spectacle is characterized by such sleights of hand, presenting, for example, economic activity as neutral and natural, as if the economic conditions of society did not reflect, and moreover protect, the interests and positions of the richest among us. But for Debord, the problem is not as simple as regulating the influence of powerholders (perhaps the most common reformist notion). The very architecture of our societies already reflects the aims of capitalists who oversee the investment and development of cities and suburbs. The infrastructure of a city, for example, from its fundamental layout and roadways, is designed to facilitate the commitments of powerholders, which are typically to business. Hence, what is needed is structural transformation, or, a revolutionary approach.

Debord observed:

> To want to redesign architecture to accord with the needs of the present massive and parasitical existence of private automobiles reflects the most unrealistic misapprehension of where the real problems lie. Instead, architecture must be transformed to accord with the whole development of the society, criticizing all the transitory values linked to obsolete forms of social relationships (in the first rank of which is the family).[18]

Debord's criticism here is based on the realization that an emphasis on consumption, on transforming the public into a market, or, on the depoliticization of the public sphere, is dangerous, but not only for the reasons laid out by Hannah Arendt, C. Wright Mills, and Jürgen Habermas. For Debord, the issue is not about the public's capacity to generate a communicative power that will either legitimate claims of democracy or throw them into question.[19] For Debord, the depoliticization of the public sphere, even in a Habermasian sense, destroys the social basis for a more radical questioning of the structures of capitalism.

As in much of the Continental philosophy of the period, the notion

of "instrumental reason" plays a major part in Debord's analysis. For example, all political discourses, if they want to be considered reasonable, must accept the premise that the existing party system in capitalist societies is more-or-less efficient and operational as is. "Reasonable persons" can dispute some of the features of the procedural apparatus and certainly the desirability of the differences between Democrats and Republicans on policy matters, but one becomes "unreasonable" almost immediately upon suggesting something more challenging than the partisan debate that characterizes the political news of the mass media.

In 1976 Noam Chomsky observed:

> To my knowledge, in the American mass media you cannot find a single journalist, not a single syndicated political commentator who is a socialist… Here in the United States there is an astonishing degree of ideological uniformity for such a complex country. Not a single socialist voice in the mass media, not even a timid one.[20]

He wrote this nearly 20 years after the second "Red Scare," roughly 14 years before the end of the Cold War, and today, over 35 years later, the observation remains an accurate description.[21] Chomsky also understood well the instrumentality of this discursive narrowness. "In a capitalist society the mass media are capitalist institutions. The fact that these institutions reflect the ideology of dominant economic interests is hardly surprising."[22] The result is that, to the rather far extent that the political conversation of a nation is delimited by the mass media, which is certainly farther than the influence of social movements and intellectuals in most countries, substantive challenges to the political system appear unreasonable. The disappearance of radical criticism is thus the logical outcome of a situation where "reasonable persons" want to engage in "reasonable debate" about the political affairs of the day.

In general, those who raise questions beyond the canon of a narrowly demarcated reasonable discourse are, by definition, unreasonable. Political positions that are marginalized or excluded from dominant political discourse are seen (or not seen, as it were), by virtue of their exclusion, as barely existing – *dominance confers both reality and reason*. Hegemonic discourses are therefore assumed to have already passed the test of rational-critical scrutiny. And invisibility, particularly in popular media, is assumed to be the result of a failed test, or worse, criminality. Debord observed "that much of the press deems guilty the person who would claim to not have to explain himself before their authority… the press gladly believes that all those who have access to this sort of celebrity of the moment want it, and indeed want it as often as possible."[23] In a sense, then, all that does not appear on television, radio, or in various other forms of news media, reflects a deficit of reason in the absent elements – hence,

Dennis Kucinich, Ron Paul, and Ralph Nader have politics that are not viable, that are impractical, their ideas ruled unreasonable. And, if such distinguished men as these are unreasonable, then *real* radicals who would never run for professional offices of political power must be insane.

"Reason," here, is recast from its classical meaning of morally sensible understanding. Whereas it was once a tautology that reasonable positions were morally justifiable, here reasonable positions are strictly "practical" in this sense: they are positions that are (or can be) wholly felicitous with the current state of affairs. This explains why Dennis Kucinich (and his contention that NAFTA is not an eternal given) is deemed unelectable from the start. Now, a good student of Debord would be quick to point out that Debord would have scant interest in a presidential election, and certainly, he would regard discussion about American elections as a diversion at best. But the example does illustrate Debord's broader point – that the only "reasonable" (i.e. felicitous, electable) options are those unchallenging enough to be immediately practical, and such options are guaranteed to stop dismally short.

Debord anticipates the objection that the society of the spectacle offers a satisfactory range of viable choices. But this gets to the heart of the problem of the society of the spectacle, *our contentment with existing options*. Our belief that democracy is more or less finished implies that there is no need to struggle for more democracy, thus any and all schemes for more radical social and political transformation are misguided at best. So rebellion is no longer "crazy" only because it is daring, for it is also "crazy" from a clinical standpoint, as rebels appear unstable, delusional, paranoid, and unreasonable.

The triumph of this way of thinking has had the material effect of stabilizing the political system of spectacular society; the mal-distribution of political power and wealth can be consolidated without any system instability. And importantly for Debord, this stability is an achievement maintained in and by the physical layout of our living spaces:

> At the technological level, when images chosen and constructed by *someone else* have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself, it has certainly not been forgotten that these images can tolerate anything and everything; because within the same image all things can be juxtaposed without contradiction. The flow of images carries everything before it, and it is similarly someone else who controls at will this simplified summary of the sensible world; who decides where the flow will lead as well as the rhythm of what should be shown, like some perpetual, arbitrary surprise, leaving no time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it.[24]

So we have come to accept that we are spectators in our society, and that the functions of government do not depend on or correspond to our input. But what we regard as the "natural environment" of modern society is not politically neutral. Our social world is not an accident of human nature. The paths that unfold before us in life, the routes we can take, both in a figurative and a literal sense, reflect the ideological position of those who have architected society for their own interest. Everything from the building of roadways for the facilitation of consumption, to city planning, to the privatizing of public space through advertising reveals that the construction of our world is directed by capital.

To this, there is the obvious and important rejoinder of "so what?" Indeed, it is commonly held that capitalism depends on markets, so in fact, the people *do* direct capitalism. But this line makes the mistake of viewing people as consumers instead of as citizens, or of not seeing much of a difference between the two. Citizenship, throughout much of the history of philosophy, was an agonistic conception, and civic engagement could not be satisfied through the conscientious shopping of individuals. "This society tends to atomize people into isolated consumers and to prohibit communication. Everyday life is thus private life, the realm of separation and spectacle."[25] We are subordinated in all pursuits to the overarching need to follow selected patterns of consumption and obedience which are more or less the same across all ideological lines – all reasonable people, that is, whether they agree with each other or not, chart their course as one kind of consumption and obedience or another. Hence to *be* an environmentalist does not require collective action, nor even, talking to another human being. One can achieve the noble goal by driving to the hardware store, purchasing compact fluorescent light bulbs, and driving home to install them.

We have generally come to believe that there is no end that is both desirable and reasonable which cannot be obtained within our society as it is currently structured. This is tantamount to the preemption of radical criticism. "In this concrete experience of permanent submission lies the psychological origin of such general acceptance of what is; an acceptance which comes to find in it, *ipso facto*, a sufficient value."[26] This "general acceptance of what is" is the greatest achievement of the society of the spectacle – it signals the subversion of both democratization and other, more radical aspirations. Anyone who seeks a fundamentally different society is apparently unaware of the possibilities ready at hand, so those who dream for a different world are far worse than dreamers. Indeed, the conservatism of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott regarding revolutionary aspirations no longer describes the conservative disposition alone.[27] Their critique of rebellion and revolution is now held in common by most people who live in spectacular societies around the world. We can

hardly imagine living up to, or even trying to live up to, the standards for scrutiny established by Immanuel Kant and those for rebellion established by John Locke.[28] Locke's ideas, even as transposed into America's Declaration of Independence, have come to appear as wild statements of radicalism that are far too inviting of social and political upheaval.

For Debord, any politics that seeks to engender a critique of existing society depends on an understanding of the politics of appearances:

> The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force.[29]

In other words, we do not live in an unreal world that is deceiving us into thinking it is real – there is no hidden, real society buried behind a façade of illusions. The society we live in is the society that exists, and the appearance of our world, the way it is architected, is not an effort to distort reality, it is the architecture of *reality itself*. Debord does not view our existence in a highly consumerist culture, in a society with increasingly privatized and withdrawn citizens, as a society that lacks reality, although it is one that lacks a degree of authenticity and critical legitimacy. What I mean by lacking authenticity and critical legitimacy is that society is imposed onto people, not created by them, and that it is accepted as such rather than interrogated. The society of the spectacle cannot be torn down so that we can see what is behind it, like old wallpaper or carpeting. *The problem is not that our reality is unreal, or hyperreal, as Baudrillard argued, but rather, that it is not of our own making.*[30]

But the spectacle, as Debord puts it, is also "a weltanschauung that has been actualized," a worldview transposed into the very architecture of our cities and towns, ideology materialized. What is this worldview and whose is it? It is the view that everything worth fighting for is achievable within the existing system, that capitalism can satisfy every need and desire. Clearly then, this worldview originates with those privileged enough within the political-economic structure that such satisfaction is indeed the case (in business, politics, and military). For everyone else, this worldview conditions both passive and active acceptance of the manifold of lifestyle options offered under capitalism, and rules out the destabilization of existing hierarchical structures and any scheme for the redistribution or decentralization of wealth and power. As Debord observed, "We adapt ourselves, with a few variations, into the network of possible itineraries. We get used to it, it seems."[31] Even the most impoverished sectors of the society can be brought to support the existing division of labor and distribution of wealth and power, and they can even be roused to spirited

defenses of systematic practices that disadvantage them. In the US, lack of support for the estate tax (or death tax) is only one such example of this phenomenon. So the prevailing ideology is represented everywhere, even within the thinking of those who are most disadvantaged by that ideology.

Debord's theory of the spectacle therefore serves as an important part of the explanation as to why there are no revolutionary movements in the most highly technological capitalist societies. Everything that we see in our lived experience, everything that is visible to us, invites us to satisfy our needs and desires through lifestyle and consumer choices. We go to the museum to view avant-garde art as an object of consumption, even when the art, as with Dadaist art, was supposed to provoke political action and not passing awe.[32] Artworks that were once shot at by conservative students are today intriguing curiosities that fill a gap in our knowledge of art history, a knowledge coveted by bourgeois intellectuals.[33] Even films that could change the outcome of an election, like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, win wide acclaim, numerous awards, make millions of dollars, and fail to inspire any real threat to the political system.

Capitalism is everywhere presented, from education to advertising and political punditry, as a prerequisite for democracy, or as the same thing as democracy, or as something that necessitates democratization. Certainly this side alone exists for our neoliberal economists. But in principle, capitalism has no substantive or procedural need for democracy. That is, businesses demand the right to be free to act without requiring a referendum from the people through elections, and there is no serious expectation that corporations are or even should be democratically steered by citizens, or accountable to anything other than shareholders and investment interests. In fact, there is much evidence that the evolution of capitalism in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries brought about a decline of democracy in both substantive and procedural terms.[34] Now, Debord was not solely concerned with democracy because, like Marx, he understood that many would fight for democracy without opposing capitalism. However, if what we mean by democracy is what Habermas means – that is, not formal procedures, but a substantive culture of democracy in a robustly participatory public sphere – then Debord wants democracy indeed. The notion of radical or substantive democracy is resonant with his position.

Debord observed that reciprocity with powerholders and democratic steering only exist as convincing illusions in capitalist societies, an illusion upheld by emphasis on the procedural aspects of democracy to the exclusion of a deeper, more meaningful sense. A key part of making such illusions convincing is achieved in the deep structural and superficial architecture of capitalist societies – societies full of robust lifestyle choices,

formal mechanisms of democracy, and a multiplicity of opinions in the public sphere. But the layout of housing and neighborhoods, for example, which reflects the priorities of developers and city-planners, destabilizes this claim. Trains always run into the parts of the city that are always open for business, yet they travel more slowly into the residential neighborhoods of impoverished workers. And if one side of town is dilapidated and neglected, while another side is well-kempt, bright, and clean, this does not represent the interests of the people living in the dilapidated part. Rather, it reflects the interests of those with wealth and decision-making power. As Debord puts it, "Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development towards absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into *its own peculiar décor*."[35] Hence, far from seeing the city as a hub for critical artistic and intellectual activity, Debord sees the city as the ultimate materialization of spectacular capitalism.

Indeed, much can be gleaned from reading the appearance and architecture of capitalist societies. The whole visual landscape of society, from billboards and entertainment to the demarcation of public spaces attests to this. The ultimate irony of the spectacle is that, through our complicity, we choose and reaffirm this society as it is, and we remake the spectacle every moment we accept it. Indeed, we can hardly find footing within our society to object to it:

> The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' The attitude it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.[36]

According to this, lack of interest in revolution does not signify extant satisfaction with society, but rather, the general acceptance of a false claim. This false claim, that upward mobility is always ready at hand, that the evolution of human society inevitably tends towards the general improvement, is supported and maintained by a monopolization of the realm of appearances that always presents it as true. We are reassured, then, not just by texts and our own concrete experiences, but also by the visual landscape of a society oriented around consumption, that whatever we want is already in, or just beyond, our immediate reach.

Debord sums up the culmination of this predicament well: "With all their 'upward mobility' they have lost the little they had and gained what no one wanted. They share poverties and humiliations from all past systems of exploitation without sharing in the revolts against those systems."[37] The spectacle has thus developed on two converging tracks –

(and this intersection is itself architected and maintained by capitalism) – the increasing impoverishment of people and monopolization of power that I catalogued in the overview at the start of this section (2.1) meets with and is protected by the extinguishment of the revolutionary aspirations of past generations. In short, spectacular capitalism keeps up exploitation, while keeping down revolt.

2.2 REVOLUTIONARY ALTERNATIVES TO REVOLUTION

Debord placed none of his revolutionary aspirations in Marxist crisis theory. Capitalism is not the unstable system that Marx thought it would inevitably prove itself to be. Instead, capitalism has developed ways to provide capitalist alternatives to itself. If regulation is the problem, then we can deregulate, and if deregulation poses new unforeseen problems in the future, we can reregulate in novel ways. If corporations need more rights, we can establish their legal personhood and protect them as citizens. If monopoly is a problem, we can invoke competition and apply antitrust laws. Even if real capital is itself a problem, capitalists can develop new instruments of monetary representation, such as credit, and usher in an era of finance capitalism. An oil spill or war, it is well known, can be a boon. If a hurricane decimates a city, businessmen can find new investment and development opportunities. In short, any of the predictive power that the Marxist model of historical materialism might have possessed has been obliterated, and we must now accept a far more modest, explanatory version of the theory. On top of all of this is the effective management of our preferences – the whole normative and technical apparatus of instrumental reason discussed above – that convinces us that whatever is not yet perfected will soon be.

From such a starting point as this, revolutionary theory and praxis must either be (a) given up completely or (b) broken off from its articulated preconditions in socialist philosophy. I do not consider (a) here because it already represents the default position of spectacular capitalism. If you prefer path (a), you can simply close this book and join the consensus of the respected and "reasonable" men of the news industry and the state. For those who remain, I shall now engage the problematic of path (b).

Exploitation can, as it turns out, exacerbate the great disparities of wealth and property that deform the opportunity structure of society, without giving rise to the rebelliousness of the oppressed. Class analysis continues to be useful in stratified societies, which is to say that it continues to be useful everywhere; yet the classes it analyzes have abandoned such analysis of themselves. Class consciousness was always a problem, as it

already was for Marx when he discussed the "illusory community" in *The German Ideology*.[38] After Marx made it into an issue, however, the world passed through a century of relatively heightened class consciousness. But now we seem to have come out on the other side with even less of it than before. Beyond all of this, and surely contributing to it, social movements, dissent, philosophy, and even the force of oppositional material events themselves, rarely rise to the level of antagonistic antitheses. In fact, spectacular capitalism offers each one of them a warm invitation, knowing full well that it is prepared to take advantage of the opportunities its opponents create, or to surpass the challenges as a matter of scale, without any real threat to the existing order. Hence, Debord undermines essential premises in Marx's and much post-Marxist theory, from the materialism of Marx himself to the reemergence of the importance of ideology and consciousness in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, and Louis Althusser.

In light of this, Debord argued that "situations" need to be created in which unexpected criticism and rebellion can take flight, to spur on cultural warfare in the superstructures (which, for Debord, are embodied in the structures) of society. But such a politics must culminate in organization and collective action and cannot be effective if actions are individualist and sporadic. So when Debord observed the Watts Riot, a tumultuous five day riot in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in August 1965, he optimistically hoped for a situation, an event that might set the stage for some kind of sustained contestation.[39] It is not simply that we must wait for situations, for we can also make them. Art could play a role in this. It should be provocative and aspire to arouse. Debord insisted that "[t]he arts of the future can be nothing less than disruptions of situations."[40] We should not, therefore, take a repertory approach to "remaking" Dada art, but rather strive to create a new form of art that can incite critique and rebellion where it would not otherwise occur.

As a socialist, Debord agreed with Cornelius Castoriadis in his distrust of any institutional form of socialism maintained by governments that claim to represent the working class. In "Socialism or Barbarism," written in 1949, Castoriadis argues that the proletariat faced a new oppressor after the Russian Revolution and World War II. In addition to bourgeois capitalism, there was now a form of "bureaucratic capitalism" masquerading as a kind of socialism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.[41] Debord, likewise, was a critic of the purportedly socialist states of the 20th century, arguing that they were more clearly bureaucratic capitalist than socialist, and that they actually subordinated the most defining features of socialist philosophy to the interests of nationalist bureaucracy. On the Stalinist annihilation of Marx's internationalism, for example, Debord wrote:

> Internationalism could never be embraced by the bureaucracy save as a deceptive slogan serving its real interests, as one *ideological* self-justification among others, for bureaucratic society is, precisely, proletarian community *turned on its head*. The bureaucracy is in essence a form of power founded on the possession of a national state, and it must ultimately bow to the logic of that reality in accordance with the particular interests imposed by the stage of development of the country that it controls. Its heroic period passes with the halcyon days of the ideology of 'socialism in one country', which Stalin took such good care to uphold as he proceeded to destroy revolutions in China (1927) or Spain (1937).[42]

Here, Debord is criticizing so-called socialist states on the grounds of their deep betrayal of the very people they claim to represent *and* derive their legitimacy from. Marx warned throughout his writings – most sharply in the *Manifesto* and *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – that socialist revolutions and communism could never be national in substance. In the passage above, Debord vindicates Marx's warnings about nationalism making reference to the real emergence of nationalist bureaucracies that called themselves communist in the 20th century. These bureaucracies produced a complete inversion of the socialist philosophy and a nightmare for proletarians around the world.

In many ways, Stalinism reveals the worst dangers of representation justified by ideology. But we must keep in mind that this yarn could just as easily be spun to describe Debord's feelings about capitalist democracies. Democratic leaders in capitalist societies must play the part of officials governing in a representative system, much the same as the Stalinists pretended to do with the proletariat. But they are both actors in this regard. Despite real differences over the question of state administration of capitalist production and the market economy, they both hold a "form of power founded on the possession of a national state," which they protect and reproduce through nationalist bureaucracies.

It is fitting here to point this out because, like Castoriadis, Debord is simultaneously opposed to the bureaucratic capitalism of so-called socialist states *and* to the free market capitalism of capitalist states. Hence, his analysis leaves him at odds with reformist measures of democratization that are felicitous with capitalism, *and also* at odds with classical revolutionary schemes. Thus, Debord does not have any optimism about (1) some form of mobilized revolutionary class, (2) some form of crisis that could not be averted by capitalism, and (3) the ascendancy of some kind of truly representative institution of governance. Where then does this leave him? Debord argues for the necessity of a revolutionary transformation of society, and yet he does not think a singular revolutionary class can bring it about, he does not think capitalism will

undermine itself, and he does not trust representative structures. He must therefore theorize revolutionary alternatives to classical conceptions of revolution. Debord's answer was a situationist politics, proposed as revolutionary, although not in a Marxian sense. But ultimately, when his hopes and efforts were frustrated, he ended with up with far more despair than he started with (reflected in his writings from the 1980s).

Without revolutionary delusions of grandeur, and without any optimism for reform, something in between, or something beyond, is called for. And it must betray dichotomous thinking about revolution and reform. This is part of the reason why Debord was attracted to certain strains of anarchism (albeit in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways), and why many anarchists have felt such an affinity with him. There was a sense that something profound had to happen, but that envisioning idealized end states was a recipe for disaster. Still, Debord's affinity with anarchism has never been more than that; post-World War II anarchism has grown increasingly individualist in its orientation (unlike the social anarchism of the Gilded Age up to World War I), and Debord founded an "International" on the Marxist understanding that any opponent to capitalism would have to match it in scale, that is, would have to be organized internationally, and on an ongoing basis. Anarchism in the 1960s and afterward, for example, has more and more favored individualist and sporadic political action, or disengagement, whereas Debord issued warnings against this. This aspect of his theory is most commonly overlooked and/or misunderstood.

Perhaps the clearest way to explain Debord's situationist politics is to consider it a problematization of the famous eleventh thesis in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. In that thesis, Marx states: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[43] Debord certainly thought that "the point" of his work was to change the world, but he rejected the opposition between *interpretation* and *change*. Interpretation is often all we have to deconstruct prevailing worldviews, and prevailing worldviews can go far towards determining political action and change. Marx was, of course, as in *The German Ideology*, attacking a particular paradigm for understanding the world, the idealism of Hegel, and the notion that what humans think maps out over how things are in the world. He wanted to shift the focus from ideas to actions, from interpretation to change. But ideas and interpretations provide the pretext for war, for genocide, for "ethnic cleansing," and for a cavalcade of other atrocities. Instrumental notions of "the other" are exploited to make collateral damage "acceptable" and to impede the development of cosmopolitan solidarity. If, for example, you can cast a group of people as subhuman, uncivilized, or intractable enemies, you can pave the way for brutalizing or killing them. This insight was well understood by Hitler and

his administration, and has been horrifically played out all over the world, as in the war in Eastern Bosnia in the 1990s, and the various wars on terrorism and "illegal aliens." Indeed, people and governments do or do not act because of their interpretation of the world.

We accept situations that we interpret as acceptable. And furthermore, since what we see is what we interpret, the appearance of our society matters. A situationist politics consists largely in creating situations, through visual art, film, performances, and other innovative demonstrations, that shift peoples' interpretation of the world away from its acceptance. As Debord put it "we believe that the world must be changed…Our concern is precisely the use of certain means of action, along with the discovery of new ones that may more easily be recognized in the sphere of culture and manners but that will be implemented with a view to interaction with global revolutionary change."[44]

2.3 RECONSIDERING SITUATIONIST PRAXIS

Debord argued that we must create situations, unexpected ruptures, in order to allow for a minor goal and a major goal: the minor goal is to reach people on an emotional level with situations that create moments of raw feeling and thought; the major goal is to create situations that open up a space for criticism and collective action:

> We must try to construct situations, i.e., collective environments, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment… We must introduce everywhere a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture; coordinate all the enquiries that are happening at this moment without a general perspective; orchestrate, through criticism and propaganda, the most progressive artists and intellectuals of all countries to make contact with us with a view to joint action.[45]

In the foundational texts of the SI, and throughout his correspondences from 1957 to 1962, Debord encouraged artists to make art that was both provocative and political, and to see their work as part of an international movement that makes the case for a critical opposition to society as it exists. By "artist," he does not mean any narrow definition. Authors, activists, musicians, teachers, and everyday people engaged in conversation can take up the aim of the subversion of the ruling culture. Simply put, Debord was interested in politicizing sub-cultures, transforming them into counter-cultures, and counter-cultures that self-identify as part of a larger political movement.

Certainly, Debord's notion of revolution is atypical. When he speaks of a "revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture," that is organized "without a general perspective" he means that we should consider revolution as a never-ending process of critique that destabilizes dominant

ideology. We do not need to have thick, highly particularized ideological agreement among ourselves, and we ought not to try to agree about some idealized end-state. The more difficult task, and the most important one, is to bring together those who share a normative commitment to remaking society in a radical democratic manner, and to create an organized and growing international network of people working for alternative interpretations of the world.

For Debord, there is no real division between idealism and materialism. What actually happens has been prepared by what some people think should happen. You can read material reality as a kind of text, reading the ideology that predominates in your social world in what you see around you. People think capitalism works because all that we actually see in the society of the spectacle is evidence of its working or of its working itself out for the better. Counter examples are interpreted out of debate and quickly debunked. As one common interpretation goes, the single mother who works 85 hours a week and still can't make ends meet is not working hard enough. A situationist approach might seize upon opportunities (or try to construct situations directly) in which this ideological narrative against "welfare mothers" could be undermined, not for the sake of defending liberal social programs, but rather, for the sake of breaking the mythology of spectacular capitalism. If one cannot change material reality directly, then perhaps one can change how reality is interpreted, and alternate interpretations can reveal the desirability of courses of action that were previously discounted.

Debord's work, already in the 1950s, was paving the way for the "culture-jamming" and *AdBusters* conception of politics that today has some traction and resonance. *AdBusters* is a magazine that covers a kind of movement directly inspired by Debord's work. It covers and encourages culture-jamming, which involves the often illegal and always creative alteration of existing messages encountered in our social environment – from graffiti, to the alteration of billboards to make statements contrary to their original intent, to high-risk performance art, culture-jamming is a politics of saying different things in the public sphere, radical and rousing things, shocking things, and by almost any means necessary. This method, in fact, was outlined by Debord in the 1950s and given the name "détournement."[46] Détournement calls for activists to use whatever is ready at hand, materials that are already visible in the world, to present a critique that undermines the intended or ruling ideology. This is certainly a part of the work of *AdBusters*. At the same time, however, Debord's work provides the grounds for a critique of such visual-discursive projects as *AdBusters*. He would view a magazine that sporadically organizes and inspires people to engage in détournement as tepid at best, and even more so when détournement is itself ultimately presented as art, and not as a

component of the repoliticization of revolutionary projects. Moreover, and as I have said, Debord never underestimated the need for collective action on an international scale.

> Self-emancipation in our time is emancipation from the material bases of an inverted truth. This 'historic mission to establish truth in the world' can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but – only and always – by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of a realized democracy – to councils in which practical theory exercises control over itself and surveys its own action. It cannot be carried out, in other words, until individuals are 'directly bound to universal history'; until dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world.[47]

There are a number of observations to make in light of the above passage. First, economic and educational inequality, deficits in substantive democracy, exclusion of radical discourses, the instrumental determination of the reasonable, and the further consolidation of historic socio-economic stratifications, are certain facts. And yet, each of them is brought about and maintained by the triumph of the false claim that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Thus, because the acceptance of this false claim leads to the aversion of revolutionary politics writ large, critique is the only (or indispensably the first) revolutionary inroad. We must, as Gramsci has argued, fight a war of position, a war of ideas, because ideas guide events no less than events guide ideas.[48] Thus far, Debord's special innovation is obscure. To bring this into focus, Debord insists on adding to "ideas" and "events" the third term of "appearances." Appearances are not neutral in a world that has been architected by capitalism, and "appearances" are a vehicle for ideas and for particular interpretations of events. In architecture, for example, we readily comprehend that the "event" of the building is the execution of the "idea" of the builder. We need to look at society, and the social terrain on which we interact, as this kind of construction. Following this, revolutionary thinking understands that it cannot simply write and speak and redeploy the model of protest demonstrations, leaving the management of all appearances and the administration of public space up to people in positions of power. To deal with the roots is to deal with the terrain, for the roots are just underneath.

Debord acknowledges that his concept of revolution is not a fast track to social and political change, admitting that "a critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must ***know how to bide its time***."[49] Nevertheless, he gives critique, the vehicle for getting the truth out, a primary role. Debord appears here as a kind of highly contentious Kantian. Kant was also suspicious of revolution in terms of a frontal assault taking the state,

and touted instead the public use of reason as the only route to enlightenment.[50] But Debord is not seeking enlightenment or any other definite end state, and he does not limit critique (as Kant does) to reading, writing, and speaking, and this is what makes his public use of reason more contentious. By contrast to Kant's "civil" and legal approach to public reasoning, Debord held that "nothing of importance has ever been communicated by being gentle with a public, not even one like that of the age of Pericles; and in the frozen mirror of the screen the spectators are not looking at anything that might suggest the respectable citizens of a democracy."[51]

So what does Debord want? While he is rightly hesitant to detail any particular end state, he does identify a direction, which he calls "realized democracy."[52] Realized democracy is not elections, scheduled by the state, with the issues decided by candidates who all agree that our world is the only one worth having. Rather, Debord envisions a council format of direct democracy that is always subject to the scrutiny of a critical and participatory public. He calls, finally, for dialogue to "take up arms and to impose its own conditions upon the world."[53] What this means is that the critical discourses of those who oppose the society of the spectacle must assume an antagonistic stance, because they must expect to be marginalized, discounted, or wholly neglected. Hence, we must impose ourselves on the world – force our perspective into the public sphere. And this imposing, even though forceful, is not contrary to the impulse for democracy, but rather, it is an action towards the realization of democracy that counters exclusion. In other words, what are most urgently needed are innovative forms of protest that look nothing like a protest demonstration. Social movements that take on surprising forms rather than expected and recycled ones must be conceived and organized. In the society of the spectacle, forms of protest from earlier generations have become an acceptable feature of the landscape of capitalism. New forms of contestation must be introduced in such a way that they cannot be ignored.

With regard to political art, he argued that we "need to publicize, elucidate and develop these initial gestures of the forthcoming revolutionary era. They can be recognized by the fact that they concentrate in themselves new forms of struggle and a new content (whether latent or explicit): the critique of the existing world."[54] Debord would have seen *AdBusters* as a good sentiment, but as something that needed to move well beyond the reading public for a magazine. Though they have tried, their resonance has been less in politics than in publishing and design. Debord surely would have appreciated the Mexican Zapatistas and their approach more. Their dangerous armed street theater, recasting of rebellion, media savvy, poetic polemics and rousing communiqués, and mysterious self-

presentation were essential to their ability to effectively thematize old issues in a new way; the Zapatistas both sustained and proliferated a critique that had been hermetically sealed in the margins of Mexican politics up to that point.

Political action must move beyond the conventionally textual (slogans, statements, manifestos, protest messages) to the visual level. Debord was already well aware in the 1950s that social movements would have to find new ways of "speaking." Mass demonstrations adorned by picket signs are as easy to ignore as they are noncontroversial. And the triumph of pacifist discourses on the Left has made the political action of the Left more or less felicitous with powerholders. Rather than having to concern themselves with the suppression of truly challenging subsets of civil society, governments are now assured by their own opponents that a predictable mode of nonviolence, cooperation, and petitioning shall characterize their attacks. Social movements now "challenge" powerholders while guaranteeing them safety.[55]

This seems to me very compelling. But Debord did not have as compelling an answer for *how* to supersede conventional speech-based action effectively. While this is hardly a problem for a theory that does not want to delimit the parameters of creativity, his aspirations for artists strike me as being rather severely undermined by the tenuous existence of "unsuccessful" artists and the bourgeois appropriation of all art that reaches any vast audience (including even the Dadaists). Revolutionary works must resist cooptation, and they imply a great personal risk by definition. While Debord's particular hope for the Situationist International was squelched, the general problematic, the impasse of needing to create unignorable situations and fissures, still remains. And this impasse, so rigorously diagnosed by Debord, and still so far from sufficient consideration, is precisely what will have to be overcome if any radical transformation of society is possible. But in 1961 Debord was optimistic about changing the world, stating that he had "no doubt that those who day after day produce it [the world] against themselves can appropriate it for themselves."[56] The first task is critique aimed at undermining the actualized weltanschauung, and any critique fit for this challenge must be surprising. How, exactly, to do this, is up to us.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, (Vintage Books, 1968), p. 391.
2. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Anatomy of Autonomy," (Semiotext(e), 1980), pp. 167-168. Cited in Lotringer and Marazzi, eds., 2007.
3. Among the countless places where Baudrillard rejects normative political theory, is in *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, where he writes: "It is no longer a matter here of philosophical morality of the sort that says 'the world isn't what it ought to be' or 'the world isn't what it was'... things are no longer anything but what they are and, such as they are, they are unbearable" (Berg, 2005, p. 26). For Baudrillard, within this notion of the "unbearability" of the world, there is certainly a kind of normativity, a critical view that borrows from Marxism. However, according to Baudrillard, the world can only be understood, or investigated, in various ways, or endured, but never effectively intervened in by any political praxis.
4. The terminology of "global north" and "global south" does not refer to an even dividing line across the globe that runs along the equator. Rather, it refers to a rather crooked line that separates most of the world's northern regions from most of the world's southern regions, even though Australia and New Zealand are found on the southern part of the globe. Global north and global south terminology means to provide more of a figurative than a literal conceptual framework intended to bring growing global disparities in wealth, military, and political power into sharp contrast.
5. UNDP: Human Development Report 2005, Summary, p.17.
6. UNDP: Human Development Report 2005, Summary, p.18.
7. UNDP: Human Development Report 2006, Summary, p. 11.
8. UNDP: Human Development Report 1999, p. 34.
9. I reference UNDP reports from 1999 to 2006, not because things got better in 2007, 2008, and 2009 (in fact, the opposite is true). However, the 2007/2008 UNDP report focuses on climate change and the 2009 UNDP report focuses on human mobility and migrations.
10. Guy Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International* (June 1957-August 1960), (Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 191, 233.
11. For two excellent theories of development that do not assume a western capitalist form, see Frantz Fanon's classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove, 1963), and Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
12. Herbert Marcuse was an optimistic exception among the Frankfurt School critical theorists.
13. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Zone Books, 1999), p. 10.
14. See Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 1985).
15. Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," (1957).
16. Ibid., 45.
17. Freedom of religion, it must be acknowledged, is always constrained to some extent, and more or less depending on where and when one is born. And sometimes religious transgressions come with very serious cultural, political, and personal stakes.
18. Debord, "Situationist Theses on Traffic," Thesis # 4 in *Situationist*

International Anthology, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
19. Arendt (1958, 1969), Mills (1956, 1959), Habermas (1962, 1973).
20. Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate On Human Nature* (The New Press, 2006), p.75.
21. The syndicated columnist Ted Rall, while not a socialist, is a rather notable exception today.
22. Chomsky, op. cit., p. 76.
23. Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*, (TamTam Books, 2001), pp. 46-47.
24. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, (Verso, 1998), pp. 27-28.
25. Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life" in *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 93.
26. *Comments*, op. cit., p. 28.
27. Burke (1790), Oakeshott (1962).
28. Kant (1784), Locke (1690).
29. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, pp. 12-13, Thesis # 5. "Weltanschauung" means worldview.
30. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana University Press, 1991), *Simulacra & Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).
31. Debord, "Critique of Separation" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p.38.
32. I am referring here to the presentation of Dada art in 2006 at The Museum of Modern Art in NYC.
33. Dada artists aimed to upset the bourgeoisie and rouse a social movement. People were actually so angry with Dada art that they chased Dadaist performers offstage and shot at work by Man Ray and Kurt Schwitters.
34. See Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Habermas (1962, 1973, 2001), Mills (1959), Parenti (1974), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Tsai (2007).
35. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis # 169, p. 121.
36. Ibid., Thesis # 12, p. 15.
37. Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p. 135.
38. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* in *The Portable Marx* (Viking Penguin, 1983), p. 193.
39. See Debord's "The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy" in *A Sick Planet* (Seagull Books, 2008).
40. Debord, "Howls for Sade" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p. 2.
41. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings, Volume 1, 1946-1955* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
42. Debord, "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China" in *A Sick Planet* (Seagull Books, 2008), p. 40.
43. Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach in *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 145.
44. Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations" in *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 29.
45. Ibid., pp. 46-47, and p. 50.
46. See, for example, Debord, "A User's Guide to Détournement" in *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
47. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis # 221, p. 154.

48. See *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916 - 1935*, (NYU Press, 2000), p. 223.
49. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis # 220, p. 154.
50. See Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1784).
51. Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p. 133.
52. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis # 221, p. 154.
53. Ibid.
54. Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art" in *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 403.
55. To be clear, my comment on pacifism here is by no means an endorsement of violence. A discussion of violence, and what it is, is necessary. But that discussion is too large to take up here. For the time being, it will have to suffice to say that capitalism stipulates violence in a very peculiar way, often removing the person and his or her physical and psychological well being from the equation. For example, damaging property, or even an advertisement in the subway station, can be and has been characterized as "violent" – any act that violates law, regardless of whether or not it is harmful, can be classified as violent, or is at least seen as departing from acceptable norms and approaching the domain of violence. This is not, however, necessarily true, as can be seen in Hannah Arendt's excellent essay *On Violence* (Harvest, 1969). For another excellent starting point for a discussion on violence, see Georg Lukács' essay "Legality and Illegality" in *History and Class Consciousness* (The MIT Press, 1988).
56. Debord, "Critique of Separation" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p. 31.

Chapter 3: Socialism and Radical Philosophy

Because the power of the proletariat has been realized nowhere in the world, some conclude that Marxism has been left behind by the fact that we can no longer ask whether "anyone today is still a Marxist." This is to suppose that the accounts of Marxism are closed and that, since it was not realized in institutions, it has nothing more to teach us... We realize that after breathing the suffocating philosophy of the Commissar for so long, he is happy to leave it. What we understand less is that he blames Marxism for it and in so doing rejects Marxism itself. – MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, 1947[1]

Perhaps you will say "Are you sure that your story is the real one?" But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am? – CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, 1869[2]

In this chapter, I shall bring the work of Guy Debord to bear directly on the project of critically rethinking prevailing narratives on the fate of socialism in the twentieth century and beyond. There are critical differences between the spectacle of socialism (or socialism as ideology), on the one hand, and socialism as philosophy or political theory, on the other. While the spectacle of socialism is *real* in material and ideological terms, it is *not* really socialist. On this basis, I contend that the future of any socialist politics depends, at least in the first instance, on philosophy. I aim to show, not only how Debord's work helps us to see the revolutionary value of philosophy and political theory, but also, how his ideas on situationist praxis can help us to think through current impasses for political action.

3.1 SOCIALIST SPECTACLE AND PHILOSOPHY

> Revolutionary theory is the domain of danger, the domain of uncertainty; it is forbidden to people who crave the sleep-inducing certainties of ideology, including even the official certainty of being the strict enemies of all ideology... When the revolution is still a long way off, the difficult task for revolutionary organization is above all *the practice of theory*.[3]

Various imposters have played the part of socialism in the short twentieth century (1914–1989).[4] And wherever such imposters were not self-consciously playing a role with the help of an ideological script, still, the appearance of socialism has been more important than its substantive basis in the world. Images, and often not in pictures, of socialism and socialist revolutions, were instrumental to competing goals. On the one hand, the framework of "socialism versus capitalism" served to mobilize and inspire international solidarity. The most hopeful aspirations in the struggles of labor and in the work of socialist authors and revolutionists took flight within this vital mood of solidarity and possibility. On the other hand, the very same framework set the stage for a triumphalist discourse about capitalism and the horrors of communism.

In reference to the Stalinist bureaucracy, Debord wrote that

> they have to play the part of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they are actors faithful to the text of ideological betrayal. Yet their effective participation in this counterfeit being has to be perceived as *real.* No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to present himself as the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the official truth of the bureaucracy is that the bureaucracy does not exist.[5]

Here, Debord contends that accepting the ideological text of socialism casts certain realities under the so-called communist regimes of the twentieth century as logical impossibilities that must be edited out of the picture. So, the most egregious violations of republican principles may in fact occur under various "peoples' republics," but such violations are denied by definition, as well as by official pronouncements from the state. An illustration of this can be seen also in the United States, where we often project ourselves (in cultural and political terms) as a beacon of democracy to the world. To suggest that America may not be a democracy in substantive or even in procedural terms (and the latter has recently been claimed in the scandals of contested elections) appears impossible because it is incompatible with the projected image of American democracy.

In the so-called communist countries, it wasn't only capitalists (or proto-capitalists) and disempowered elites who became political prisoners,

but also intellectual critics, poor people, and open socialists. Anarchists in Russia were often imprisoned, monitored, and restricted in their use of public speaking and the press, as Lenin felt that free speech was "a bourgeois notion. There can be no free speech in a revolutionary period."[6] Lenin had good reasons for this, for he did have many prospective allies who were not yet on his side. But this instinct, to contain and preempt antagonistic tendencies for the sake of bureaucratic control, was not only criticized by anarchists but also by communists like Cornelius Castoriadis who expressed intense hostility towards anarchism.

Using Debord's term, socialism existed as a "spectacle." This is essential for a precise reading of Debord, since many who study his most popular work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, falsely conclude that the spectacle is a function of highly technological capitalist societies alone. But for Debord, the critique of capitalism can be found also within the critique of so-called communist regimes. Like Castoriadis, Debord saw the opposition between the US and the USSR as an opposition between free market capitalism (in the US) and bureaucratic or state controlled capitalism (in the USSR).[7]

This helps us to answer the question, "If not communism, what was it?" Rather than an opposition between capitalism and communism, there was in fact a standoff between two distinct forms of capitalism, where the free market version wins out in the end. This more fitting alternate reading of the twentieth century explains the acceleration of neoliberalism in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union far better than the conventional Cold War discourse.[8] In the story of capitalism versus communism, we can certainly understand the flourishing of capitalism in light of the disintegration of historic border impediments to trade. But only in the story of an opposition between different forms of capitalism can we accurately grasp the transition to the current phase of globalization made possible by aggressive deregulation and the liquidation (through privatization programs) of the public functions of government.

But, in the discursive contest framed by the Cold War, the opposition was presented as that of capitalism versus communism, where capitalism emerged the victor – and today, we are left with the legacy and limitations of this conflicted (and profoundly ideological) narrative.

That being said, it is important to acknowledge that the proliferation of socialist theory and action is much scarcer in the United States than in much of the rest of the world. And it is not only that we are more likely to find greater consideration of socialism in the regions of the usual suspects throughout Latin America (i.e. Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela). Recently, for example, many of us have witnessed tumultuous outbreaks of socialist critique in Greece and France. In Greece, there have been years of anarchist and socialist uprisings since the

December 6, 2008 police shooting of 15-year-old boy, Alexandros Grigoropoulos (although the uprisings had just as much to do with economic crisis and the widely hated Prime Minister Karamanlis). In fact, Greece has seen the fiercest unrest in decades in cities across the country. In France, the Left Party (PG) and the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) have enjoyed robust revitalization in light of an economic crisis that has, in the US, had the opposite effect of driving the government towards new precedents in corporate welfare. And even more recently, in September and October 2010, the EU's headquarters in Brussels came under the overwhelming attack of physical and critical social forces, while in Spain civil society erupted into upheaval, both largely in response to the government's proposed austerity measures that clearly favor capitalists and their corporations over working class people and the growing numbers of unemployed.

Here in the US many conservatives vacillate between characterizing President Barack Obama as a socialist and as a return to the "taxation without representation" era of British Empire, hence the peculiar rash of tea party protests that took off in March and April of 2009. Contrary to the defamation of Obama as a socialist (which is no less a defamation of socialism), Obama is actually ensconced in a rescue mission to recapitalize (and not to "nationalize") ailing capitalist institutions that had been functioning on the assumption that *empty signifiers for money* would continue to be backed by *real capital*. Belief in the reality of empty signifiers (the financial instruments of banks and investors, including credit and loans) has become typical under, and is indeed defining of, the current phase of finance capitalism.

Despite the current global economic crisis (and the more inspiring responses to it in Europe), I maintain that capitalism fully preserves its hegemonic security in the US, Europe, and elsewhere. Crisis, in general, poses no insurmountable difficulties for capitalism unless countervailing social powers either are, or can be, mobilized. And a countervailing power (which may take the form of a critique), must not only be prepared to seize the opportunity presented by a crisis, for it must also be considered viable within the general population. The uprisings in Greece, radicalism in France, and the recent protest activity in Brussels and Spain, still function like saturnalias – that is, they swell and dissipate demonstrating moments of temporary power. With capitalism, however, it is just the reverse: Capitalism's systemic weaknesses are revealed in temporary moments of crisis, while its strengths are demonstrated on a relatively permanent basis, quite unlike a saturnalia.

This can be evidenced in a number of ways, but I'll just mention two: First, the governments of the world are looking only to capitalist solutions to the problems of capitalism – Karamanlis and Sarkozy too, despite much

of their populations, pushed for neoliberal responses to the crisis of 2008-09 (the new prime minister of Greece, George Papandreou, quickly set to making deals with the International Monetary Fund, further agitating Greek radicals). And regulation and oversight, wherever we do see them, are not socialism – that is a relic of a Cold War discourse that we should have transcended by now. Second, capitalism has historically thrived on crisis and disaster, which enables it to retrench its hold and reorganize (often through massive layoffs and the closing of plants that are not sufficiently profitable) and to consolidate power.[9]

Yet, while capitalism does enjoy a relatively secure position of supremacy in the world, the narrative of its "triumph" in the Cold War appears in a new light when we consider that it was not socialism, and certainly not communism, but rather, bureaucratic state capitalism that was defeated by free market capitalism. The declaration that there was no socialism *established* in the twentieth century does not require any feat of revisionist history, nor does it rely on self-serving redefinitions of socialism as something other than what has been practiced in its name. To be clear, when I say "no *established* socialism" I do not mean to deny that within the political cultures and discourses of the world, that within civil society and material struggles, there were no *real* socialists, no *real* movements. In these terms, there is indeed a rich history of socialism. Rather, I intend to throw into question the prevalent interpretation of the century as occupied and stunted by bureaucratically managed communist states, blocs of countries facing off in a showdown between two great oppositional programs.

Moreover, by "*real* socialism" I do not mean to suggest that there is any such thing as "unreal" or "fake" socialism. I want to suggest that there are some fundamental and defining principles of socialism that many of the political regimes (both institutional and discursive) that have been called "socialist" did not abide. Many of these principles come directly from Marx's work, although many have been restated and rearticulated by thinkers throughout the twentieth century who were trying to account for the events of their day. Socialism is a conflicted field within philosophy, and is not internally homogenous or even consistent. But that is not the problem. To the contrary, the fact that socialist philosophy is an indeterminate and heterogeneous field means that its enduring significance and viability are one possible codification.

The problem, then, is to formulate a clear and general enough definition of socialism that synthesizes the fundamental principles of the tradition and enables us, as Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* aimed to accomplish, to reveal how some permutations of the socialist philosophy effectively transform the philosophy into something self-contradictory. We must have some intellectual resources, for example, with

which to counter the common practice of discussing policies to fund social programs and regulate business as "socialist," even though such policies and programs are completely felicitous with and within capitalist society. At this juncture, I would like to ask the reader to accept a promissory note that I will endeavor to provide such definition below. For now, let me just say that we need an irreducibly antagonistic conception of socialism, sketched in a preliminary way in 3.3 of this chapter.

A close reading of Marx's work, his warnings in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and his insistence on the incompatibility of communism with any strictly national project, reveal fundamental betrayals of the socialist idea in the history of so-called communist projects. That is, with Marx alone, we can discover how little real foundation his theory provided for these projects.[10] But Marx is not the only, or even the best, thinker to employ for a critique of twentieth century "socialism." For Marx did not see the twentieth century, and there were other philosophers who lived to point out the absence of socialism contemporaneously with "socialist" revolutions.

There are many examples of this, all of which help to refute any suspicion that only disgruntled radicals after 1989 could possibly deny the existence of socialism in Russia, or China, or Poland, and elsewhere. There was Antonio Gramsci's essay, *The Revolution Against 'Capital,'* written in 1917 just after the Bolshevik Revolution, Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* (1923), and, from the 1940s until nearly the collapse of the Soviet Union, a great wealth of philosophy, and notably by Castoriadis and Debord, that challenged the claims to socialism made by Russian and Chinese officials, claims that were repeated in varying and damning terms in Cold War propaganda in the US. Of course, beyond philosophy, the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s was a devastating blow to the illusion of socialism in that country. There are, indeed, many other examples (and perhaps most notably, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) that I am not discussing here.

The work of Castoriadis and Debord are of special value because they ran incisively contrary to the Cold War discourse at the height of its proliferation and offered a more convincing diagnosis of the conflict. But Debord's analysis provides an enduring way of thinking about the prospects for revolution that does better to open up a space for imagining the future of socialism, far more than Castoriadis' discussion of permanent revolution vis-à-vis a constantly applied form of direct democracy.[11] Only Debord understood that, beyond political-economic material realities and beyond the world of philosophy – that is, beyond structure and superstructure – there was also a visual terrain of "image-objects" that had begun to overpower text, and even material conditions, in maintaining a social order (including political

culture) wholly felicitous with capitalism.[12]

Following Debord's claim that when the revolution is a long way off *the practice of theory* is of primary importance, I propose the following thesis: Today, there is nothing a socialist politics needs more than philosophy. We are not, as Marx was, engaged in a youth culture energized by Hegel's writings in Berlin in the nineteenth century. Marx lived in a time and place when the overemphasis on philosophy seemed to him debilitating, and *The German Ideology* aimed at (among other things) a confrontation with philosophy that could catalyze a paradigm shift towards praxis. But today, there is not too much philosophy, and we are far from overwhelmed by it. Rather, there is too little philosophy, and its absence is debilitating.

With regard to thinking about socialism today, one can almost see the end of philosophy – socialist theory must first justify its existence before it can begin to speak. This is largely for the sake of the conventional reading of the twentieth century for which theory is cast aside to embrace the grand narrative of the opposition between communism and capitalism. To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is a *single* narrative here, without any conflict, uncritically accepted everywhere. Certainly, communists, capitalists, scholars of various kinds, and activists, have interrogated and interpreted the oppositions of the twentieth century differently. Yet, the idea that twentieth century communism was to one extent or another the transposition of socialist philosophy into the world still reigns supreme.

Consider the American scene. On the political right, and among neoliberal capitalists, the conventional story is read like a sacred text, one that glorifies and eulogizes Ronald Reagan for presiding over and ushering in a great world-historical capitalist transformation. Among liberals, in the main, communism and socialism are dirty and dangerous words, which everyone knows can ruin a political career. This is why talk of universal health care is always veiled and tenuous, why Hillary Clinton was always clear to insist that her plan was not one of "socialized medicine," and why Republicans never tire of calling Barack Obama a Marxist and socialist.[13] Even the Obama administration's far weaker term, "public option," which implies that one can continue to choose the private sector, has been characterized as part of a socialist coup. In the US, the old Cold War discourse has been brought back – and along with it, all of the awful mutilation and ignorance of the entire corpus of Marx – to ignite concern over a new internal threat of communism which, we are supposed to believe, has managed to make a Trojan horse out of the pathetically conciliatory Democratic Party. On the far left, the faithful "Marxism-Leninism-Maoism" (MLM) position of the Revolutionary Communist Party does nothing to critically confront the socialist spectacle in terms that overturn the conventional story.[14] In academia, it remains the case

that most scholars, even among liberals and radicals who speak critically of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, accept the premise of a standoff between communism and capitalism throughout the twentieth century. This is partly why Habermas and others choose to speak of a short twentieth century from 1914–1989.[15] However, philosophy can and must be brought to bear on this premise in order to learn not to accept it as the prerequisite for debate about socialism after 1989.

As Debord argued, thinking of Russia and China, "an *image of the working class* arose in radical opposition to the working class itself."[16] This thesis functions as an excellent general guide. One could say that communism (its twentieth century representations) *stood against* what communism (as theory/philosophy) *stands for*.

Here, it is necessary to clarify that I reject Marx's definition of the working class, not in terms of the ones it includes, but rather, in terms of the ones it excludes (the peasantry, indigenous peoples, and those in philosophical solidarity). In this way, I think Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conception of the "multitude" is a step (albeit a baby step) in the right direction.[17] In *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory*, I argued that indigenous peoples occupy a vital revolutionary subject position today, despite their existence beyond the parameters of mass production and bourgeois society, and despite their very real status as living impediments to capitalism (whereas the proletariat is required for capitalist production).

Beyond this, there has been some serious injury to the working class as a result of many decades of an integrated spectacle of upward mobility. Many impoverished workers today are likely to blame themselves, rather than capitalism, for their condition of life. The cultural development that has led to the proliferation of apologetics among the working poor has been terribly damaging on what Marx and others considered an adequate class consciousness. In light of this, socialists today must continue to rethink the heterogeneous forces that are truly dangerous to capitalism, and thus, to rethink who comprises the "dangerous class." This consideration should be done on an ongoing basis.

Debord applies a similar logic in his essay, "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China." There, he repeatedly points out the significance of peasant worker revolts against a government that claimed to have a communist concern for the interests of the rural poor.[18] From the Kronstadt sailors in Russia to the Solidarity movement in Poland, we find that, at certain times, the claims of communist governments have been the most vehemently contested by the people whose will and interests they most expressly claimed to embody. The revolt of the working class against a "working class government" makes representations of the represented against their purported representatives. As well, philosophy can achieve

an exposé of this ideological betrayal.

With ideology, we begin thinking at a juncture that philosophy takes to be a kind of end. That is to say, ideology enables us to make normative recommendations, valuational claims, and to reject other ideological positions *without* having to go through processes of inquiry, scrutiny, reflection, and critique that precede such achievements in philosophy. Although it is not necessary (as it was for Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*) to search for the indubitable, it is certainly better to doubt any validity claim before accepting it. With philosophy, we begin at the beginning. We neither make nor accept normative recommendations and valuational claims until we assure ourselves of such recommendations and claims through processes of inquiry, scrutiny, reflection, and critique.

I do not mean to suggest that there is an end of philosophy in a dialectical sense, but that philosophy consists of questioning, and questioning can yield to answers. *Ideology begins with answers*, or at least by providing a framework for thinking in which the answers are always ready at hand. Philosophy cannot remain fixed and retain its identity – philosophy tends towards thinking and rethinking (revision), critique, and transformation. Thus, while philosophy comes to a stop where ideology begins, this does not imply that philosophy cannot be set to work against ideology, "undermining the foundations" of unquestioned, false opinions, causing "whatever has been built upon them to crumble of its own accord."[19]

At its best, as can be seen from Plato to Descartes to the present, philosophy helps us to interpret the world against calcified conventional thinking; *it takes action on conceptions generally taken for granted*. The practice of philosophy, in theorizing the moral and political commitments of socialism, is necessarily set against the prevalent ideological discourses of the twentieth century. Debord wrote: "Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology – *and it knows it*."[20] What this means is that theory can pierce the veil of the spectacle, providing precise and nuanced diagnoses as a basis for recommending action – it overthrows images of particular kinds of power, images instrumental to the maintenance of material and ideological domination. Debord understood that only theory could destabilize ideology. And when ideology governs in a literal (i.e. the ideology of a ruling party) and a figurative (i.e. the cultural-valuational norms that shape how we think and act) sense, the importance of theory is brought to the fore.

3.2 CAPITALIST SPECTACLE, SITUATIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Drawing on Debord's work to articulate a viable project for new

socialisms today, I want to remind the reader of the twofold value of his work. First, Debord articulates a major reformulation of Marxist theory. Second, Debord's answer to the question of why revolutionary socialist aspirations in advanced capitalist societies dwindled after World War II, and what could be done to reinvigorate radical criticism, is of indispensible practical importance.

Debord's work is not a refutation of Marxism, but it does provide important correctives to and extensions of Marx's political philosophy. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many post-Marxist theories that have addressed deficits in classical socialist philosophy have failed to fully comprehend the unique stability of the contemporary (post-World War II) form of capitalist society and its innovative means of managing crises. Debord addresses this failure, and other key deficits in Marx's work.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the basic claim underlying Debord's theory of the spectacle is the assertion that what we *see* in the world – essentially, *how* the world is architected – is a reflection of triumphant ideologies. The shared world that we live in is the material realization of a particular ideology, it is ideology materialized. This is precisely what makes society a spectacle – society is the embodiment of particular worldviews but is presented as a neutral natural environment, as a terrain for (and not *already* an expression of) ideology. We therefore mistake our starting positions as being wholly undetermined, or at least *never wholly determined*, as we assume that where we go and what we do is guided by personal discretion, ambition, natural and learned ability, etc. What is lost in this scenario is the understanding that while we may be free to choose from myriad diverse options, all such free choice is constrained within a general framework that limits our options only to ones that benefit (or at least do not contradict) the existing society and its political-economic structure. Any choice beyond this framework renders the chooser crazy or criminal, which is partly why the revolutionary, if anyone could find her, is seen in the main to be either crazy, a criminal, or both. In the society of the spectacle, we tend to believe that we can achieve almost anything without structural transformation, thus revolution (which requires structural transformation) appears increasingly out of place.

Debord considers the discursive content of the *appearance* of capitalist society – not only its explicit *movements* and *arguments*. According to Marx, philosophers had long been concerned with ideas and arguments (superstructure) instead of material reality (structure).[21] Even those, such as Gramsci, who saw a causal reciprocity between ideas and events, often maintained the analytical dichotomy between superstructure and structure. But Debord saw the two realms folded into one, into "image-objects," into man-made realities manufactured by and representative of ideologies. He argued that one could actually see the ideological commitments of

powerholders by reading the architecture of capitalism.

Yet despite the entrenched structural and superstructural power of spectacular capitalism, many still manage to find the means to oppose it. We must never deny the existence of rousing social movements that have emerged like saturnalias in the streets of Seattle in 1999, in Genoa in 2001, and elsewhere wherever the G8, G20, and World Trade Organization meet, or where they do not, for example, at the World Social Forum in Brazil and India, and at many other sites of contestation. However, these appear as saturnalias indeed, as festivals with too much space in between them, and with a communicative impact that is far too limited. No festival can engage in sustained disputation with an opponent who exists *all of the time*, who always points to its own permanence and stability as evidence for its general desirability, who always points to its practical superiority when compared to an opponent who can only form and dissipate in brief, desperate moments.

This desperation is connected to the question of instrumental reason addressed in Chapter 2. A society of the spectacle always selects and presents a multiplicity of political discourses that are accepted as reasonable. Democrats and Republicans, for example, may have some mutually exclusive positions on some important policies, but in order to be "reasonable" they must support the continual deregulation of economic activity, the privatization of the public functions of government, and the "courage" to go to war in defense of America (among other things; namely, geopolitical and business interests). This is not to say that all Americans thought George W. Bush was a reasonable man. There was, of course, bitter disagreement over policies and positions. However, no matter how roused by a sense of justice or invective, Bush's opposition remained in a state of civil disagreement with a man who the public accepted without mutiny or tumult throughout his two-term presidency. What I mean by "accepted" here is that Americans found Bush reasonable enough to see no cause for rebellion, and to give him victories in our elections, no matter how problematic those elections were. To those who insist that Bush lost his elections vis-à-vis various forms of disenfranchisement and the usurpation of the electoral college, the fact remains that he came close enough to appear more reasonable than not. And if Bush was indeed an unreasonable head of state, well, then rebellion was apparently less reasonable than he was. In general, and in between the aforementioned saturnalias, we see a lot more cooperation than antagonism in the many modes of present-day political culture.

Debord addresses this by way of disagreement with one of the central tenets of Marxist crisis theory: Capitalism does not, as Marx argued, inexorably work towards its own instability by increasingly exploiting masses of people who grow increasingly antagonistic to the wealthy elite

who are only ever fewer and more prosperous. To the contrary, the highly technologized capitalism that emerged after World War II in the most advanced capitalist countries developed new mechanisms of social control that could guard capitalism from internal or external crises that might have given rise to rebellion or revolution. Debord believed that the predictive power (but not the explanatory power) of historical materialism had been disproved by a phase of capitalism that could effectively manage our preferences, convincing us that we live in the best of all possible worlds – and, as suggested above, believing this is tautological with the obsolescence of revolutionary thought.

Because of this general perspective, at least a few things that socialists of the past counted on were no longer reliable. *First*, exploitation and immiseration will not necessarily lead to the rebelliousness of the oppressed; opposing socioeconomic classes do not self-understand as staunchly opposed. *Second*, capitalism cannot be destabilized by an opposing ideology because the former appropriates all opposing ideology into its own self-supporting narrative (i.e. "communism" in the mainstream Cold War discourse, or terrorism today). *Third*, social movements and dissent are provided some space within capitalist societies so that they may safely take place without amounting to any real threat to the existing order. Debord recognized, therefore, that his generation would have to give up on emancipatory projects altogether, or it would have to rethink socialist praxis in radically new directions, working out of the Marxist trajectory, yet in many ways against it. We must understand Debord's works (and especially his early works) as outgrowths of his commitment to the latter course.

3.3 WHICH WAY FORWARD? A GENERAL DIRECTION

Because of the entrenchment of the spectacle of socialism as a stand-in for actually existing socialism, a socialist politics must be defined in both negative and positive terms. And again, because of the entrenchment of the spectacle, we must return to philosophical articulation for the groundwork of our definition. First, let us consider what socialism is ***not***. A socialist politics is not compatible with the unbounded flourishing of capitalism. While this may seem obvious on some level, it represents a diacritical distinction that is lost in talk of market socialism in China today, that is to say, in talk of utilizing the market to bolster productive powers. This vital distinction is also softened and blurred in discussions about policy initiatives in Europe, in the UK and France, for example, sometimes called the "two-and-a-half" way, which has gained significant traction recently.[22]

Alain Touraine, an advocate of the two-and-a-half way policy, argues for an agenda that follows priorities to work, sustainable development, and

intercultural communication. While I agree with Touraine's normative commitments, this two-and-a-half way (like the notion of market socialism in China) is presented as a potentially happy combination of socialism and capitalism, or as a combination with some tension, with some give and take, but with an ultimate commensurability. The notion that socialism can and/or must be achieved within the narrow limits of particular policies and practices that require no transformation or deconstruction of the capitalist system is very troubling. Such a notion mitigates and aims to alleviate tensions that, in the philosophical articulation of socialism, have always been irreducible – it aims, in other words, to alleviate the antithetical (and dialectical) relationship between capitalism and its opposite – and this is part of the reason why we must return to philosophical articulation.

Another reason why it is problematic to think of socialism in terms of policy measures implemented in capitalist political economies is that socialism is *not* an end state. Socialism cannot be *achieved by policy*, although it can be *facilitated by policy*. This distinction may appear slippery on the face of it, but in fact, it matters considerably if we say that socialism is nowhere "established," but everywhere a kind of striving, a perpetually unfinished project. Policies that are exceedingly punitive or repressive, policies that aim to diminish or obliterate antagonistic social expressions can, at least for some time, keep socialism down. Or, in a dialectical manner, such policies might only keep socialist energies down, hidden, and off-stage until they explode to the surface with a critical mass. Other more liberal policies might afford society more freedom to work out a socialist opposition to liberalism itself. If the so-called communist projects of the twentieth century were thoroughly conscious of this, they might not have ended up so staunchly set against the internal logic of socialism – they might have had a different view of the critical social forces that took aim at them from below.

In Russia, the Kronstadt sailors were willing to wait for some time, understanding that the revolution was a transitional process, and not an end state. But when Lenin seemed to stabilize government, the distribution of necessities was anticipated – the sailors could wait, but the revolution could not simply end with the stability of the state. So they asked for an increase of food rations, they asked for more fuel and clothing. They were themselves revolutionaries. In fact, "[t]he Kronstadt sailors were ever the first to serve the Revolution. They had played an important part in the revolution of 1905; they were in the front ranks in 1917."[23] But they were revolutionaries making demands on a revolutionary government. They met with Trotsky to register their grievances just before Trotsky issued orders for the bombardment of Kronstadt.[24] The sailors understood that socialism could not be an end state. The logic of this insight remains instructive in present-day democracies where we would do well to demand

more democracy from even the most democratic regimes. It is always a dangerous thing when a society believes it has enough democracy. So too, socialism only works by not stopping where it is and declaring the present state of affairs the end of history, or even the paroxysm, the moment just before the last, where it may stay for decades.

All talk of socialism as actually existing within the framework of capitalist society, such that the two antagonists find a kind of compromise via policy measures, is talk of a reconciliation that hollows out the substantive commitments of socialism as a political philosophy. While I remain skeptical of any form of positivistic dialectical thinking (see below), I do maintain that socialism can only announce itself to (or within) capitalism through oppositional and irreconcilably antagonistic representations.

Having some sense of what socialism ***is not***, let me now say something about what ***it is***. Socialism is a process comprised of various challenges and antagonisms that collectively (and sometimes individually) aim to counteract and reverse tendencies towards privatization in all of its guises. Here, I do not only mean privatization in the familiar economic sense, but also in the sense of social and cultural privatization, what Hegel called "Moralität" (to which he proposed "Sittlichkeit" as the antidote), or what Habermas calls the depoliticization of the public sphere. Socialism, as the name implies, is a tendency towards the social, towards the public and what may be regarded as the public good. Socialism opposes the individualist "achievement ideology" fostered under capitalism, "familial-vocational privatism" (a narrow family/career orientation), and the "possessive individualism" taught as a central ideal in the educational systems of advanced capitalist societies.[25] Socialism must look carefully at macroeconomic realities and broad disparities of stratification, and must never see the personal anecdote as evidence to the contrary; in fact, socialism never sees the person him or herself as existing outside of a social, cultural, political-economic fabric. Therefore, it is not possible from this point of view to ask about "the good" for an individual, for "the good," properly speaking, does not exist for an individual alone. No individual is in fact alone.

This opposition to privatization (in the robust sense discussed above) is what makes socialism irreducibly antagonistic to capitalism. Concretely stated, the positive content of socialist politics consists of all of the *theoretical* and *practiced* contributions to a multifarious countervailing force to capitalism. While the demands of the individual need not get lost, and need not be canceled out (for the individual finds herself always within the collectivity), private demands can never be invoked against the necessities of the public as a larger, ultimately global, body. That which pushes against tendencies towards privatization creates a force *for the*

public, for society. I have written elsewhere about how the unbounded capitalism promoted by neoliberals is tautological with unbounded privatization, and how the former always tends to the latter.[26] Simply put, privatization in its many forms functions as both cause and effect (variously) of capitalist power. And socialism, in opposing privatization in its many forms (i.e. Moralität, the depoliticization of the public sphere, economic privatization, etc.) is necessarily antithetical to capitalism.

Following these negative and positive impressions, we may say that the more there *actually is* of socialism (as a process in action), the less there is of capitalism (following the principle of displacement) – in a decisively capitalist *lifeworld*, neutrality and indifference endorse the existing state of affairs. The antithetical, antagonistic, and oppositional relationship between socialism and capitalism, by virtue of their respective logics, requires the displacement of capitalism by socialism and *vice versa*. Therefore, to speak of "making" socialism within the limits of capitalism is a red herring at best, a base manipulation, or an ultimate acquiescence to capital at worst. This does not mean that socialism cannot act *against* capitalism from within the limits of the capitalist present, for if socialism could not, then capitalism would be a totality without any cracks or crises (and that is clearly not the case). However, the operational logic of socialism can never be made felicitous with or complementary to the capitalist *logos*. That is, capitalism may be made more or less liberal or "socialistic" while fully preserving the center of its worldview (i.e. capital).

Today, capitalism is expansive well beyond Marx's imagination, and appears without even a spectacular challenger on the horizon (for we must not forget that spectacular socialism is both a tool and artifice of capitalism itself, and is thus nothing more than an instrumental property of the overarching capitalist ideology); there is very little socialism indeed. And, if we read the twentieth century as I have suggested, as a century best characterized by an opposition between two forms of capitalism, then socialism seems to have existed in a kind of oblivion. This oblivion is darker today, in the dim and distorting light of the resuscitated socialist spectacle, than it was during the twentieth century. The socialist oblivion is certainly darker now than before World War II when no such oblivion existed, when socialist discourses enlivened real hopes and struggles on a transnational scale that seemed (to many participants and observers) only countable victories away from active realization. Today, few believe that socialism will emerge from contests with neoliberalism or from "damage control" on the ill effects of capitalist globalization.

To move out of oblivion, socialism needs philosophy, and Debord helps us to grasp this. We cannot count on environmental disaster to bring socialism into the world, and we cannot expect capitalism to dialectically produce its own antithesis in any other way. The spectacle doesn't require

oil in order to survive, for it does not need to be produced anew and is safe from everything except for radical criticism. Recession, as we have seen, generates little to no critique of political economy.[27] So we need to think about organization, not as a political party, and by no means as an administration or bureaucracy – but how to organize countervailing forces from within and against spectacular capitalism; that is the vital question.

"Ignorance about organization is the central ignorance about praxis; ...Error about organization is the *central practical error*. If it is intentional, it aims to use the masses. If not, it is at least total error about the conditions of historical praxis. It is therefore fundamental error in the very theory of revolution."[28] What Debord is saying here is similar to Kant's refutation of the common saying about theory and practice, "That may be true in theory, but it is false in practice." To this common saying, Kant arrives at a completely opposite conclusion, that "whatever reason shows to be valid in theory, is also valid in practice."[29] That is, without theory we cannot reveal which way forward for practice. Debord maintains that what I have called the multifarious countervailing forces of socialism can only prevail if and only if we can first think correctly about, and understand fully, the predicament that we face and the points of entry for overturning it. His work, and the organization of the Situationist International, was aimed at this goal.

Debord theorized revolution as a never-ending process of critique that destabilizes the ideology of the dominant class, without proposing a new hegemony to take its place.[30] "Our task first and foremost is to create an overall critical theory and (therefore inseparably) to *communicate* it to every sector already objectively involved in a negation which remains subjectively piecemeal. Further definition, experimentation and long-term work around this question of communication constitutes our most important, real activity as an organised group."[31] So theory lies behind the recovery of a socialist project, and communication lies at the center of a situationist politics – communication aims to function as a kind of binding agent, to reveal a revolutionary perspective that has its corollary in concrete actions in the world. Without an overarching theory that effectively links and organizes such actions, they can only appear as saturnalias. An overarching theory, however, can transform these piecemeal saturnalias of negation into a permanent, ongoing countervailing discourse.[32]

The situationist point of view understands that radical criticism is blockaded from conventional channels of communication, and thus requires concerted and creative efforts to get out. A situationist politics seizes upon, or creates, situations that can be utilized to reveal the deficits of spectacular society, and to foster and mobilize further critique. This is part of the reason why Debord offered a reading of the Watts Riot in LA in 1965 as a reflection of the general discontent of African Americans in

the US, and also why he and the situationists read the events of May-June 1968 in France as evidence of a revolutionary spirit lying in wait, out of sight, for the right time to reveal itself.[33]

Debord held to his situationist optimism beyond the lifespan of the SI itself, writing in 1978

> Our agitators disseminated ideas that a class society *cannot stomach*. The intellectuals in the service of the system – themselves even more obviously in decline than the system itself – are now cautiously investigating these poisons in the hope of discovering some antidotes; but they won't succeed. They used to try just as hard to ignore them – but just as vainly, so great is the power of a truth spoken in its time.[34]

Perhaps it is clearer here than it is anywhere else why Debord could not abandon the concept of truth. Revolutionary agitation consists largely of articulating truths in such a way that they are effectively injected into the social and political system, that then has to deal with those truths, which antagonize and threaten the spectacle. The system cannot purge itself of an antagonistic "truth spoken in its time," nor can it inoculate itself against the poison of critique. But we must ask whether or not this rather Kantian notion should have ever earned our optimism, or if it holds any promise today.

In Chapter 2, I described Debord's theory as a kind of radicalization of Kant's thesis on the public use of reason, the latter of which was, in fact, a call for public criticism intended to gradually transform society and politics.[35] But times have changed, and the most "enlightened" societies did not move in the cosmopolitan direction Kant imagined. The linear progressive optimism of Kant was quite clearly blown apart in the 20th century, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer documented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Instead of cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace, the world's most "enlightened" nations – at least by enlightenment measures of reason and science – built concentration camps and honed their new technological capacity for propaganda.

Kantian reason has been bludgeoned to the point where it is not easily discernable even where it makes an appearance, like Jesus Christ on earth working as a janitor in a mosque. In other words, "rational-critical" insights do not simply win the day as soon as they're presented, on the virtue of their internal logic and moral sensibility, like a ray of light for all to see. *It is not enough to have the better idea*. Public attention – *and feeling* – must be seized by something more dramatic and captivating than reason and truth. The imagination and attention of the public have, long since Kant, come to require first and foremost to be surprised and overtaken before moving on to "rational-critical" inquiry. Sometimes scandal is the prerequisite for philosophy. Radicals who have understood this well, like the Zapatistas

from Mexico and the Argentine piqueteros, engaged in guerrilla movements of the imagination. The guerrilla element is increasingly necessary today. And Debord understood this well in the 1950s and 1960s: "We have no *mass media*, and neither will any radical movement for a very long time to come. We will have to learn how to recognize and use other materials *at any time*."[36] We need to learn how to find the points of entry for communication and to seize upon them in provocative and captivating ways. This is no simple task, but it is possible.[37]

In thinking about points of entry for communication, Debord understood well that we would need to work on the visual terrain that was outflanking the textual terrain (the terrain of manifestos, newspapers, and speeches). And he understood that a fundamental departure from Marx was necessary on the basis of the fact that poverty and immiseration guarantee nothing. I have added to this that ecological crisis holds no promise for a new socialist future. Hence, for a movement that occupies the desperate space of principled opportunism, that owns neither the means of production nor the means of communication, situations are all that we have. If they are effectively made into inroads for radical criticism, woven together into a cohesive discourse, grounded and guided by a revolutionary theory, their cumulative effect can, I believe, "do harm to spectacular society."[38] After all, while spectacular society is real, it is spectacular precisely because it is held in place by an ideological landscape designed to support the capitalist weltanschauung. And this ideological landscape, made up of ideas, can be intervened on, and the weltanschauung can be challenged, as I have already shown in discussing the socialist spectacle in 3.1 of this chapter.

Like Debord, I cannot say in certain terms what "doing harm to spectacular society" will or should lead to, other than that it is a prerequisite for any socialist project. While the business of articulating ideal end states has a catastrophic history that we should not want to repeat, I propose the specification of a general direction, following my articulation of socialism for normative guidance. And while Debord is understandably hesitant to detail any particular end state, he too identifies a general direction (compatible with mine), which he calls in the final thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle* "realized democracy."[39]

The realization of democracy is not achieved through the procedural apparatus of elections and legislation, but rather, in the society itself, in the agonistic creation and maintenance of a vibrant democratic political culture. Democracy is realized best when everyday people can and do mobilize their energies towards expanding their influence over the conditions of everyday life. Everyday people never have, and can never, wield such influence through representative bureaucrats, or alone through personal and professional lifestyle choices. The *"demos"* of democracy

indicates the people in common, the people viewed as a collectivity. Hence, realized democracy requires a normative valuational shift from the individuating interests of private capital to the common interests of society as a whole. And the inclusion of transformative political discourses is never achieved by asking for inclusion nicely. Rather, democratization implies a process that typically entails some form of struggle.

Democratization, which by definition works against exclusionary practices, hierarchical structures, and deep inequalities in the opportunity structure of society, is in serious need of some guerrilla creativity (especially now that protest signs function like written petitions submitted to corporations and state officials for their generous consideration). In adopting and restaging protest formats that are now well over 50 years old, activists and their demonstrations often make a "challenge" that is a spectacle in-and-of-itself. Challenges that occupy spaces that are wholly felicitous with existing allotments for "free speech" in capitalist societies are not sufficiently challenging. The historical significance of civil disobedience must be well understood, but not rehashed in organizational form – new organizational forms are necessary.

As mentioned above, the Mexican Zapatistas broke free of a long history of failed petitioning with street theater, *poesis*, and rousing communiqués. The 2000 uprising in Cochabamba, Bolivia against water privatization is a more recent example, as is the response to the Iranian elections in the summer of 2009, and the contestation in the streets of Greece in 2008-2010. At mass demonstrations in the US and Europe, the much maligned Black Bloc is actually on the right track, if only they could come back each time in a manner too unusual to make them immediately identifiable *as the Black Bloc*. It is always much better, for example, to raise the questions "what was that?" and "who was that?" than to provide the peremptory damning answer "yes, that was the Black Bloc."

One of the key lessons we should learn from Debord is that political action must transcend the conventionally textual. This is by no means the most surprising lesson, and all of the examples mentioned above understand it well. But it is nevertheless a lesson that lies at the core of situationist praxis and strikes me as critical for social movements today. The increasingly consolidated private ownership of the means of mass communication – *and the overly saturated milieu of a fragmentary social media where everything can be found and yet everything is lost* – makes this even more difficult today than in Debord's time. Movements must look elsewhere than the media – this makes a situationist approach continually and increasingly well-suited to political action.

When socialist theory consults Debord, the promise of historical materialism, even if only for a single catalyzing event, looks grim. In this way, the experience is much like the encounter with Adorno and

Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. But, more like Sartre and Camus, Debord occupies a space in between extreme optimism and extreme pessimism.[40] Without sufficient optimism, socialist theory can only flounder, which perfectly suits its position in oblivion. But socialist theory has a difficult time negotiating refutations of positivistic dialectical thinking, as can be seen in many places today, but prominently in Hardt and Negri's work and the work of many ecosocialists.[41] Still, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, for Debord, problematizing the predictive component of dialectical thinking *does not* signify disaster for revolutionary aspirations and collective action.

Instead, the revolutionary spirit and collective action must proceed without the expectation that material eventualities will provide a supportive framework. They must understand their precarious position. The best of all possible supportive frameworks for the material transformation of the world lies with the hope for people to realize the false claims of spectacular society. Politics consists of struggles on a visual-discursive terrain that make way for, or give rise to, new attitudes and actions. This is precisely what the Situationist International set out to do, and remains the central endeavor of our times. Any critique that can rise to this challenge will make a transition, from the conventionally textual and conventionally symbolic, to the realm of signification and the visual. From the situationists to the Zapatistas, there is indeed a sensibility – a sensibility that lacks the resolve of an organized movement and the force of collective action – that creative new ways of speaking are vital to this general project.

There already is, within the political cultures of the world, an understanding that organizational forms from the past hold little promise today. Protest demonstrations in societies structured by spectacular capitalism are affirmations of solidarity, feel-good experiences that struggle to communicate thinly articulated messages with the help of media coverage, yet with scant revolutionary pretensions. Still, the Zapatistas and the World Social Forum and the Greek revolt and the Arab Spring, for example – despite their faults and failures – could not have existed at any earlier moment in history. Various forms of exclusion and oppression *do* ultimately give rise to emancipatory insurrections, new counterpublics, and creative organizational forms. Despite the complete indeterminacy of their successes, such upheavals are as inevitable as they are precarious. As Franco "Bifo" Berardi has said, "it is not possible to implement forms of permanent social organization… We still do not know in which way this organization can be constructed: this is the main political problem of the future."[42] Although the word "precarious" could perhaps describe all great movements in history – always determined in part by unpredictable contingencies – the emergence and novelty of new saturnalias tells us something about the era in which they arise. The best political action today

identifies catalyzing situations and seizes upon them with guerrilla creativity, raising the most important questions of our time. Perhaps the actions that raise these questions are doing the work of radical philosophy directly.

If this is true, then it is high time that we get over the old question, which thinly disguises its contempt: "What can philosophy do for the world?" Marx's contention that we must change rather than only interpret the world is a fair declaration as long as we do not read it as a kind of choice between change and interpretation. If, as I have argued above, philosophy is the antidote to ideology, and if ideology has in fact been materialized in the world, then we should flip the old question on its head. We might better ask: "What can the world do for philosophy?"

NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 215, 219.
2. Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* (New Directions Books, 1970), p. 77.
3. Debord, *The Real Split in the International: Theses on the Situationist International and its Time, 1972*, (Pluto Press, 2003), pp. 62-63.
4. See Habermas' discussion of the "long" nineteenth century and the "short" twentieth century as historical units punctuated by events, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, (MIT Press, 2001), Chapter 3.
5. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Zone Books, 1999), Thesis # 107, pp. 74-75.
6. Cited in Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, (Dover, 2003), p. 33.
7. See Cornelius Castoriadis, "Socialism or Barbarism" (1949).
8. It is worth noting here that the late 80s and the early to mid-90s coincide with Uruguay Round of GATT and the formation of the World Trade Organization and NAFTA, which was followed by CAFTA, FTAA, and a host of other concrete initiatives to facilitate the current phase of neoliberal capitalism. These initiatives are pursued outside of the framework of the Cold War because they represent the ideology of a particular theory of capitalism and development that opposes state regulation and oversight.
9. See Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2007).
10. On this score, Marx could (and should) also be brought to bear on commonly overblown characterizations of socialism in, for example, Venezuela and Bolivia, and certainly in Cuba, today.
11. See, once again, Castoriadis, "Socialism or Barbarism" (1949).
12. The notion of a visual terrain of "image-objects" will be clarified below.
13. Clinton's denial of her health care plan as "socialist" and the charge that it was, were rampant throughout the primaries in the fall of 2007 and spring and summer of 2008, but one clear example can be found here: http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/politics/2007/08/09/sot.clinton.medicare.cnn (Accessed, 8/7/08). As well, the charge that Obama is a Marxist and a socialist is a common, ongoing refrain from popular talk show hosts like Mark Levin and Glenn Beck, but can also be found in countless news reports, including: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article3382313.ece (Accessed, 8/18/10).
14. See http://www.pcr-rcp.ca/en/programme/2 (Accessed, 8/18/10).
15. Habermas (1998).
16. Debord (1967).
17. See Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (Harvard, 2001) and *Multitude* (Penguin, 2004). What I intend by qualifying the conception of multitude as a "baby step" in the right direction is that while it does account for certain deficits in Marxian class analysis, it does not offer a useful framework that in any way expands upon the base claims of cosmopolitan solidarity – nor does the multitude (either as an extant or emergent revolutionary subject position) exist as such in the world. See additional comments on Hardt and Negri and their conception of the multitude in Chapter 4, Thesis III.
18. See Debord, "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China" in *A Sick Planet* (Seagull Books, 2008).

19. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Hackett, 1998), p. 60.
20. Debord (1967).
21. See, for example, *The German Ideology* (1845-46).
22. For discussion of market socialism in China and the general contention that socialism is reconcilable with capitalism through policy, see Arran Gare, "Marxism and the Problem of Creating an Environmentally Sustainable Civilization in China," in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 19, No. 1, March 2008. For Touraine's discussion of the two-and-a-half way, see his book *Beyond Neoliberalism* (Polity, 2001).
23. Goldman, op. cit.
24. See Goldman's broader discussion of Kronstadt, Chapter XXVII, op. cit.
25. The best discussion of these ideologies is in Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Beacon Press, 1973), pp. 36-37, and pp. 75-77.
26. See Gilman-Opalsky, *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lexington, 2008).
27. For example, during all the talk about recession in 2007 and 2008 in the US, any suggestion that capitalism had something to do with it was completely inaudible, and it surely would have been a surprising declaration.
28. Debord (1972).
29. Kant, "Theory and Practice," in *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 92.
30. In fact, my articulation above, inasmuch as it defines a socialist politics and clarifies a general direction, goes beyond Debord's comfort level with specifying the desirability of certain outcomes. As mentioned just below and elsewhere in this chapter, Debord focused centrally on a critique that could overturn the spectacle, and not on imagining any post-revolutionary state of affairs. I do not totally disagree with Debord here. I think he is right to remain tenuous on the question of end states. But I do think we can and must say something, and something more than what Debord says.
31. Debord, "Report to the Seventh SI Conference in Paris (Excerpts)" in *The Real Split in the International: Theses on the Situationist International and its Time, 1972* (Pluto Press, 2003), p. 133.
32. This notion of permanent countervailing discourse is intended to challenge Hakim Bey's notion of the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ), the latter of which ultimately only reifies the desperate nature of an oppositional politics that recognizes itself as a reprieve from the conditions of everyday life. Temporary autonomous zones can be liberating, empowering, and even dangerous (in the good sense of danger). However, with the TAZ, we achieve a temporary respite from the conditions of everyday life, leaving the general conditions themselves essentially unchanged. See Bey, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomedia, 2003).
33. See, regarding the Watts Riot, Debord's "The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity Economy" (1965).
34. Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" in *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003), p. 176.
35. See Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1784).
36. Debord (1966), op. cit.
37. It is worth noting that Debord himself was most optimistic about politics

mainly in the 50s and 60s. By the mid to late 70s he became less convinced of the revolutionary prospects of his own situationist praxis. It is for this reason that, while I find Debord's later works, such as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Verso, 1998) and *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* (TamTam Books, 2001) profound and invaluable, the earlier works go further towards the articulation of a new philosophy of praxis.

38. As Debord said was the intention of *The Society of the Spectacle* in the preface to the third French edition.
39. Debord (1967).
40. See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "The Humanism of Existentialism" in *Essays in Existentialism* (The Citadel Press, 1965) and Albert Camus' essay, "Pessimism and Courage" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays* (Vintage, 1960).
41. Hardt and Negri's influential books, *Empire* (Harvard, 2001) and *Multitude* (Penguin, 2004) contextualize current developments in post-imperialist empire, war, and terrorism utilizing a classical historical materialist explanatory framework. Their use of Foucault and emphasis on biopower complements, and does not undermine, their positivistic dialectical thinking. With regard to ecosocialists, reading *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, for example, the preeminent journal in the field, we encounter effort after effort to understand ecological catastrophe in dialectical and crisis theory terms. In these instances, it is as if socialist analysis cannot survive without positivistic dialectical thinking and crisis theory.
42. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation* (Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2009), p. 148. No theorist better elaborates the precarious nature of labor and revolutionary politics than Berardi. In addition to the book cited here, I recommend *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Semiotext(e), 2009).

Chapter 4: Theses on Debord

The urban environment proclaimed the orders and tastes of the ruling society just as violently as the newspapers... Obstacles were everywhere. And they were all interrelated, maintaining a unified reign of poverty. Since everything was connected, it was necessary to change everything through a unitary struggle, or nothing. It was necessary to link up with the masses, but sleep was all around us. – GUY DEBORD, 1959[1]

[T]he effort of the philosopher does not and cannot stay on an isolated philosophical level, in a separate consciousness, sphere or dimension; the source of his theories is social practice, and he must direct them back towards life, be it through his teaching or by other means (poetry? literature?). – HENRI LEFEBVRE, 1958[2]

I just don't know how to go about this. I want to find out just how I should do it. I think it's going to have to be very subtle; you can't ram philosophies down anybody's throat, and the music is enough! That's philosophy. – JOHN COLTRANE, 1966[3]

I.

The chief defect of all situationist theory – that of Debord included – is that it responds to the realm of appearances, and particularly that of the urban environment, which always already embodies and reflects a particular and dominant ideology, and which is organized and managed by capital; situationist theory thus recommends contestatory interventions that can only ever aspire to be interruptions or disruptions, rendering politics an occasional attack, a kind of piracy, "hacking," or a temporary counter-media. In short, situationist theory reifies the "permanence" of its opponent by accepting saturnalias of interference as a *modus operandi*. Situationist theory thus admits a desperation and opportunism that, while

reflecting a practical consideration of its own position, ultimately mirrors and affirms the "permanence" of the society of the spectacle, which it wants to destroy. Debord's theory is a necessary advance over the materialism of Marx, the idealism of Hegel, and the various combinations of the two (i.e. Gramsci, Lukács, etc.) – none of which captured the singularity of the image-object. Yet Debord's understandable cynicism regarding revolutionary aspirations leads him to a politics of exceptional activity that leaves the rules intact.

Debord's earliest efforts reflect his trajectory from the art world, and his personal investment in staging gallery events carrying the principles of an outline for a new political philosophy into the world.[4] Hence, Debord arrives at political philosophy out of various non-political or amorphously political commitments, and never manages to breach those commitments sufficiently for an understanding of the "permanent situation" of capitalism. To be clear, the trajectory from art is a major source of the *strength* of Debord's work (i.e. contestation utilizing hoaxes, humor, and other provocations, seizing attention with creative and visual savvy), but in this case art is a double-bind; for it also leads to a practice conceived and fixed mainly in gallery or sketchbook format, such that the discrete acts of a situationist politics often feel like incendiary novelty items. Hence, like Feuerbach, Debord "does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary,' of practical-critical, activity."[5]

II.

Truth is a matter of both theory and practice. Despite Baudrillard's obfuscations on the subject, truth can be discerned, although never very easily, and never as a *purely theoretical* or as a *purely practical* matter. Truth is not *a priori* or *a posteriori*, for it is both – it is only ever discerned in the corroboration of the conceptual with human experience, or the corroboration of human experience with the conceptual. While philosophy can help us to identify *what ought to be*, only the world as it is can help us to identify *which way to go*. One without the other is never enough of the truth: one without the other is always a moral and practical risk. Theory without practice is indeed merely scholastic, but it is no more merely scholastic than the empirical facts of the world are merely "data" without the conceptual assessment of human beings and the organization of such "data" in critical discourses. In other words, the empirical facts of the world alone, without the struggle to understand them from a theoretical point of view, forces a break between the facts of the world and the world itself. If we could manage to extricate the facts of the world from their complex historical, economic, and social contingencies, then the facts of the world would be a purely non-political field of data available

for the scientific assessment of objective study. But, as C. Wright Mills has said, "No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact. No such world exists."[6]

The empirical facts of the world always already reflect a politics, and *if there was nothing else besides the world as it already is*, that would mean the end of politics itself. In order for politics to exist there must be some analysis of what is *and* a contention that something other than what already is could possibly be. To be apolitical is nothing more than to accept the facts of the world as they are without any contention. Without theory and a sense of the possibility for something other than what already is, the world would be (and often is) mistaken for an immutable obstacle course, and human understanding is reduced to a means for finding one's way through to the end of life. Therefore, contrary to a common derision of philosophy as otherworldly and useless (i.e. the common lesson of Thales who was so involved in observing the stars that he fell into a well), both the world and politics depend on it.

III.

The antagonisms underlying spectacular society have been complicated and obscured to the point of oblivion and society *cannot* be cleanly divided "into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat."[7] These two camps, in particular, still exist, but many different constitutive parts comprise each one, some parts ideological, some formed by group identities – many of the constitutive parts bind individual members across class lines. More and more, we discover the failure of class analysis to account for the heterogeneous complexity of class composition. *But this does not mean that we should abandon class analysis.* To the contrary, the actual and ongoing existence of class society requires class analysis. However, the analysis of society must be more complex and less inexorable – refuting all dichotomous thinking that would make things easier to talk about, but farther from the truth of the world. The complexity of the world we live in *does* undermine and ultimately destroys Marx's efforts to identify a revolutionary subject position through class analysis. And we cannot rescue the inexorable antagonism of Marx's "revolutionary class" by introducing a far more amorphous category like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have done with the "multitude."

A further complication is that the new complexities of social stratification in so-called multicultural societies cannot be reasonably understood as reflecting revolutionary developments in a historical materialist dialectic. Changes in the composition of society are due to multifarious causes, none of which can simply be celebrated as a harbinger

of anything radical or even liberal (i.e. migrations and group diversification often lead just as much – or more – to ethno-nationalist reaction, chauvinistic patriotism, and the reification of racial identities as they do to cosmopolitanism and social solidarity).

But there is some good news. By retaining (i.e. rethinking and reviving) a moral and normative political position against capitalism and its culture, we *can* identify a common ground shared by people across different fields of human life. Indigenous Mayans in Mexico were quite surprised in the 1990s to discover their robust common ground and the profound resonance of their claims with environmentalists and feminists and gays and lesbians and precarious and rebellious people everywhere – theirs was a commonality of being on the losing side of power, where power is defined by and for capital. However, capital does not by its own force create a revolutionary subject as "its special and essential product."[8] Rather, the creation of any revolutionary subject today requires the conscious and creative work of the imagination.[9]

Helpful in this regard are the works of Nancy Fraser and Enrique Dussel who find "revolutionary" prospects in subsets of populations that attempt to "transform" instead of "reform" the political-economic and cultural structures of the world.[10] Commonality (and solidarity) among such groups is critical because none can bring about structural transformations alone, or through temporary, sporadic, and opportunist interventions. Yet, the commonality of the aims of disparate groups does not produce a "multitude" that, however internally diverse, retains a cohesive unity over time. If any such "group of groups" did retain cohesive unity over time, then we could employ an analytical rubric of the multitude versus its opponents. But this *cannot* be done because when we look to the world for something like Hardt and Negri's multitude we do not find it there. And this is not because we are not looking in the right place, but rather, because it is not there to be found.

In addition to Dussel and Fraser, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's comments on "expanding the chain of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression" are helpful.[11] But, while these theorists can help us to imagine a new revolutionary subject position, we must keep in mind that none of them comprehended the critical role of the meta-textual terrains that Debord focused on. It is one thing to answer the question of "who," yet another to answer the question of "how." And the final analysis on these questions is not even an analysis: "who" will be answered when they show themselves, and "how" will be answered when they win.

IV.

Debord starts with an extreme form of alienation, which deepens

Marx's theory of estrangement and recognizes the complete failure of the predictive side (that is, the promise) of historical materialism. One could say that, in Debord, this latter recognition is dialectically related to the new depth of alienation. To state the problem bluntly: How can we resolve the failure of revolutionary projects and the lost promise of historical materialism, on the one hand, with the maintenance of revolutionary aspirations on the other (especially if alienation manages to extinguish instead of ignite revolutionary aspirations)? This is still the preeminent question today. The problem was summed up very well by Raoul Vaneigem in his Basic Banalities (Part 1):

> In this social context the function of alienation must be understood as a *condition of survival*… The satisfaction of basic needs remains the best safeguard of alienation; it is best dissimulated by being justified on the grounds of undeniable necessities. Alienation multiplies needs because it can satisfy none of them; …the glut of conveniences and elements of survival reduces life to a single choice: suicide or revolution.[12]

Here, I read "suicide" to have a particular signification regarding the life and the living spirit of the revolutionary. Either we will find revolutionary alternatives to revolution, or we will choose to end our lives *as revolutionaries*. Simply put, without a way through this impasse, the revolutionary becomes a relic for the archives of history.

Keeping the revolutionary subject position alive in the world is not a task for the philosopher, but philosophy can work through the impasse if wielded by others than philosophers. And while radical philosophy has its professors, it is not a profession. The way forward is never a matter of intellectuals writing recipes for the people and the people providing study material (in the form of their lives) to intellectuals. Philosophy itself must become the ongoing activity of those who can think and communicate well, and who can do better than my kind at reaching more than specialized reading publics looking for "groundbreaking" texts.[13] When I hear or see or learn about an articulation of some kind that reframes critical questions in a provocative and compelling manner, that destabilizes ideology, I cannot but conclude that it is philosophy broke loose.[14]

I must make a qualification at this juncture. There are and have been versions of "*folk philosophy*" that could never be called "*radical philosophy*." There is a difference between the two, and it is a difference that makes all the difference in the world. Let us take a particularly dangerous example. *The School of Practical Philosophy* secularizes philosophy by offering it up (selling it, to be precise) as a practical means for the "philosophically trained" person to achieve positional advantages (economic, psychological, spiritual) in complete felicity with the existing society. Like much of the "practical psychology" that aims to teach people how to be happy, "folk

philosophy" is oriented towards making "healthy" adjustments to the existing world, and not in any way towards making transformations of the world into something other than what it is. Philosophy only retains its transformative potential for as long as it is not made (and does not make us) compatible with the smooth functioning of spectacular capitalism.

V.

Debord, not satisfied with the "science" of Marx's crisis theory, wants to abandon the whole enterprise.[15] But Debord does not sufficiently understand the reluctance of human societies to desire and imagine, let alone to work for radical transformations. Generally, people are not open to structural transformations in the absence of imminent crises. John Locke understood this well in 1690, and his observations are no less true today:

> People are not so easily got out of their old forms, as some are apt to suggest. They are hardly to be prevailed with to amend the acknowledged faults in the frame they have been accustomed to. And if there be any original defects, or adventitious ones introduced by time, or corruption; it is not an easy thing to get them changed, even when all the world sees there is an opportunity for it.[16]

Americans in the US are especially uninterested in radical and revolutionary politics; that position is largely a result of the fact that the global crises many people worry about are still in the realm of abstraction for most Americans. Americans, for example, need to find themselves in greater imminent danger than a well-managed flurry of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad-cow disease) to prompt them to become vegetarians who oppose factory farming. Likewise, the "crises" of peak oil and global warming and fresh water reserves are not imminent for as long we can continue everyday life relatively uninterrupted, except by occasional worries about the abstract eventually becoming concrete. Most of the political work that takes place *in between crises* is preparatory, as people must be ready to act when the opportunity structure changes.[17] We must utilize crisis theory in order to comprehend the political significance of the abstract becoming concrete.

Crisis theory is necessary, but must be done without the predictive side of Marx or the indifference of Baudrillard. As much as radical philosophy can redirect attention, nobody will imagine and fight for possible futures unlike the present until the present proves its unsustainability in imminent and concrete ways.

The imminence of unsustainability is the only catalyst that lies in wait for a revolutionary politics today. The practice of radical philosophy (and

situationist politics, since crisis is the ultimate situation) is limited for as long as we live *in between crises*. But if and when crises are deep and widespread and especially if and when they reflect transnational system-crises, then the "permanent situation" of spectacular capitalism becomes all at once evidently impermanent and is thus more susceptible to the inroads of radical philosophy. Like Debord, my own view lies in between the optimism of Marx and the oblivion of Baudrillard. Yet, unlike Debord, I explicitly recognize the catalyzing prospects of crises. The downside of this view is that the emergence of such crises is out of our hands. Even though human culpability *does* often lie behind the environmental crises that are treated as purely "natural" events, such events are mostly made by generations of humans collectively and inadvertently, and such crises cannot be unmade or averted by the conscientious lifestyles of green anarchists or green consumers (which often amount to the same thing).

When the financial systems collapsed in 2008-2010, the US was only prepared to bail out its private sector through gargantuan measures of corporate welfare. US civil society vacillated between seeing this as a regrettable necessity, or, suspending all logic, socialism. Meanwhile many in the civil societies of France, Greece, and Spain, and in the city of Brussels, were ready to make real socialist transformations. Those movements, however, appear to have been suffocated by isolation or diminishing appeal, just as the most revolutionary transnational aspirations of the Zapatista rebellion were almost evaporated by the end of the 1990s. Still, the most promising responses are not coming from the US. I do not propose any vanguard, and certainly not a national vanguard, but for numerous reasons of culture and economy, the new revolutionary subject *will not hail from the US.*

One of the hardest questions I hear from students in the US is, "What can I do?" I do not buy into the old rhetoric about the "belly of the beast" or "using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house." Solidarity may be the only role to play for those in the US. There is only one other option, and that is if the world's most marginalized and rebellious people form "transgressive public spheres" and invite our participation from abroad.[18] Of course, a crisis may change this reality, but it is worth keeping in mind that the crisis of empire is often the vital contestation of everyone else who could not afford to wait until the bitter end.

VI.

The world needs a kind of humanism. This is a moral claim. The basic principles of humanism can be derived from multifarious sources, from Marx's early manuscripts of 1844, from Raya Dunayevskaya, from Jean-Paul Sartre, and even from Louis Althusser's critique of humanism.

Humanism is not very clear in Debord. The humanism that animates the cosmopolitan philosophy demarcates the broadest (even if the thinnest) sphere of human solidarity. Cosmopolitanism itself is a very good idea, and is the logical extension of humanism; but its faults come out in the rejection of nationalisms, certain forms of which have served liberatory purposes, as can be seen in the colonial and postcolonial struggles of peoples in the 20th century, and clearly in the works of Frantz Fanon and Partha Chatterjee.[19] What is needed, then, is a general humanism combined with the principle of self-determination. Our human being provides a broader basis for solidarity than shifting national, religious, or other identities which are in a slow flux. However, people use such other identities to highlight their particular struggles against exclusion, discrimination, poverty, disempowerment, etc. In some cases (i.e. under occupation or colonial rule), the assertion of national or sub-national identities is part of a liberatory struggle for self-determination. And it is necessary to clarify that self-determination is not the business of states, which have long histories of preserving themselves first and foremost, and of treating their "constituents" as instrumental to the goal of self-preservation and the propagation of their own power. We must, therefore, always distinguish between national identity and the national state.

The kind of base humanism I am proposing makes it impossible to "presuppose an abstract – *isolated* – human individual."[20] The meaning of being human is a meaning that must always be negotiated within a social context. This is a basic sociological and existential observation, well expounded by phenomenology, and controversial mainly to essentialists who want to mystify the human person.[21] But the point has a further stipulation vis-à-vis Debord: *Just as the human person does not exist as an isolated individual, so too the revolutionary transformation of human society cannot take place as the culmination of isolated individual acts.* On some level, perhaps this seems obvious. But, after World War II, radical movements around the globe saw the emergence of a form of lifestyle politics, often seen in atomistic varieties of anarchism and consumerist politics.[22]

The total individuation of the human person, which can only occur in one's imagination, leads inevitably to the individuation (or privatization) of political action, which has only an imaginary value. As Jürgen Habermas pointed out in his earliest works, individuation or privatization of political action is actually depoliticization.[23] As it turns out, no matter how deformed our social life becomes, we ultimately understand ourselves only and always within the context of other human beings. Other human beings make each of us who we are, whatever distinguishes us as individual persons is only visible in the light of other people, and other human beings make one social reality (or another) possible. Solipsism is a philosophical error that cannot actually occur in the world of human affairs[24]. The only

thing that everyday people can do that can *really* be seen and heard, that can, in other words, intervene in and possibly transform *the conditions of everyday life*, is collective action.[25] The movement of collective action can feel like plate tectonics, and the instinct to step outside of the collectivity is understandable, but none of that sensibility makes it any more effective (or, for that matter, possible).

VII.

Debord was right in making the first necessity of the program collective action. But his effort on this score was hobbled by an opposing force, that of the cult of personality of his own role in the SI and of the SI itself. Debord sharply denounced the conversion of his philosophy into the ideology of "situationism." He even cites this move from theory and philosophy to ideology as one of the root causes of the dissolution of the SI.[26] Already in 1960, Debord wrote "There is no 'situationism.' I myself am only a situationist by the fact of my participation, in this moment and under certain conditions, in a community that has come together for practical reasons with a certain task in sight, which it will know how or not know how to accomplish."[27] But any honest account of the SI inevitably reveals Debord's top-down micro-managerial style, his own susceptibility to the trappings of political purism and *cause célèbre*. I am not the slightest bit interested in this as a biographical curiosity or a lifestyle criticism, but rather, as a specific historical context that indubitably impacted Debord's political thinking. This point is not psychoanalytic and can be simply stated as follows: Debord's narrow and tenuous faith in a coterie of situationists was just as misplaced as any narrow and tenuous faith in any group with a particular name and set of organizational texts. The strategy of the putsch has been far better utilized by the powerful than by their antagonists, and it is time that the antagonists understood this.

I am therefore not a "pro-situ" writer who wants to see some kind of new SI. As interesting as the storied history of the SI is, Debord's *writing* was his real legacy. Debord himself said that of the many names he had been called, "theoretician" was the most fitting, and, he asserted, he was "one of the best."[28] We are certainly safeguarded then in shelving all of the biography and confronting the theoretician as such. With regard to the SI itself, we need a complete inversion of how the footnotes have gone thus far. That is, the theory and the analysis of spectacular capitalism and spectacular socialism must take center-stage, while all the rest of the SI drama, which has until now been the source of Debord's notoriety, should become the new footnote. In order to put these works to work for the future, we must take them from the trap of the SI itself.

This project is neither about the recuperation of the SI nor is it about the fossilization of the SI in time. Recuperation wants to turn a corpse into a kind of Frankenstein's monster, and fossils are useful for the reconstructive work of paleontologists. We must continually remind ourselves that revolutionary politics is neither recuperative nor backward-looking.

VIII.

All good theory is essentially practical. All of the most pressing problems of spectacular capitalism will find their solutions in human practice and theory, and not necessarily in that order. This follows the basic Kantian principle that what works in theory also works in practice, a principle which remains true and yet continues to run contrary to the common saying (no less common today) on theory and practice that Kant was responding to in 1793.[29] That common saying, which Marxist orthodoxy (and anarchist anti-intellectualism) has repeated *ad nauseam*, has served to separate critique from praxis, which impoverishes both.[30]

IX.

The highest points reached in Debord's political philosophy consist of his formal efforts towards the practical synthesis of creative, theatrical, and surprising collective action, utilizing humor and savvy, to cultivate (or provoke) an insurrectionary and/or revolutionary comportment and critique. Following such practical thinking, even new political parties (in addition to political science itself) should not be organized around elections and legislation as much as for the cultivation or understanding of insurrectionary and/or revolutionary tendencies.

X.

The standpoint of old socialisms has been to view the state, and capitalism, as instrumental historically transitional modes; the standpoint of new socialisms must be more anarchist with regard to the state and less predictive (less willing to find anything inexorable) with regard to capitalism. The standpoint of new socialisms must seek to understand the complex social-psychological position and composition of civil society and the destabilization (via radical philosophy) of the ideological impediments on that terrain.

XI.

Philosophy can *change* the world if it is wielded by others than philosophers; when the best philosophical works are the emancipatory struggles of the marginalized among us, *interpretation is not their sole content*.

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* (AK Press, 2003), p. 20.
2. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* (Verso, 2008), p. 76
3. John Coltrane cited in Frank Kofsky's *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (Pathfinder Press, 1988), p. 241.
4. See Guy Debord's *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957 – August 1960)* (Semiotext(e), 2009).
5. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis I.
6. Mills, "The Cultural Apparatus," in *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 405.
7. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Part 1, in *The Portable Marx* (Viking Penguin, 1983), p. 204.
8. Marx, op. cit., p. 215.
9. Franco "Bifo" Berardi speaks of composition, re-composition, and "compositionism" to refer to the creative processes of forming a political subject as a conscious collectivity (Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2009).
10. See Enrique Dussel's *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Duke University Press, 2008) and Nancy Fraser's *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (Routledge, 1997).
11. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 2001), p. 176.
12. Raoul Vaneigem, Basic Banalities (Part 1), Thesis # 6, in *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 120-121.
13. Thinking and communicating well does not imply formal education or conventional measures of literacy. To the contrary, in the wider world of art, where we find some of the greatest thinkers and communicators throughout human history, formal education and conventional measures of literacy can actually be limitations or impediments. It is also worth reading the speeches and letters of impoverished workers, former slaves, anarchist and communist mechanics and electricians, and women who have been blockaded from education and the rights of political citizenship. Such examples reinforce the possibility for the secularization of radical philosophy and its prospects for openness and inclusion, since its two main components – *thought and critique* – are not and have never been the private property of professionals.
14. In connection with this point, see the quotation at the top of this chapter from John Coltrane. His later recordings, such as *Ascension* and *Interstellar Space*, and their critical reception by offended connoisseurs, raises questions about what qualifies as "music," let alone as "jazz," about how to listen in spatial rather than in linear terms, about the commercial viability of collectively improvised music that has no fetishes of familiarity, and about how ecstatic and unruly real freedom and democracy might sound. Has any professional philosopher (i.e. Adorno?) done better than Coltrane to raise these questions? Likewise, regarding political questions, one might ask: Who better raises questions about public and private spheres of influence and control, Jürgen Habermas or the water war activists who made a rebellion in Cochabamba, Bolivia in the spring of 2000?
15. In particular, see Theses 79 to 95 in *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books,

1999) for Debord's critique of Marx's historical materialist dialectic and the scientific intentions of that model.

16. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: The Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter XIX: "Of the Dissolution of Government," Section 223 (any edition).
17. Consider, here, Gramsci's appropriation of military science for political struggle, and in particular, his observations on "war of movement" and "war of position." Gramsci argues that political struggle cannot just happen when you want it to, or practically, when you can mobilize the resources for it. One must also be in the right position to advance one's arguments and to defeat one's opponents, and such a position is often ripened by an "organic crisis" in the hegemony of the existing power structure. See, for example, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (International Publishers, 1971), the section on "State and Civil Society."
18. For more on my theory of the "transgressive public sphere," see Chapters 6 through 9 in *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lexington Books, 2008).
19. Although it is not true that all cosmopolitanism leads to a "rejection of all nationalisms," it is true that some of the most prominent theories of cosmopolitanism, from Kant to Nussbaum to Habermas, move in that direction. For Kant, cosmopolitanism is an ultimate ideal, higher than the ideal national community, and is the precondition for his dream of perpetual peace. Nussbaum has juxtaposed cosmopolitanism to patriotism in a way that presents the two as oppositional choices that displace each other. And Habermas has declared an era *after the nation-state* with his conception of the "postnational." Other cosmopolitans, like Kwame Anthony Appiah and Charles Taylor, defend a far less dichotomous (and better) view. See, for example, their replies to Martha Nussbaum in *For Love of Country?* (Beacon Press, 2002).
20. Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis VI.
21. It is necessary to make a qualification here regarding the human being (as an ontological subject) and humanism (as a moral point of view). In my conception, humanism begins with the species human being, but that does not mean that humanism as a moral point of view cannot be extended to non-human animals. I agree with much of the animal rights literature that posits personhood for non-human animals on the basis of their personality, sentience, community membership, and mortality, among other attributes. Indeed, I would far rather live in a world that recognizes and grants personhood to non-human animals than to corporations. Presently, our legal conventions do just the opposite of this, and I think we are worse off for it, and certainly less humanistic.
22. Sadly, situationist writings have been increasingly appropriated and invoked by "lifestylists" alongside the increasing popularity of the situationists since 1968, and in some cases, the appropriation was not the sole fault of the appropriators. Debord understood the pitfalls of lifestyle politics early on, writing in 1959, "If we arrogantly reject all the unpleasant conditions of the cultural reality in which we are caught and which we must transform, we will manifest, on a personal level, an ironclad (and inoffensive) purity. But such idealist satisfaction will condemn us to a solitude that is opposed to the first necessity of our program: collective action" (*Correspondence: The Foundation of*

the Situationist International (June 1957 – August 1960) [Semiotext(e), 2009], p. 217).

23. See, for example, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (The MIT Press, 1991) and *Legitimation Crisis* (Beacon Press, 1975) where Habermas discusses the deformation of the public sphere and various forms of civil, familial, and vocational privatism.
24. Even the most ruthless individualist businessman's "self-made" wealth depends ultimately on the existence and actions of other people.
25. We must not lose sight of the conditions of everyday life in everyday life itself.
26. The problem of ideology is discussed at great length throughout *The Real Split in the International* (Pluto Press, 2003). For two particularly vivid examples from that book, see Thesis # 25 and Footnote 14 in "Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time, 1972."
27. Debord, *Situationist International*, Number 4, 1960, cited in *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* (TamTam Books, 2001), p. 73.
28. See *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*, p. 75.
29. The common saying that what may be true in theory does not apply in practice.
30. In fact, most Marxism is not orthodox and most anarchism is not anti-intellectual. However, such versions (and they are the worst versions) of Marxism and anarchism *do* exist, and they are the only versions that opponents tend to recognize for the obvious reason that reductionism makes rejection easier.

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