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# **The Society of the Spectacle**

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**GUY DEBORD**

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>THE CULMINATION OF SEPARATION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>THE COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCES</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>THE PROLETARIAT AS SUBJECT AND REPRESENTATION</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>TIME AND HISTORY</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	
<b>SPECTACULAR TIME</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	
<b>TERRITORIAL DOMINATION</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	
<b>NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION WITHIN CULTURE</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	
<b>IDEOLOGY MATERIALIZED</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Comments on the Society of the Spectacle</b>	<b>176</b>





# Chapter 1

## THE CULMINATION OF SEPARATION

“But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence ... truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.”

Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

## GUY DEBORD

### 1

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.

### 2

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.

### 3

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.

### 4

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

### 5

The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective.

### 6

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the project of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality. In all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle also represents the constant presence of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process.

### 7

Separation is itself an integral part of the unity of this world, of a global social practice split into reality and image. The social practice confronted by an autonomous spectacle is at the same time the real totality which contains that spectacle. But the split within this totality mutilates it to the point that the spectacle seems to be its goal. The language of the spectacle consists of signs of the dominant system of production — signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that system.

**8**

The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity. Each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society.

**9**

In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false.

**10**

The concept of “the spectacle” interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena. The apparent diversities and contrasts of these phenomena stem from the social organization of appearances, whose essential nature must itself be recognized. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle’s essential character reveals it to be a visible negation of life — a negation that has taken on a visible form.

**11**

In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces that work against it, it is necessary to make some artificial

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

distinctions. In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle. For the spectacle is both the meaning and the agenda of our particular socio-economic formation. It is the historical moment in which we are caught.

### 12

The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears." The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.

### 13

The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.

### 14

The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.

**15**

As indispensable embellishment of currently produced objects, as general articulation of the system's rationales, and as advanced economic sector that directly creates an ever-increasing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the leading production of present-day society.

**16**

The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.

**17**

The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real.

**18**

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings — dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.

### 19

The spectacle inherits the weakness of the Western philosophical project, which attempted to understand activity by means of the categories of vision, and it is based on the relentless development of the particular technical rationality that grew out of that form of thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality, reducing everyone's concrete life to a universe of speculation.

### 20

Philosophy — the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power — was never by itself able to supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispersed the religious mists into which human beings had projected their own alienated powers, it has merely brought those mists down to earth, to the point that even the most mundane aspects of life have become impenetrable and unbreathable. The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a "world beyond"; the culmination of humanity's internal separation.

**21**

As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.

**22**

The fact that the practical power of modern society has detached itself from that society and established an independent realm in the spectacle can be explained only by the additional fact that that powerful practice continued to lack cohesion and had remained in contradiction with itself.

**23**

The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society's ambassador to itself, delivering its official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.

**24**

The spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes: a second Nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the inevitable consequence of some supposedly

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

natural technological development. On the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technological content. If the spectacle, considered in the limited sense of the “mass media” that are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to be invading society in the form of a mere technical apparatus, it should be understood that this apparatus is in no way neutral and that it has been developed in accordance with the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social needs of the age in which such technologies are developed can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially unilateral. The concentration of these media thus amounts to concentrating in the hands of the administrators of the existing system the means that enable them to carry on this particular form of administration. The social separation reflected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern state — the product of the social division of labor that is both the chief instrument of class rule and the concentrated expression of all social divisions.

### 25

Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor in the form of class divisions had given rise to an earlier, religious form of contemplation: the mythical order with which every power has always camouflaged itself. Religion justified the cosmic and ontological order that corresponded to the interests of the masters, expounding and embellishing everything their societies could not deliver. In this sense, all separate power has been spectacular. But this earlier universal devotion to a fixed religious imagery was only a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for the poverty of a concrete social activity that was still generally

experienced as a unitary condition. In contrast, the modern spectacle depicts what society could deliver, but in so doing it rigidly separates what is possible from what is permitted. The spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence. Like a factitious god, it engenders itself and makes its own rules. It reveals itself for what it is: an autonomously developing separate power, based on the increasing productivity resulting from an increasingly refined division of labor into parcelized gestures dictated by the independent movement of machines, and working for an ever-expanding market. In the course of this development, all community and all critical awareness have disintegrated; and the forces that were able to grow by separating from each other have not yet been reunited.

**26**

The general separation of worker and product tends to eliminate any direct personal communication between the producers and any comprehensive sense of what they are producing. With the increasing accumulation of separate products and the increasing concentration of the productive process, communication and comprehension are monopolized by the managers of the system. The triumph of this separation-based economic system proletarianizes the whole world.

**27**

Due to the very success of this separate production of separation, the fundamental experience that in earlier societies was associated with people's primary work is in the process of being replaced (in sectors near the cutting edge of the system's evolution) by an identification of life with nonworking time, with inactivity. But such inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity. It remains dependent on it, in an



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

uneasy and admiring submission to the requirements and consequences of the production system. It is itself one of the consequences of that system. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nullified — all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a “liberation from work,” namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of the activity stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced.

### 28

The reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender “lonely crowds.” With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions.

### 29

The spectacle was born from the world’s loss of unity, and the immense expansion of the modern spectacle reveals the enormity of this loss. The abstractifying of all individual labor and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose manner of being concrete is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, a part of the world presents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness.

**30**

The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

**31**

Workers do not produce themselves, they produce a power independent of themselves. The success of this production, the abundance it generates, is experienced by the producers as an abundance of dispossession. As their alienated products accumulate, all time and space become foreign to them. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map that is identical to the territory it represents. The forces that have escaped us display themselves to us in all their power.

**32**

The spectacle's social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion consists primarily of the expansion of this particular sector of industrial production. The "growth" generated by an economy developing for its own sake can be nothing other than a growth of the very alienation that was at its origin.

**33**

Though separated from what they produce, people nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life.

**34**

The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.

# Chapter 2

## THE COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE

"The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the attitudes that people adopt toward it, as it subjugates their consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression... As labor is increasingly rationalized and mechanized, this subjugation is reinforced by the fact that people's activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative."

Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

**35**

In the spectacle's basic practice of incorporating into itself all the fluid aspects of human activity so as to possess them in a congealed form, and of inverting living values into purely abstract values, we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious, yet which is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties.

**36**

The fetishism of the commodity — the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things” — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.

**37**

The world at once present and absent that the spectacle holds up to view is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its development is identical to people's estrangement from each other and from everything they produce.

**38**

The loss of quality that is so evident at every level of spectacular language, from the objects it glorifies to the behavior it regulates, stems from the basic nature of a production system that shuns reality. The commodity form reduces everything to quantitative equivalence. The quantitative is what it develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative.

**39**

Despite the fact that this development excludes the qualitative, it is itself subject to qualitative change. The spectacle reflects the fact that this development has crossed the threshold of its own abundance. Although this qualitative change has as yet taken place only partially in a few local areas, it is already implicit at the universal level that was the commodity's original standard — a standard that the commodity has lived up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.

**40**

The development of productive forces is the unconscious history that has actually created and altered the living conditions of human groups — the conditions enabling them to survive and the expansion of those conditions. It has been the economic basis of all human undertakings. Within natural economies, the emergence of a commodity sector represented a surplus survival. Commodity production, which implies the exchange of varied products between independent producers, tended for a long time to retain its small-scale craft aspects, relegated as it was to a marginal economic role where its quantitative reality was still hidden. But whenever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale commerce and capital accumulation, it took total control of the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had already shown itself to be in the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This constant expansion of economic power in the form of commodities transformed human labor itself into a commodity, into wage labor, and ultimately produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival — but only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher level. Economic growth has liberated societies from the natural pressures that forced them into an immediate struggle for survival; but

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

they have not yet been liberated from their liberator. The commodity's independence has spread to the entire economy it now dominates. This economy has transformed the world, but it has merely transformed it into a world dominated by the economy. The pseudonature within which human labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain forever in its service; and since this demand is formulated by and answerable only to itself, it in fact ends up channeling all socially permitted projects and endeavors into its own reinforcement. The abundance of commodities — that is, the abundance of commodity relations — amounts to nothing more than an augmented survival.

### 41

As long as the economy's role as material basis of social life was neither noticed nor understood (remaining unknown precisely because it was so familiar), the commodity's dominion over the economy was exerted in a covert manner. In societies where actual commodities were few and far between, money was the apparent master, serving as plenipotentiary representative of the greater power that remained unknown. With the Industrial Revolution's manufacturing division of labor and mass production for a global market, the commodity finally became fully visible as a power that was colonizing all social life. It was at that point that political economy established itself as the dominant science, and as the science of domination.

### 42

The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship both extensively and intensively. In the less industrialized regions, its reign is

already manifested by the presence of a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by the more industrially advanced regions. In the latter, social space is blanketed with ever-new layers of commodities. With the “second industrial revolution,” alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production. The society’s entire sold labor has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has to be returned in fragmented form to fragmented individuals who are completely cut off from the overall operation of the productive forces. To this end the specialized science of domination is broken down into further specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, and semiology, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

**43**

Whereas during the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation “political economy considers the proletariat only as a worker,” who only needs to be allotted the indispensable minimum for maintaining his labor power, and never considers him “in his leisure and humanity,” this ruling-class perspective is revised as soon as commodity abundance reaches a level that requires an additional collaboration from him. Once his workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organization and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. At this point the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the worker’s “leisure and humanity” simply because political economy now can and must dominate those spheres as political economy. The “perfected denial of man” has thus taken charge of all human existence.



**44**

The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to include privation. If augmented survival never comes to a resolution, if there is no point where it might stop expanding, this is because it is itself stuck in the realm of privation. It may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

**45**

Automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, obliges the commodity system to resolve the following contradiction: The technological developments that objectively tend to eliminate work must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity, because labor is the only creator of commodities. The only way to prevent automation (or any other less extreme method of increasing labor productivity) from reducing society's total necessary labor time is to create new jobs. To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or "service" sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities; and in this it is serving a real need, in the sense that increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.

**46**

Exchange value could arise only as a representative of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the conditions for its own autonomous power. By mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in controlling use. Usefulness has come to be seen purely in terms of

exchange value, and is now completely at its mercy. Starting out like a condottiere in the service of use value, exchange value has ended up waging the war for its own sake.

**47**

The constant decline of use value that has always characterized the capitalist economy has given rise to a new form of poverty within the realm of augmented survival — alongside the old poverty which still persists, since the vast majority of people are still forced to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of the system's ends and each of them knows that he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail — the fact that even in its most impoverished forms (food, shelter) use value now has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival — accounts for the general acceptance of the illusions of modern commodity consumption. The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.

**48**

Use value was formerly understood as an implicit aspect of exchange value. Now, however, within the upside-down world of the spectacle, it must be explicitly proclaimed, both because its actual reality has been eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because it serves as a necessary pseudo-justification for a counterfeit life.

**49**

The spectacle is the flip side of money. It, too, is an abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence — the exchangeability of

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

different goods whose uses remain incomparable — the spectacle is the modern complement of money: a representation of the commodity world as a whole which serves as a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is money one can only look at, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just a servant of pseudo-use, it is already in itself a pseudo-use of life.

### 50

With the achievement of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to the appearances that are now that labor's primary product. Capital is no longer the invisible center governing the production process; as it accumulates, it spreads to the ends of the earth in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

### 51

The economy's triumph as an independent power at the same time spells its own doom, because the forces it has unleashed have eliminated the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity with a necessity for boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But that economy loses all connection with authentic needs insofar as it emerges from the social unconscious that unknowingly depended on it. "Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin" (Freud).

**52**

Once society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy in fact depends on the society. When the subterranean power of the economy grew to the point of visible domination, it lost its power. The economic Id must be replaced by the I. This subject can only arise out of society, that is, out of the struggle within society. Its existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle that is both product and producer of the economic foundation of history.

**53**

Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and thus the workers' direct possession of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

# Chapter 3

## UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCES

“A lively new polemic about the concepts ‘one divides into two’ and ‘two fuse into one’ is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that ‘one divides into two’ is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that ‘two fuse into one’ are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.”

Red Flag (Beijing), 21 September 1964

**54**

The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.

**55**

Although the struggles between different powers for control of the same socio-economic system are officially presented as irreconcilable antagonisms, they actually reflect that system's fundamental unity, both internationally and within each nation.

**56**

The sham spectacular struggles between rival forms of separate power are at the same time real, in that they express the system's uneven and conflictual development and the more or less contradictory interests of the classes or sections of classes that accept that system and strive to carve out a role for themselves within it. Just as the development of the most advanced economies involves clashes between different priorities, totalitarian state-bureaucratic forms of economic management and countries under colonialism or semicolonialism also exhibit highly divergent types of production and power. By invoking any number of different criteria, the spectacle can present these oppositions as totally distinct social systems. But in reality they are nothing but particular sectors whose fundamental essence lies in the global system that contains them, the single movement that has turned the whole planet into its field of operation: capitalism.

**57**

The society that bears the spectacle does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely by its economic hegemony. It also dominates them as the society of the spectacle. Even where the material base is still absent, modern society has already used the spectacle to invade the social surface of every continent. It sets the stage for the formation of indigenous ruling classes and frames their agendas. Just as it presents pseudogoods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialized countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support. Even if local manifestations of the spectacle include certain totalitarian specializations of social communication and control, from the standpoint of the overall functioning of the system those specializations are simply playing their allotted role within a global division of spectacular tasks.

**58**

Although this division of spectacular tasks preserves the existing order as a whole, it is primarily oriented toward protecting its dominant pole of development. The spectacle is rooted in the economy of abundance, and the products of that economy ultimately tend to dominate the spectacular market and override the ideological or police-state protectionist barriers set up by local spectacles with pretensions of independence.

**59**

Behind the glitter of spectacular distractions, a tendency toward banalization dominates modern society the world over, even where the more advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly

multiplied the variety of roles and objects to choose from. The vestiges of religion and of the family (the latter is still the primary mechanism for transferring class power from one generation to the next), along with the vestiges of moral repression imposed by those two institutions, can be blended with ostentatious pretensions of worldly gratification precisely because life in this particular world remains repressive and offers nothing but pseudo-gratifications. Complacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness — dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material.

**60**

Stars — spectacular representations of living human beings — project this general banality into images of permitted roles. As specialists of apparent life, stars serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations that they actually live. The function of these celebrities is to act out various lifestyles or sociopolitical viewpoints in a full, totally free manner. They embody the inaccessible results of social labor by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: power and vacations — the decisionmaking and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned. On one hand, a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudostar; on the other, a star of consumption may campaign for recognition as a pseudopower over life. But the activities of these stars are not really free, and they offer no real choices.

**61**

The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

individuality as of the individuality of others. Entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the succession of things. The stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying equal access to, and deriving equal happiness from, the entire realm of consumption. The stars of decisionmaking must possess the full range of admired human qualities: official differences between them are thus canceled out by the official similarity implied by their supposed excellence in every field of endeavor. As head of state, Khrushchev retrospectively became a general so as to take credit for the victory of the battle of Kursk twenty years after it happened. And Kennedy survived as an orator to the point of delivering his own funeral oration, since Theodore Sorenson continued to write speeches for his successor in the same style that had contributed so much toward the dead man's public persona. The admirable people who personify the system are well known for not being what they seem; they attain greatness by stooping below the reality of the most insignificant individual life, and everyone knows it.

## 62

The false choices offered by spectacular abundance — choices based on the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects) — develop into struggles between illusory qualities designed to generate fervent allegiance to quantitative trivialities. Fallacious archaic oppositions are revived — regionalisms and racisms which serve to endow mundane rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority — and pseudoplayful enthusiasms are aroused by an endless succession of ludicrous

competitions, from sports to elections. Wherever abundant consumption is established, one particular spectacular opposition is always in the forefront of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adults. But real adults — people who are masters of their own lives — are in fact nowhere to be found. And a youthful transformation of what exists is in no way characteristic of those who are now young; it is present solely in the economic system, in the dynamism of capitalism. It is things that rule and that are young, vying with each other and constantly replacing each other.

**63**

Spectacular oppositions conceal the unity of poverty. If different forms of the same alienation struggle against each other in the guise of irreconcilable antagonisms, this is because they are all based on real contradictions that are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated form and a diffuse form, depending on the requirements of the particular stage of poverty it denies and supports. In both cases it is nothing more than an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm center of misery.

**64**

The concentrated spectacle is primarily associated with bureaucratic capitalism, though it may also be imported as a technique for reinforcing state power in more backward mixed economies or even adopted by advanced capitalism during certain moments of crisis. Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat takes part in the ownership of the entire economy only through his membership in the community of bureaucrats. And since commodity production is less developed under bureaucratic capitalism, it too takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

the total social labor, and what it sells back to the society is that society's wholesale survival. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and any choice made independently of it, whether regarding food or music or anything else, thus amounts to a declaration of war against it. This dictatorship must be enforced by permanent violence. Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system's totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute star or disappear. This master of everyone else's nonconsumption is the heroic image that disguises the absolute exploitation entailed by the system of primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If the entire Chinese population has to study Mao to the point of identifying with Mao, this is because there is nothing else they can be. The dominion of the concentrated spectacle is a police state.

### 65

The diffuse spectacle is associated with commodity abundance, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the total commodity production, of which the spectacle is a laudatory catalog. Irreconcilable claims jockey for position on the stage of the affluent economy's unified spectacle, and different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting social policies. The automobile spectacle, for example, strives for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of old urban districts, while the city spectacle needs to preserve those districts as tourist attractions. The already dubious satisfaction alleged to be obtained from the consumption of the whole is thus constantly being disappointed because the actual consumer can

directly access only a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven, fragments which invariably lack the quality attributed to the whole.

**66**

Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end. The spectacle does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle each commodity, by pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself: the globalization of the commodity (which also amounts to the commodification of the globe). Thus, as a result of the cunning of the commodity, while each particular manifestation of the commodity eventually falls in battle, the general commodity-form continues onward toward its absolute realization.

**67**

The satisfaction that no longer comes from using the commodities produced in abundance is now sought through recognition of their value as commodities. Consumers are filled with religious fervor for the sovereign freedom of commodities whose use has become an end in itself. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products are propagated by all the communications media. A film sparks a fashion craze; a magazine publicizes night spots which in turn spin off different lines of products. The proliferation of faddish gadgets reflects the fact that as the mass of commodities becomes increasingly absurd, absurdity itself becomes a commodity. Trinkets such as key chains which come as free bonuses with the purchase of some luxury product, but which end up being traded back and forth as valued collectibles in their own right, reflect a mystical self-abandonment to commodity transcendence. Those who collect

the trinkets that have been manufactured for the sole purpose of being collected are accumulating commodity indulgences — glorious tokens of the commodity's real presence among the faithful. Reified people proudly display the proofs of their intimacy with the commodity. Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent exaltation. All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission.

### 68

The pseudoneeds imposed by modern consumerism cannot be opposed by any genuine needs or desires that are not themselves also shaped by society and its history. But commodity abundance represents a total break in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation unleashes an unlimited artificiality which overpowers any living desire. The cumulative power of this autonomous artificiality ends up by falsifying all social life.

### 69

The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely postpones the consumer's awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation. But as with the fashionable adoption of seemingly aristocratic first names which end up being given to virtually all individuals of the same age, the objects that promise uniqueness can be offered up for mass consumption only if they have been mass-produced. The prestigiousness of mediocre objects of this kind is solely due to the fact that they have been placed, however briefly, at the center of social life and hailed as a revelation

of the unfathomable purposes of production. But the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes mundane as soon as it is taken home by its consumer — and by all its other consumers. Too late, it reveals its essential poverty, a poverty that inevitably reflects the poverty of its production. Meanwhile, some other object is already replacing it as representative of the system and demanding its own moment of acclaim.

**70**

The fraudulence of the satisfactions offered by the system is exposed by this continual replacement of products and of general conditions of production. In both the diffuse and the concentrated spectacle, entities that have brazenly asserted their definitive perfection nevertheless end up changing, and only the system endures. Stalin, like any other outmoded commodity, is denounced by the very forces that originally promoted him. Each new lie of the advertising industry is an admission of its previous lie. And with each downfall of a personification of totalitarian power, the illusory community that had unanimously approved him is exposed as a mere conglomeration of loners without illusions.

**71**

The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle's natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.

**72**

The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle masks the class division underlying the real unity of the capitalist mode of production. What

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what excludes them from it. What brings people into relation with each other by liberating them from their local and national limitations is also what keeps them apart. What requires increased rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What produces society's abstract power also produces its concrete lack of freedom.

# Chapter 4

## THE PROLETARIAT AS SUBJECT AND REPRESENTATION

“Equal right to all the goods and pleasures of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints – in the final analysis, these are the aims behind the March 18<sup>th</sup> insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army.”

Parliamentary Inquest on the Paris Commune



**73**

The real movement that transforms existing conditions has been the dominant social force since the bourgeoisie's victory within the economic sphere, and this dominance became visible once that victory was translated onto the political plane. The development of productive forces shattered the old production relations, and all static order crumbled. Everything that was absolute became historical.

**74**

When people are thrust into history and forced to participate in the work and struggles that constitute history, they find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear and disabused manner. This history has no object distinct from what it creates from out of itself, although the final unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era considered the productive progression through which history had unfolded as itself the object of history. As for the subject of history, it can be nothing other than the self-production of the living — living people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world and of their own fully conscious adventures.

**75**

The class struggles of the long era of revolutions initiated by the rise of the bourgeoisie have developed in tandem with the dialectical “thought of history” — the thought which is no longer content to seek the meaning of what exists, but which strives to comprehend the dissolution of what exists, and in the process breaks down every separation.

For Hegel the point was no longer to interpret the world, but to interpret the transformation of the world. But because he limited himself to merely interpreting that transformation, Hegel only represents the philosophical culmination of philosophy. He seeks to understand a world that develops by itself. This historical thought is still a consciousness that always arrives too late, a consciousness that can only formulate retrospective justifications of what has already happened. It has thus gone beyond separation only in thought. Hegel's paradoxical stance — his subordination of the meaning of all reality to its historical culmination while at the same time proclaiming that his own system represents that culmination — flows from the simple fact that this thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought in his philosophy only a reconciliation with the results of those revolutions. "Even as a philosophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not express the entire process of this revolution, but only its concluding phase. In this sense it is a philosophy not of the revolution, but of the restoration" (Karl Korsch, "Theses on Hegel and Revolution"). Hegel performed the task of the philosopher — "the glorification of what exists" — for the last time; but already what existed for him could be nothing less than the entire movement of history. Since he nevertheless maintained the external position of thought, this externality could be masked only by identifying that thought with a preexisting project of the Spirit — of that absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done, and whose ultimate goal coincides with the present. Philosophy, in the process of being superseded by historical thought, has thus arrived at the point where it can glorify its world only by denying it, since in order to speak it must presuppose that the total history to which it has relegated everything has already come to an end, and that the only tribunal where truth could be judged is closed.

**77**

When the proletariat demonstrates through its own actions that this historical thought has not been forgotten, its refutation of that thought's conclusion is at the same time a confirmation of its method.

**78**

Historical thought can be salvaged only by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class can be nothing less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of its world. All the theoretical currents of the revolutionary working-class movement — Stirner and Bakunin as well as Marx — grew out of a critical confrontation with Hegelian thought.

**79**

The inseparability of Marx's theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from that theory's revolutionary character, that is, from its truth. It is in this regard that the relationship between Marx and Hegel has generally been ignored or misunderstood, or even denounced as the weak point of what became fallaciously transformed into a doctrine: "Marxism." Bernstein implicitly revealed this connection between the dialectical method and historical partisanship when in his book *Evolutionary Socialism* he deplored the 1847 Manifesto's unscientific predictions of imminent proletarian revolution in Germany: "This historical self-deception, so erroneous that the most naïve political visionary could hardly have done any worse, would be incomprehensible in a Marx who at that time had already seriously studied economics if we did not recognize that it reflected the lingering influence of the antithetical Hegelian dialectic, from which Marx, like Engels, could never completely free himself. In those times of general effervescence this influence was all the more fatal to him."

## 80

The inversion carried out by Marx in order to “salvage” the thought of the bourgeois revolutions by transferring it to a different context does not trivially consist of putting the materialist development of productive forces in place of the journey of the Hegelian Spirit toward its eventual encounter with itself — the Spirit whose objectification is identical to its alienation and whose historical wounds leave no scars. For once history becomes real, it no longer has an end. Marx demolished Hegel’s position of detachment from events, as well as passive contemplation by any supreme external agent whatsoever. Henceforth, theory’s concern is simply to know what it itself is doing. In contrast, present-day society’s passive contemplation of the movement of the economy is an untranscended holdover from the undialectical aspect of Hegel’s attempt to create a circular system; it is an approval that is no longer on the conceptual level and that no longer needs a Hegelianism to justify itself, because the movement it now praises is a sector of a world where thought no longer has any place, a sector whose mechanical development effectively dominates everything. Marx’s project is a project of conscious history, in which the quantitativeness that arises out of the blind development of merely economic productive forces must be transformed into a qualitative appropriation of history. The critique of political economy is the first act of this end of prehistory: “Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.”

## 81

Marx’s theory is closely linked with scientific thought insofar as it seeks a rational understanding of the forces that really operate in society. But it ultimately goes beyond scientific thought, preserving it only by superseding it. It seeks to understand social struggles, not sociological

laws. "We recognize only one science: the science of history" (The German Ideology).

**82**

The bourgeois era, which wants to give history a scientific foundation, overlooks the fact that the science available to it could itself arise only on the foundation of the historical development of the economy. But history is fundamentally dependent on this economic knowledge only so long as it remains merely economic history. The extent to which the viewpoint of scientific observation could overlook history's effect on the economy (an overall process modifying its own scientific premises) is shown by the vanity of those socialists who thought they had calculated the exact periodicity of economic crises. Now that constant government intervention has succeeded in counteracting the tendencies toward crisis, the same type of mentality sees this delicate balance as a definitive economic harmony. The project of transcending the economy and mastering history must grasp and incorporate the science of society, but it cannot itself be a scientific project. The revolutionary movement remains bourgeois insofar as it thinks it can master current history by means of scientific knowledge.

**83**

The utopian currents of socialism, though they are historically grounded in criticism of the existing social system, can rightly be called utopian insofar as they ignore history (that is, insofar as they ignore actual struggles taking place and any passage of time outside the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society), but not because they reject science. On the contrary, the utopian thinkers were completely dominated by the scientific thought of earlier centuries. They sought the completion and fulfillment of that general rational system. They did not

consider themselves unarmed prophets, for they firmly believed in the social power of scientific proof and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. “Why,” Sombart asked, “would they want to seize through struggle what merely needed to be proved?” But the utopians’ scientific understanding did not include the awareness that some social groups have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, forces to maintain it, and forms of false consciousness to reinforce it. Their grasp of reality thus lagged far behind the historical reality of the development of science itself, which had been largely oriented by the social requirements arising from such factors, which determined not only what findings were considered acceptable, but even what might or might not become an object of scientific research. The utopian socialists remained prisoners of the scientific manner of expounding the truth, viewing this truth as a pure abstract image — the form in which it had established itself at a much earlier stage of social development. As Sorel noted, the utopians took astronomy as their model for discovering and demonstrating the laws of society; their unhistorical conception of harmony was the natural result of their attempt to apply to society the science least dependent on history. They described this harmony as if they were Newtons discovering universal scientific laws, and the happy ending they constantly evoked “plays a role in their social science analogous to the role of inertia in classical physics” (*Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*).

**84**

The scientific-determinist aspect of Marx’s thought was precisely what made it vulnerable to “ideologization,” both during his own lifetime and even more so in the theoretical heritage he left to the workers movement. The advent of the historical subject continues to be postponed, and it is economics, the historical science par excellence,

which is increasingly seen as guaranteeing the inevitability of its own future negation. In this way revolutionary practice, the only true agent of this negation, tends to be pushed out of theory's field of vision. Instead, it is seen as essential to patiently study economic development, and to go back to accepting the suffering which that development imposes with a Hegelian tranquility. The result remains "a graveyard of good intentions." The "science of revolutions" then concludes that consciousness always comes too soon, and has to be taught. "History has shown that we, and all who thought as we did, were wrong," Engels wrote in 1895. "It has made clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was far from being ripe." Throughout his life Marx had maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the exposition of his theory was carried out on the terrain of the dominant thought insofar as it took the form of critiques of particular disciplines, most notably the critique of that fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It was in this mutilated form, which eventually came to be seen as orthodox, that Marx's theory was transformed into "Marxism."

### 85

The weakness of Marx's theory is naturally linked to the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The German working class failed to inaugurate a permanent revolution in 1848; the Paris Commune was defeated in isolation. As a result, revolutionary theory could not yet be fully realized. The fact that Marx was reduced to defending and refining it by cloistered scholarly work in the British Museum had a debilitating effect on the theory itself. His scientific conclusions about the future development of the working class, and the organizational practice apparently implied by those conclusions, became obstacles to proletarian consciousness at a later stage.

**86**

The theoretical shortcomings of the scientific defense of proletarian revolution (both in its content and in its form of exposition) all ultimately result from identifying the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.

**87**

As early as the Communist Manifesto, Marx's effort to demonstrate the legitimacy of proletarian power by citing a repetitive sequence of precedents led him to oversimplify his historical analysis into a linear model of the development of modes of production, in which class struggles invariably resulted "either in a revolutionary transformation of the entire society or in the mutual ruin of the contending classes." The plain facts of history, however, are that the "Asiatic mode of production" (as Marx himself acknowledged elsewhere) maintained its immobility despite all its class conflicts; that no serf uprising ever overthrew the feudal lords; and that none of the slave revolts in the ancient world ended the rule of the freemen. The linear schema loses sight of the fact that the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever won; and that it is also the only class for which the development of the economy was both the cause and the consequence of its taking control of society. The same oversimplification led Marx to neglect the economic role of the state in the management of class society. If the rising bourgeoisie seemed to liberate the economy from the state, this was true only to the extent that the previous state was an instrument of class oppression within a static economy. The bourgeoisie originally developed its independent economic power during the medieval period when the state had been weakened and feudalism was breaking up the stable equilibrium between different powers. In contrast, the modern state — which began to support the bourgeoisie's development through its mercantile policies



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

and which developed into the bourgeoisie's own state during the *laissez-faire* era — was eventually to emerge as a central power in the planned management of the economic process. Marx was nevertheless able to describe the “Bonapartist” prototype of modern statist bureaucracy, the fusion of capital and state to create a “national power of capital over labor, a public force designed to maintain social servitude” — a form of social order in which the bourgeoisie renounces all historical life apart from what has been reduced to the economic history of things, and would like to be “condemned to the same political nothingness as all the other classes.” The sociopolitical foundations of the modern spectacle are already discernable here, and these foundations negatively imply that the proletariat is the only pretender to historical life.

### 88

The only two classes that really correspond to Marx's theory, the two pure classes that the entire analysis of *Capital* brings to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history, but operating under very different conditions. The bourgeois revolution is done. The proletarian revolution is a yet-unrealized project, born on the foundation of the earlier revolution but differing from it qualitatively. If one overlooks the originality of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, one also tends to overlook the specific originality of the proletarian project, which can achieve nothing unless it carries its own banners and recognizes the “immensity of its own tasks.” The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat cannot create its own new form of power except by becoming the class of consciousness. The growth of productive forces will not in itself guarantee the emergence of such a power — not even indirectly by way of the increasing dispossession which that growth entails. Nor can a Jacobin-style seizure of the state

be a means to this end. The proletariat cannot make use of any ideology designed to disguise its partial goals as general goals, because the proletariat cannot preserve any partial reality that is truly its own.

**89**

If Marx, during a certain period of his participation in the proletarian struggle, placed too great a reliance on scientific prediction, to the point of creating the intellectual basis for the illusions of economism, it is clear that he himself did not succumb to those illusions. In a well-known letter of 7 December 1867, accompanying an article criticizing *Capital* which he himself had written but which he wanted Engels to present to the press as the work of an adversary, Marx clearly indicated the limits of his own science: “The author’s subjective tendency (imposed on him, perhaps, by his political position and his past), namely the manner in which he views and presents the final outcome of the present movement and social process, has no connection with his actual analysis.” By thus disparaging the “tendentious conclusions” of his own objective analysis, and by the irony of the “perhaps” with reference to the extrascientific choices supposedly “imposed” on him, Marx implicitly revealed the methodological key to fusing the two aspects.

**90**

The fusion of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each depends on the other for its validation. The proletarian class is formed into a subject in its process of organizing revolutionary struggles and in its reorganization of society at the moment of revolution — this is where the practical conditions of consciousness must exist, conditions in which the theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory. But this crucial question of organization was virtually ignored by revolutionary theory

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

during the period when the workers movement was first taking shape — the very period when that theory still possessed the unitary character it had inherited from historical thought (and which it had rightly vowed to develop into a unitary historical practice). Instead, the organizational question became the weakest aspect of radical theory, a confused terrain lending itself to the revival of hierarchical and statist tactics borrowed from the bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization of the workers movement that were developed on the basis of this theoretical negligence tended in turn to inhibit the maintenance of a unitary theory by breaking it up into various specialized and fragmented disciplines. This ideologically alienated theory was then no longer able to recognize the practical verifications of the unitary historical thought it had betrayed when such verifications emerged in spontaneous working-class struggles; instead, it contributed toward repressing every manifestation and memory of them. Yet those historical forms that took shape in struggle were precisely the practical terrain that was needed in order to validate the theory. They were what the theory needed, yet that need had not been formulated theoretically. The soviet, for example, was not a theoretical discovery. And the most advanced theoretical truth of the International Workingmen's Association was its own existence in practice.

### 91

The First International's initial successes enabled it to free itself from the confused influences of the dominant ideology that had survived within it. But the defeat and repression that it soon encountered brought to the surface a conflict between two different conceptions of proletarian revolution, each of which contained an authoritarian aspect that amounted to abandoning the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. The feud between the Marxists and the Bakuninists, which

eventually became irreconcilable, actually centered on two different issues — the question of power in a future revolutionary society and the question of the organization of the current movement — and each of the adversaries reversed their position when they went from one aspect to the other. Bakunin denounced the illusion that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian implementation of state power, warning that this would lead to the formation of a new bureaucratic ruling class and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (or of those reputed to be such). Marx, who believed that the concomitant maturation of economic contradictions and of the workers' education in democracy would reduce the role of a proletarian state to a brief phase needed to legitimize the new social relations brought into being by objective factors, denounced Bakunin and his supporters as an authoritarian conspiratorial elite who were deliberately placing themselves above the International with the harebrained scheme of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those who would designate themselves as such). Bakunin did in fact recruit followers on such a basis: "In the midst of the popular tempest we must be the invisible pilots guiding the revolution, not through any kind of overt power but through the collective dictatorship of our Alliance — a dictatorship without any badges or titles or official status, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power." Thus two ideologies of working-class revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique, but each losing the unity of historical thought and setting itself up as an ideological authority. Powerful organizations such as German Social Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation faithfully served one or the other of these ideologies; and everywhere the result was very different from what had been sought.

The fact that anarchists have seen the goal of proletarian revolution as immediately present represents both the strength and the weakness of collectivist anarchist struggles (the only forms of anarchism that can be taken seriously — the pretensions of the individualist forms of anarchism have always been ludicrous). From the historical thought of modern class struggles collectivist anarchism retains only the conclusion, and its constant harping on this conclusion is accompanied by a deliberate indifference to any consideration of methods. Its critique of political struggle has thus remained abstract, while its commitment to economic struggle has been channeled toward the mirage of a definitive solution that will supposedly be achieved by a single blow on this terrain, on the day of the general strike or the insurrection. The anarchists have saddled themselves with fulfilling an ideal. Anarchism remains a merely ideological negation of the state and of class society — the very social conditions which in their turn foster separate ideologies. It is the ideology of pure freedom, an ideology that puts everything on the same level and loses any conception of the “historical evil” (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence. Anarchism responds to each particular struggle by repeating and reapplying the same simple and all-embracing lesson, because this lesson has from the beginning been considered the be-all and end-all of the movement. This is reflected in Bakunin’s 1873 letter of resignation from the Jura Federation: “During the past nine years the International has developed more than enough ideas to save the world, if ideas alone could

save it, and I challenge anyone to come up with a new one. It's no longer the time for ideas, it's time for actions." This perspective undoubtedly retains proletarian historical thought's recognition that ideas must be put into practice, but it abandons the historical terrain by assuming that the appropriate forms for this transition to practice have already been discovered and will never change.

**93**

The anarchists, who explicitly distinguish themselves from the rest of the workers movement by their ideological conviction, reproduce this separation of competencies within their own ranks by providing a terrain that facilitates the informal domination of each particular anarchist organization by propagandists and defenders of their ideology, specialists whose mediocre intellectual activity is largely limited to the constant regurgitation of a few eternal truths. The anarchists' ideological reverence for unanimous decisionmaking has ended up paving the way for uncontrolled manipulation of their own organizations by specialists in freedom; and revolutionary anarchism expects the same type of unanimity, obtained by the same means, from the masses once they have been liberated. Furthermore, the anarchists' refusal to take into account the great differences between the conditions of a minority banded together in present-day struggles and of a postrevolutionary society of free individuals has repeatedly led to the isolation of anarchists when the moment for collective decisionmaking actually arrives, as is shown by the countless anarchist insurrections in Spain that were contained and crushed at a local level.

**94**

The illusion more or less explicitly maintained by genuine anarchism is its constant belief that a revolution is just around the corner, and that

the instantaneous accomplishment of this revolution will demonstrate the truth of anarchist ideology and of the form of practical organization that has developed in accordance with that ideology. In 1936 anarchism did indeed initiate a social revolution, a revolution that was the most advanced expression of proletarian power ever realized. But even in that case it should be noted that the general uprising began as a merely defensive reaction to the army's attempted coup. Furthermore, inasmuch as the revolution was not carried to completion during its opening days (because Franco controlled half the country and was being strongly supported from abroad, because the rest of the international proletarian movement had already been defeated, and because the anti-Franco camp included various bourgeois forces and statist working-class parties), the organized anarchist movement proved incapable of extending the revolution's partial victories, or even of defending them. Its recognized leaders became government ministers, hostages to a bourgeois state that was destroying the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

### 95

The "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International is the scientific ideology of socialist revolution, an ideology which identifies its whole truth with objective economic processes and with the progressive recognition of the inevitability of those processes by a working class educated by the organization. This ideology revives the faith in pedagogical demonstration that was found among the utopian socialists, combining that faith with a contemplative invocation of the course of history; but it has lost both the Hegelian dimension of total history and the static image of totality presented by the utopians (most richly by Fourier). This type of scientific attitude, which can do nothing more than resurrect the traditional dilemmas between symmetrical ethical choices, is at the root of Hilferding's absurd conclusion that recognizing the

inevitability of socialism “gives no indication as to what practical attitude should be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize that something is inevitable, and quite another to put oneself in the service of that inevitability” (Finanzkapital). Those who failed to realize that for Marx and for the revolutionary proletariat unitary historical thought was in no way distinct from a practical attitude to be adopted generally ended up becoming victims of the practice they did adopt.

96

The ideology of the social-democratic organizations put those organizations under the control of the professors who were educating the working class, and their organizational forms corresponded to this type of passive apprenticeship. The participation of the socialists of the Second International in political and economic struggles was admittedly concrete, but it was profoundly uncritical. It was a manifestly reformist practice carried on in the name of an illusory revolutionism. This ideology of revolution inevitably foundered on the very successes of those who proclaimed it. The elevation of socialist journalists and parliamentary representatives above the rest of the movement encouraged them to become habituated to a bourgeois lifestyle (most of them had in any case been recruited from the bourgeois intelligentsia). And even industrial workers who had been recruited out of struggles in the factories were transformed by the trade-union bureaucracy into brokers of labor-power, whose task was to make sure that that commodity was sold at a “fair” price. For the activity of all these people to have retained any appearance of being revolutionary, capitalism would have had to have turned out to be conveniently incapable of tolerating this economic reformism, despite the fact that it had no trouble tolerating the legalistic political expressions of the same reformism. The social democrats’ scientific ideology confidently affirmed that capitalism



could not tolerate these economic antagonisms; but history repeatedly proved them wrong.

97

Bernstein, the social democrat least attached to political ideology and most openly attached to the methodology of bourgeois science, was honest enough to point out this contradiction (a contradiction which had also been implied by the reformist movement of the English workers, who never bothered to invoke any revolutionary ideology). But it was historical development itself which ultimately provided the definitive demonstration. Although full of illusions in other regards, Bernstein had denied that a crisis of capitalist production would miraculously force the hand of the socialists, who wanted to inherit the revolution only by way of this orthodox sequence of events. The profound social upheaval touched off by World War I, though it led to a widespread awakening of radical consciousness, twice demonstrated that the social-democratic hierarchy had failed to provide the German workers with a revolutionary education capable of turning them into theorists: first, when the overwhelming majority of the party rallied to the imperialist war; then, following the German defeat, when the party crushed the Spartakist revolutionaries. The ex-worker Ebert, who had become one of the social-democratic leaders, apparently still believed in sin since he admitted that he hated revolution "like sin." And he proved himself a fitting precursor of the socialist representation that was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat in Russia and elsewhere, when he accurately summed up the essence of this new form of alienation: "Socialism means working a lot."

## 98

As a Marxist thinker, Lenin was simply a faithful and consistent Kautskyist who applied the revolutionary ideology of “orthodox Marxism” within the conditions existing in Russia, conditions which did not lend themselves to the reformist practice carried on elsewhere by the Second International. In the Russian context, the Bolshevik practice of directing the proletariat from outside, by means of a disciplined underground party under the control of intellectuals who had become “professional revolutionaries,” became a new profession — a profession which refused to come to terms with any of the professional ruling strata of capitalist society (the Czarist political regime was in any case incapable of offering any opportunities for such compromise, which depends on an advanced stage of bourgeois power). As a result of this intransigence, the Bolsheviks ended up becoming the sole practitioners of the profession of totalitarian social domination.

## 99

With the war and the collapse of international social democracy in the face of that war, the authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks was able to spread its influence all over the world. The bloody end of the democratic illusions of the workers movement transformed the entire world into a Russia, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary breakthrough engendered by this period of crisis, offered its hierarchical and ideological model to the proletariat of all countries, urging them to adopt it in order to “speak Russian” to their own ruling classes. Lenin did not reproach the Marxism of the Second International for being a revolutionary ideology, but for ceasing to be a revolutionary ideology.

100

The historical moment when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world marks the inauguration of the state of affairs that is at the heart of the modern spectacle's domination: the representation of the working class has become an enemy of the working class.

101

“In all previous revolutions,” wrote Rosa Luxemburg in *Die Rote Fahne* of 21 December 1918, “the combatants faced each other openly and directly — class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops protecting the old order are not fighting under the insignia of the ruling class, but under the banner of a ‘social-democratic party.’ If the central question of revolution was posed openly and honestly — Capitalism or socialism? — the great mass of the proletariat would today have no doubts or hesitations.” Thus, a few days before its destruction, the radical current of the German proletariat discovered the secret of the new conditions engendered by the whole process that had gone before (a development to which the representation of the working class had greatly contributed): the spectacular organization of the ruling order's defense, the social reign of appearances where no “central question” can any longer be posed “openly and honestly.” The revolutionary representation of the proletariat had at this stage become both the primary cause and the central result of the general falsification of society.

102

The organization of the proletariat in accordance with the Bolshevik model resulted from the backwardness of Russia and from the abandonment of revolutionary struggle by the workers movements of

the advanced countries. These same backward conditions also tended to foster the counterrevolutionary aspects which that form of organization had unconsciously contained from its inception. The repeated failure of the mass of the European workers movement to take advantage of the golden opportunities of the 1918–1920 period (a failure which included the violent destruction of its own radical minority) favored the consolidation of the Bolshevik development and enabled that fraudulent outcome to present itself to the world as the only possible proletarian solution. By seizing a state monopoly as sole representative and defender of working-class power, the Bolshevik Party justified itself and became what it already was: the party of the owners of the proletariat, owners who essentially eliminated earlier forms of property.

### 103

For twenty years the various tendencies of Russian social democracy had engaged in an unresolved debate over all the conditions that might bear on the overthrow of Czarism — the weakness of the bourgeoisie; the preponderance of the peasant majority; and the potentially decisive role of a proletariat which was concentrated and combative but which constituted only a small minority of the population. This debate was eventually resolved in practice by a factor that had not figured in any of the hypotheses: a revolutionary bureaucracy that placed itself at the head of the proletariat, seized state power and proceeded to impose a new form of class domination. A strictly bourgeois revolution had been impossible; talk of a “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants” was meaningless verbiage; and the proletarian power of the soviets could not simultaneously maintain itself against the class of small landowners, against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation which had become externalized and alienated in the form of a working-class party that maintained total control over the state,

the economy, the means of expression, and soon even over people's thoughts. Trotsky's and Parvus's theory of permanent revolution, which Lenin adopted in April 1917, was the only theory that proved true for countries with underdeveloped bourgeoisies; but it became true only after the unknown factor of bureaucratic class power came into the picture. In the numerous arguments within the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was the most consistent advocate of concentrating dictatorial power in the hands of this supreme ideological representation. Lenin was right every time in the sense that he invariably supported the solution implied by earlier choices of the minority that now exercised absolute power: the democracy that was kept from peasants by means of the state would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to denying it to Communist union leaders and to party members in general, and finally to the highest ranks of the party hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being crushed by arms and buried under a barrage of slander, Lenin attacked the radical-left bureaucrats who had formed a "Workers' Opposition" faction with the following ultimatum, the logic of which Stalin would later extend to an absolute division of the world: "You can stand here with us, or against us out there with a gun in your hand, but not within some opposition... We've had enough opposition."

### 104

After Kronstadt, the bureaucracy consolidated its power as sole owner of a system of state capitalism — internally by means of a temporary alliance with the peasantry (the "New Economic Policy") and externally by using the workers regimented into the bureaucratic parties of the Third International as a backup force for Russian diplomacy, sabotaging the entire revolutionary movement and supporting bourgeois governments whose support it in turn hoped to secure in the sphere of international politics (the Kuomintang regime in the China of

1925–27, the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, etc.). The Russian bureaucracy then carried this consolidation of power to the next stage by subjecting the peasantry to a reign of terror, implementing the most brutal primitive accumulation of capital in history. The industrialization of the Stalin era revealed the bureaucracy's ultimate function: continuing the reign of the economy by preserving the essence of market society: commodified labor. It also demonstrated the independence of the economy: the economy has come to dominate society so completely that it has proved capable of recreating the class domination it needs for its own continued operation; that is, the bourgeoisie has created an independent power that is capable of maintaining itself even without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy was not "the last owning class in history" in Bruno Rizzi's sense; it was merely a substitute ruling class for the commodity economy. An impotent capitalist property system was replaced by a cruder version of itself — simplified, less diversified, and concentrated as the collective property of the bureaucratic class. This underdeveloped type of ruling class is also a reflection of economic underdevelopment, and it has no agenda beyond overcoming this underdevelopment in certain regions of the world. The hierarchical and statist framework for this crude remake of the capitalist ruling class was provided by the working-class party, which was itself modeled on the hierarchical separations of bourgeois organizations. As Ante Ciliga noted while in one of Stalin's prisons, "Technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions" (Lenin and the Revolution).

## 105

Leninism was the highest voluntaristic expression of revolutionary ideology — a coherence of the separate governing a reality that resisted it. With the advent of Stalinism, revolutionary ideology returned to its fundamental incoherence. At that point, ideology was no longer a

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

weapon, it had become an end in itself. But a lie that can no longer be challenged becomes insane. The totalitarian ideological pronouncement obliterates reality as well as purpose; nothing exists but what it says exists. Although this crude form of the spectacle has been confined to certain underdeveloped regions, it has nevertheless played an essential role in the spectacle's global development. This particular materialization of ideology did not transform the world economically, as did advanced capitalism; it simply used police-state methods to transform people's perception of the world.

### 106

The ruling totalitarian-ideological class is the ruler of a world turned upside down. The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. It is modest only on this one point, however, because this officially nonexistent bureaucracy simultaneously attributes the crowning achievements of history to its own infallible leadership. Though its existence is everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy must be invisible as a class. As a result, all social life becomes insane. The social organization of total falsehood stems from this fundamental contradiction.

### 107

Stalinism was also a reign of terror within the bureaucratic class. The terrorism on which this class's power was based inevitably came to strike the class itself, because this class has no juridical legitimacy, no legally recognized status as an owning class which could be extended to each of its members. Its ownership has to be masked because it is based on false consciousness. This false consciousness can maintain its total power only by means of a total reign of terror in which all real motives are ultimately obscured. The members of the ruling bureaucratic class have the right of

ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a fundamental lie: they have to play the role of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they have to be actors faithful to a script of ideological betrayal. Yet they cannot actually participate in this counterfeit entity unless their legitimacy is validated. No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to demonstrate that he was the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the bureaucracy's official line is that there is no bureaucracy. Each bureaucrat is thus totally dependent on the central seal of legitimacy provided by the ruling ideology, which validates the collective participation in its "socialist regime" of all the bureaucrats it does not liquidate. Although the bureaucrats are collectively empowered to make all social decisions, the cohesion of their own class can be ensured only by the concentration of their terrorist power in a single person. In this person resides the only practical truth of the ruling lie: the power to determine an unchallengeable boundary line which is nevertheless constantly being adjusted. Stalin decides without appeal who is and who is not a member of the ruling bureaucracy — who should be considered a "proletarian in power" and who branded "a traitor in the pay of Wall Street and the Mikado." The atomized bureaucrats can find their collective legitimacy only in the person of Stalin — the lord of the world who thus comes to see himself as the absolute person, for whom no superior spirit exists. "The lord of the world recognizes his own nature — omnipresent power — through the destructive violence he exerts against the contrastingly powerless selfhood of his subjects." He is the power that defines the terrain of domination, and he is also "the power that ravages that terrain."



## 108

When ideology has become total through its possession of total power, and has changed from partial truth to totalitarian falsehood, historical thought has been so totally annihilated that history itself, even at the level of the most empirical knowledge, can no longer exist. Totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which whatever has previously happened is determined solely by its police. The project already envisioned by Napoleon of “monarchically controlling memory” has been realized in Stalinism’s constant rewriting of the past, which alters not only the interpretations of past events but even the events themselves. But the price paid for this liberation from all historical reality is the loss of the rational frame of reference that is indispensable to capitalism as a historical social system. The Lysenko fiasco is just one well-known example of how much the scientific application of ideology gone mad has cost the Russian economy. This contradiction — the fact that a totalitarian bureaucracy trying to administer an industrialized society is caught between its need for rationality and its repression of rationality — is also one of its main weaknesses in comparison with normal capitalist development. Just as the bureaucracy cannot resolve the question of agriculture as ordinary capitalism has done, it also proves inferior to the latter in the field of industrial production, because its unrealistic authoritarian planning is based on omnipresent falsifications.

## 109

Between the two world wars the revolutionary working-class movement was destroyed by the joint action of the Stalinist bureaucracy and of fascist totalitarianism (the latter’s organizational form having been inspired by the totalitarian party that had first been tested and developed in Russia). Fascism was a desperate attempt to defend the bourgeois economy from the dual threat of crisis and proletarian

subversion, a state of siege in which capitalist society saved itself by giving itself an emergency dose of rationalization in the form of massive state intervention. But this rationalization is hampered by the extreme irrationality of its methods. Although fascism rallies to the defense of the main icons of a bourgeois ideology that has become conservative (family, private property, moral order, patriotism), while mobilizing the petty bourgeoisie and the unemployed workers who are panic-stricken by economic crisis or disillusioned by the socialist movement's failure to bring about a revolution, it is not itself fundamentally ideological. It presents itself as what it is — a violent resurrection of myth calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudovalues: race, blood, leader. Fascism is a technologically equipped primitivism. Its factitious mythological rehashes are presented in the spectacular context of the most modern means of conditioning and illusion. It is thus a significant factor in the formation of the modern spectacle, and its role in the destruction of the old working-class movement also makes it one of the founding forces of present-day society. But since it is also the most costly method of preserving the capitalist order, it has generally ended up being replaced by the major capitalist states, which represent stronger and more rational forms of that order.

## 110

When the Russian bureaucracy has finally succeeded in doing away with the vestiges of bourgeois property that hampered its rule over the economy, and in developing this economy for its own purposes, and in being recognized as a member of the club of great powers, it wants to enjoy its world in peace and to disencumber itself from the arbitrariness to which it is still subjected. It thus denounces the Stalinism at its origin. But this denunciation remains Stalinist — arbitrary, unexplained, and subject to continual modification — because the ideological lie at its

origin can never be revealed. The bureaucracy cannot liberalize itself either culturally or politically because its existence as a class depends on its ideological monopoly, which, for all its cumbersomeness, is its sole title to power. This ideology has lost the passion of its original expression, but its passionless routinization still has the repressive function of controlling all thought and prohibiting any competition whatsoever. The bureaucracy is thus helplessly tied to an ideology that is no longer believed by anyone. The power that used to inspire terror now inspires ridicule, but this ridiculed power still defends itself with the threat of resorting to the terrorizing force it would like to be rid of. Thus, at the very time when the bureaucracy hopes to demonstrate its superiority on the terrain of capitalism it reveals itself to be a poor cousin of capitalism. Just as its actual history contradicts its façade of legality and its crudely maintained ignorance contradicts its scientific pretensions, so its attempt to vie with the bourgeoisie in the production of commodity abundance is stymied by the fact that such abundance contains its own implicit ideology, and is generally accompanied by the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular pseudoalternatives — a pseudofreedom that remains incompatible with the bureaucracy's ideology.

### 111

The bureaucracy's ideological title to power is already collapsing at the international level. The power that established itself nationally in the name of an ostensibly internationalist perspective is now forced to recognize that it can no longer impose its system of lies beyond its own national borders. The unequal economic development of diverse bureaucracies with competing interests that have succeeded in establishing their own "socialism" in more than one country has led to an all-out public confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese

lie. From this point on, each bureaucracy in power will have to find its own way; and the same is true for each of the totalitarian parties aspiring to such power (notably those that still survive from the Stalinist period among certain national working classes). This international collapse has been further aggravated by the expressions of internal negation which first became visible to the outside world when the workers of East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats and demanded a “government of steel workers” — a negation which has in one case already gone to the point of sovereign workers councils in Hungary. But in the final analysis, this crumbling of the global alliance of pseudosocialist bureaucracies is also a most unfavorable development for the future of capitalist society. The bourgeoisie is in the process of losing the adversary that objectively supported it by providing an illusory unification of all opposition to the existing order. This division of labor between two mutually reinforcing forms of the spectacle comes to an end when the pseudorevolutionary role in turn divides. The spectacular component of the destruction of the working-class movement is itself headed for destruction.

**112**

The only current partisans of the Leninist illusion are the various Trotskyist tendencies, which stubbornly persist in identifying the proletarian project with an ideologically based hierarchical organization despite all the historical experiences that have refuted that perspective. The distance that separates Trotskyism from a revolutionary critique of present-day society is related to the deferential distance the Trotskyists maintain regarding positions that were already mistaken when they were acted on in real struggles. Trotsky remained fundamentally loyal to the upper bureaucracy until 1927, while striving to gain control of it so as to make it resume a genuinely Bolshevik foreign policy. (It is well known, for example, that in order to help conceal Lenin’s famous

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

“Testament” he went so far as to slanderously disavow his own supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public.) Trotsky was doomed by his basic perspective, because once the bureaucracy became aware that it had evolved into a counterrevolutionary class on the domestic front, it was bound to opt for a similarly counterrevolutionary role in other countries (though still, of course, in the name of revolution). Trotsky’s subsequent efforts to create a Fourth International reflect the same inconsistency. Once he had become an unconditional partisan of the Bolshevik form of organization (which he did during the second Russian revolution), he refused for the rest of his life to recognize that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class. When Lukács, in 1923, presented this same organizational form as the long-sought link between theory and practice, in which proletarians cease being mere “spectators” of the events that occur in their organization and begin consciously choosing and experiencing those events, he was describing as merits of the Bolshevik Party everything that that party was not. Despite his profound theoretical work, Lukács remained an ideologue, speaking in the name of the power that was most grossly alien to the proletarian movement, yet believing and pretending that he found himself completely at home with it. As subsequent events demonstrated how that power disavows and suppresses its lackeys, Lukács’s endless self-repudiations revealed with caricatural clarity that he had identified with the total opposite of himself and of everything he had argued for in *History and Class Consciousness*. No one better than Lukács illustrates the validity of the fundamental rule for assessing all the intellectuals of this century: What they respect is a precise gauge of their own degradation. Yet Lenin had hardly encouraged these sorts of illusions about his activities. On the contrary, he acknowledged that “a political party cannot examine its members to see if there are contradictions between their philosophy and the party program.” The party whose idealized portrait Lukács had so

inopportunately drawn was in reality suited for only one very specific and limited task: the seizure of state power.

**113**

Since the neo-Leninist illusion carried on by present-day Trotskyism is constantly being contradicted by the reality of modern capitalist societies (both bourgeois and bureaucratic), it is not surprising that it gets its most favorable reception in the nominally independent “underdeveloped” countries, where the local ruling classes’ versions of bureaucratic state socialism end up amounting to little more than a mere ideology of economic development. The hybrid composition of these ruling classes tends to correspond to their position within the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between those two poles of capitalist power, along with their numerous ideological compromises (notably with Islam) stemming from their heterogeneous social bases, end up removing from these degraded versions of ideological socialism everything serious except the police. One type of bureaucracy establishes itself by forging an organization capable of combining national struggle with agrarian peasant revolt; it then, as in China, tends to apply the Stalinist model of industrialization in societies that are even less developed than Russia was in 1917. A bureaucracy able to industrialize the nation may also develop out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened in Egypt. In other situations, such as the aftermath of the Algerian war of independence, a bureaucracy that has established itself as a para-state authority in the course of struggle may seek a stabilizing compromise by merging with a weak national bourgeoisie. Finally, in the former colonies of black Africa that remain openly tied to the American and European bourgeoisie, a local bourgeoisie constitutes itself (usually based on the power of traditional tribal chiefs) through its possession of

the state. Foreign imperialism remains the real master of the economy of these countries, but at a certain stage its native agents are rewarded for their sale of local products by being granted possession of a local state — a state that is independent from the local masses but not from imperialism. Incapable of accumulating capital, this artificial bourgeoisie does nothing but squander the surplus value it extracts from local labor and the subsidies it receives from protector states and international monopolies. Because of the obvious inability of these bourgeois classes to fulfill the normal economic functions of a bourgeoisie, they soon find themselves challenged by oppositional movements based on the bureaucratic model (more or less adapted to particular local conditions). But if such bureaucracies succeed in their fundamental project of industrialization, they produce the historical conditions for their own defeat: by accumulating capital they also accumulate a proletariat, thus creating their own negation in countries where that negation had not previously existed.

### 114

In the course of this complex and terrible evolution which has brought the era of class struggles to a new set of conditions, the proletariat of the industrial countries has lost its ability to assert its own independent perspective. In a fundamental sense, it has also lost its illusions. But it has not lost its being. The proletariat has not been eliminated. It remains irreducibly present within the intensified alienation of modern capitalism. It consists of that vast majority of workers who have lost all power over their lives and who, once they become aware of this, redefine themselves as the proletariat, the force working to negate this society from within. This proletariat is being objectively reinforced by the virtual elimination of the peasantry and by the increasing degree to which the “service” sectors and intellectual professions are being

subjected to factorylike working conditions. Subjectively, however, this proletariat is still far removed from any practical class consciousness, and this goes not only for white-collar workers but also for blue-collar workers, who have yet to become aware of any perspective beyond the impotence and mystifications of the old politics. But when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power contributes to the constant reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer only in the form of its alienated labor but also in the form of the trade unions, political parties, and state powers that it had created in the effort to liberate itself, it also discovers through concrete historical experience that it is the class that must totally oppose all rigidified externalizations and all specializations of power. It bears a revolution that cannot leave anything outside itself, a revolution embodying the permanent domination of the present over the past and a total critique of separation; and it must discover the appropriate forms of action to carry out this revolution. No quantitative amelioration of its impoverishment, no illusory participation in a hierarchized system, can provide a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, because the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong it has suffered, nor in the righting of any particular wrong. It cannot recognize itself even in the righting of many such wrongs, but only in the righting of the absolute wrong of being excluded from any real life.

**115**

New signs of negation are proliferating in the most economically advanced countries. Although these signs are misunderstood and falsified by the spectacle, they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. We have already seen the failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism; now we are witnessing the failure of capitalist abundance. On one hand, anti-union struggles of Western workers are being repressed



first of all by the unions; on the other, rebellious youth are raising new protests, protests which are still vague and confused but which clearly imply a rejection of art, of everyday life, and of the old specialized politics. These are two sides of a new spontaneous struggle that is at first taking on a criminal appearance. They foreshadow a second proletarian assault against class society. As the lost children of this as yet immobile army reappear on this battleground — a battleground which has changed and yet remains the same — they are following a new “General Ludd” who, this time, urges them to attack the machinery of permitted consumption.

### 116

“The long-sought political form through which the working class could carry out its own economic liberation” has taken on a clear shape in this century, in the form of revolutionary workers councils which assume all decisionmaking and executive powers and which federate with each other by means of delegates who are answerable to their base and revocable at any moment. The councils that have actually emerged have as yet provided no more than a rough hint of their possibilities because they have immediately been opposed and defeated by class society’s various defensive forces, among which their own false consciousness must often be included. As Pannekoek rightly stressed, opting for the power of workers councils “poses problems” rather than providing a solution. But it is precisely within this form of social organization that the problems of proletarian revolution can find their real solution. This is the terrain where the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are brought together — the terrain where active direct communication is realized, marking the end of specialization, hierarchy and separation, and the transformation of existing conditions into “conditions of unity.” In this process proletarian subjects can emerge from their struggle against

their contemplative position; their consciousness is equal to the practical organization they have chosen for themselves because this consciousness has become inseparable from coherent intervention in history.

**117**

With the power of the councils — a power that must internationally supplant all other forms of power — the proletarian movement becomes its own product. This product is nothing other than the producers themselves, whose goal has become nothing other than their own fulfillment. Only in this way can the spectacle's negation of life be negated in its turn.

**118**

The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century was the most advanced expression of the old proletarian movement, but it was unnoticed or forgotten, except in travestied forms, because it was repressed and destroyed along with all the rest of the movement. Now, from the vantage point of the new stage of proletarian critique, the councils can be seen in their true light as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement. The historical consciousness that recognizes that the councils are the only terrain in which it can thrive can now see that they are no longer at the periphery of a movement that is subsiding, but at the center of a movement that is rising.

**119**

A revolutionary organization that exists before the establishment of the power of workers councils will discover its own appropriate form through struggle; but all these historical experiences have already made it

clear that it cannot claim to represent the working class. Its task, rather, is to embody a radical separation from the world of separation.

**120**

Revolutionary organization is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into two-way communication with practical struggles, in the process of becoming practical theory. Its own practice is to foster the communication and coherence of these struggles. At the revolutionary moment when social separations are dissolved, the organization must dissolve itself as a separate organization.

**121**

A revolutionary organization must constitute an integral critique of society, that is, it must make a comprehensive critique of all aspects of alienated social life while refusing to compromise with any form of separate power anywhere in the world. In the organization's struggle with class society, the combatants themselves are the fundamental weapons: a revolutionary organization must thus see to it that the dominant society's conditions of separation and hierarchy are not reproduced within itself. It must constantly struggle against its deformation by the ruling spectacle. The only limit to participation in its total democracy is that each of its members must have recognized and appropriated the coherence of the organization's critique — a coherence that must be demonstrated both in the critical theory as such and in the relation between that theory and practical activity.

**122**

As capitalism's ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own

impoverishment, putting them in the position of having to reject that impoverishment in its totality or not at all, revolutionary organization has had to learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.

**123**

Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as understanding of human practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires that workers become dialecticians and put their thought into practice. It thus demands of its “people without qualities” more than the bourgeois revolution demanded of the qualified individuals it delegated to carry out its tasks (because the partial ideological consciousness developed by a segment of the bourgeois class was based on the economy, that central part of social life in which that class was already in power). The development of class society to the stage of the spectacular organization of nonlife is thus leading the revolutionary project to become visibly what it has always been in essence.

**124**

Revolutionary theory is now the enemy of all revolutionary ideology, and it knows it.

# Chapter 5

## TIME AND HISTORY

O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! ...

An if we live, we live to tread on kings.

Shakespeare, Henry IV

## 125

Man, “the negative being who is solely to the extent that he suppresses Being,” is one with time. Man’s appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the development of the universe. “History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man” (Marx). Conversely, this “natural history” has no real existence other than through the process of human history, the only vantage point from which one can take in that historical totality (like the modern telescope whose power enables one to look back in time at the receding nebulas at the periphery of the universe). History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. The temporalization of humanity, brought about through the mediation of a society, amounts to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true within historical consciousness.

## 126

True (though still hidden) historical movement begins with the slow and imperceptible development of the “real nature of man” — the “nature that is born with human history, out of the generative action of human society.” But even when such a society has developed a technology and a language and is already a product of its own history, it is conscious only of a perpetual present. Knowledge is carried on only by the living, never going beyond the memory of the society’s oldest members. Neither death nor procreation is understood as a law of time. Time remains motionless, like an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally becomes conscious of time, it tries to negate it — it views time not as something that passes, but as something that returns. This static type of society organizes time in a cyclical manner, in accordance with its own direct experience of nature.

**127**

Cyclical time is already dominant among the nomadic peoples because they find the same conditions repeated at each stage of their journey. As Hegel notes, “the wandering of nomads is only nominal because it is limited to uniform spaces.” When a society settles in a particular location and gives space a content by developing distinctive areas within it, it finds itself confined within that locality. The periodic return to similar places now becomes the pure return of time in the same place, the repetition of a sequence of activities. The transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture marks the end of an idle and contentless freedom and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, is the basis for fully developed cyclical time. Eternity is within this time, it is the return of the same here on earth. Myth is the unitary mental construct which guarantees that the cosmic order conforms with the order that this society has in fact already established within its frontiers.

**128**

The social appropriation of time and the production of man by human labor develop within a society divided into classes. The power that establishes itself above the poverty of the society of cyclical time, the class that organizes this social labor and appropriates its limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the temporal surplus value resulting from its organization of social time: it alone possesses the irreversible time of the living. The wealth that can only be concentrated in the hands of the rulers and spent in extravagant festivities amounts to a squandering of historical time at the surface of society. The owners of this historical surplus value are the only ones in a position to know and enjoy real events. Separated from the collective organization of time associated with the repetitive production at the base of social life,

this historical time flows independently above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war, the time in which the masters of cyclical society pursue their personal histories; it is also the time that emerges in the clashes with foreign communities that disrupt the unchanging social order. History thus arises as something alien to people, as something they never sought and from which they had thought themselves protected. But it also revives the negative human restlessness that had been at the very origin of this whole (temporarily suspended) development.

**129**

In itself, cyclical time is a time without conflict. But conflict is already present even in this infancy of time, as history first struggles to become history in the practical activity of the masters. This history creates a surface irreversibility; its movement constitutes the very time it uses up within the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

**130**

“Static societies” are societies that have reduced their historical movement to a minimum and that have managed to maintain their internal conflicts and their conflicts with the natural and human environment in a constant equilibrium. Although the extraordinary diversity of the institutions established for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the flexibility of human nature’s self-creation, this diversity is apparent only to the external observer, the anthropologist who looks back from the vantage point of historical time. In each of these societies a definitive organizational structure has eliminated any possibility of change. The total conformism of their social practices, with which all human possibilities are identified for all time, has no external limit but the fear of falling back into a formless animal condition. The members



of these societies remain human at the price of always remaining the same.

**131**

With the emergence of political power — which seems to be associated with the last great technological revolutions (such as iron smelting) at the threshold of a period that would experience no further major upheavals until the rise of modern industry — kinship ties begin to dissolve. The succession of generations within a natural, purely cyclical time begins to be replaced by a linear succession of powers and events. This irreversible time is the time of those who rule, and the dynasty is its first unit of measurement. Writing is the rulers' weapon. In writing, language attains its complete independence as a mediation between consciousnesses. But this independence coincides with the independence of separate power, the mediation that shapes society. With writing there appears a consciousness that is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living — an impersonal memory, the memory of the administration of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the state; archives are its memory" (Novalis).

**132**

The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power. It also serves to inspire the continued progression of that time by recording the past out of which it has developed, since this orientation of time tends to collapse with the fall of each particular power and would otherwise sink back into the indifferent oblivion of cyclical time (the only time known to the peasant masses who, during the rise and fall of all the empires and their chronologies, never change). The owners of history have given time a direction, a direction which is also a meaning. But this history develops and perishes separately, leaving the underlying

society unchanged, because it remains separated from the common reality. This is why we tend to reduce the history of Oriental empires to a history of religions: the chronologies that have fallen to ruins have left nothing but the seemingly independent history of the illusions that veiled them. The masters who used the protection of myth to make history their private property did so first of all in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; and their earliest officially recognized dynasties were nothing but imaginary reconstructions of the past. But this illusory ownership by the masters was the only ownership then possible, both of the common history and of their own history. As their real historical power expanded, this illusory-mythical ownership became increasingly vulgarized. All these consequences flowed from the simple fact that as the masters played the role of mythically guaranteeing the permanence of cyclical time (as in the seasonal rites performed by the Chinese emperors), they themselves achieved a relative liberation from cyclical time.

**133**

The dry, unexplained chronology that a deified authority offered to its subjects, who were supposed to accept it as the earthly fulfillment of mythic commandments, was destined to be transcended and transformed into conscious history. But for this to happen, sizeable groups of people had to have experienced real participation in history. Out of this practical communication between those who have recognized each other as possessors of a unique present, who have experienced a qualitative richness of events in their own activity and who are at home in their own era, arises the general language of historical communication. Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the memorable and the threat of oblivion: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents

the results of his researches, so that time will not abolish the deeds of men...”

**134**

Examining history amounts to examining the nature of power. Greece was the moment when power and changes in power were first debated and understood. It was a democracy of the masters of society — a total contrast to the despotic state, where power settles accounts only with itself, within the impenetrable obscurity of its inner sanctum, by means of palace revolutions, which are beyond the pale of discussion whether they fail or succeed. But the shared power in the Greek communities was limited to the consumption of a social life whose production remained the separate and static domain of the servile class. The only people who lived were those who did not work. The divisions among the Greek communities and their struggles to exploit foreign cities were the externalized expression of the internal principle of separation on which each of them was based. Although Greece had dreamed of universal history, it did not succeed in unifying itself in the face of foreign invasion, or even in unifying the calendars of its independent city-states. Historical time became conscious in Greece, but it was not yet conscious of itself.

**135**

The disappearance of the particular conditions that had favored the Greek communities brought about a regression of Western historical thought, but it did not lead to a restoration of the old mythic structures. The clashes of the Mediterranean peoples and the rise and fall of the Roman state gave rise instead to semihistorical religions, which became a new armor for separate power and basic components of a new consciousness of time.

## 136

The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time that still governed the sphere of production and the irreversible time that was the theater of conflicts and regroupings among different peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were abstract universal acknowledgments of an irreversible time that had become democratized and open to all, but only in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: “The Kingdom of God is soon to come.” These religions were rooted in the soil of history, but they remained radically opposed to history. The semihistorical religions establish a qualitative point of departure in time (the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed), but their irreversible time — introducing an accumulation that would take the form of conquest in Islam and of increasing capital in Reformation Christianity — is inverted in religious thought and becomes a sort of countdown: waiting for time to run out before the Last Judgment and the advent of the other, true world. Eternity has emerged from cyclical time, as something beyond it. It is also the element that restrains the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within history itself by positioning itself on the other side of irreversible time as a pure point into which cyclical time returns and disappears. Bossuet will still say: “By way of time, which passes, we enter eternity, which does not pass.”

## 137

The Middle Ages, an incomplete mythical world whose consummation lay outside itself, is the period when cyclical time, though still governing the major part of production, really begins to be undermined by history. An element of irreversible time is recognized in the successive stages of each individual’s life. Life is seen as a one-way journey through a world whose meaning lies elsewhere: the pilgrim is the

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

person who leaves cyclical time behind and actually becomes the traveler that everyone else is symbolically. Personal historical life still finds its fulfillment within the sphere of power, whether in struggles waged by power or in struggles over disputed power; but power's irreversible time is now shared to an unlimited degree due to the general unity brought about by the oriented time of the Christian Era — a world of armed faith, where the adventures of the masters revolve around fealty and disputes over who owes fealty to whom. Feudal society was born from the merging of “the organizational structures of the conquering armies that developed in the process of conquest” with “the productive forces found in the conquered regions” (The German Ideology), and the factors contributing to the organization of those productive forces include the religious language in which they were expressed. Social domination was divided between the Church and the state, the latter power being in turn subdivided in the complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage within and between rural domains and urban communities. This diversification of potential historical life reflected the gradual emergence (following the failure of that great official enterprise of the medieval world, the Crusades) of the era's unnoticed innovation: the irreversible time that was silently undermining the society, the time experienced by the bourgeoisie in the production of commodities, the foundation and expansion of cities, and the commercial discovery of the planet — a practical experimentation that destroyed every mythical organization of the cosmos once and for all.

### 138

With the waning of the Middle Ages, the irreversible time that had invaded society was experienced by a consciousness still attached to the old order as an obsession with death. This was the melancholy of a world passing away, the last world where the security of myth still

counterbalanced history; and for this melancholy all earthly things move inevitably toward decay. The great European peasant revolts were also an attempt to respond to history — a history that was violently wresting the peasants from the patriarchal slumber that had been imposed by their feudal guardians. The millenarians' utopian aspiration of creating heaven on earth revived a dream that had been at the origin of the semihistorical religions, when the early Christian communities, like the Judaic messianism from which they sprung, responded to the troubles and misfortunes of their time by envisioning the imminent realization of the Kingdom of God, thereby adding an element of unrest and subversion to ancient society. When Christianity reached the point of sharing power within the empire, it denounced whatever still remained of this hope as mere superstition. This is what St. Augustine was doing when, in a formula that can be seen as the archetype of all the modern ideological apologetics, he declared that the Kingdom of God had in fact already come long ago — that it was nothing other than the established Church. The social revolts of the millenarian peasantry naturally began by defining their goal as the overthrow of that Church. But millenarianism developed in a historical world, not on the terrain of myth. Modern revolutionary hopes are not irrational continuations of the religious passion of millenarianism, as Norman Cohn thought he had demonstrated in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. On the contrary, millenarianism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary tendency, a tendency that lacked only the consciousness that it was a purely historical movement. The millenarians were doomed to defeat because they were unable to recognize their revolution as their own undertaking. The fact that they hesitated to act until they had received some external sign of God's will was an ideological corollary to the insurgent peasants' practice of following leaders from outside their own ranks. The peasant class could not attain a clear understanding of the workings of society or of

how to conduct its own struggle, and because it lacked these conditions for unifying its action and consciousness, it expressed its project and waged its wars with the imagery of an earthly paradise.

**139**

The Renaissance was a joyous break with eternity. Though seeking its heritage and legitimacy in the ancient world, it represented a new form of historical life. Its irreversible time was that of a never-ending accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness engendered by the experience of democratic communities and of the forces that destroy them now took up once again, with Machiavelli, the analysis of secularized power, saying the previously unsayable about the state. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the creation of festivals, life is experienced as an enjoyment of the passage of time. But this enjoyment of transience is itself transient. The song of Lorenzo de' Medici, which Burckhardt considered "the very spirit of the Renaissance," is the eulogy this fragile historical festival delivers on itself: "How beautiful the spring of life — and how quickly it vanishes."

**140**

The constant tendency toward the monopolization of historical life by the absolute-monarchist state — a transitional form on the way to complete domination by the bourgeois class — brings into clear view the nature of the bourgeoisie's new type of irreversible time. The bourgeoisie is associated with a labor time that has finally been freed from cyclical time. With the bourgeoisie, work becomes work that transforms historical conditions. The bourgeoisie is the first ruling class for which work is a value. And the bourgeoisie, which suppresses all privilege and recognizes no value that does not stem from the exploitation of labor, has appropriately identified its own value

as a ruling class with labor, and has made the progress of labor the measure of its own progress. The class that accumulates commodities and capital continually modifies nature by modifying labor itself, by unleashing labor's productivity. At the stage of absolute monarchy, all social life was already concentrated within the ornamented poverty of the Court, the gaudy trappings of a bleak state administration whose apex was the "profession of king"; and all particular historical freedoms had to surrender to this new power. The free play of the feudal lords' irreversible time came to an end in their last, lost battles — in the Fronde and in the Scottish uprising in support of Bonny Prince Charlie. The world now had a new foundation.

**141**

The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of a profoundly historical time, because it is the time corresponding to an economic production that continuously transforms society from top to bottom. So long as agrarian production remains the predominant form of labor, the cyclical time that remains at the base of society reinforces the joint forces of tradition, which tend to hold back any historical movement. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economy eradicates those vestiges throughout the world. History, which until then had seemed to involve only the actions of individual members of the ruling class, and which had thus been recorded as a mere chronology of events, is now understood as a general movement — a relentless movement that crushes any individuals in its path. By discovering its basis in political economy, history becomes aware of what had previously been unconscious; but this basis remains unconscious because it cannot be brought to light. This blind prehistory, this new fate that no one controls, is the only thing that the commodity economy has democratized.



142

The history that is present in all the depths of society tends to become invisible at the surface. The triumph of irreversible time is also its metamorphosis into a time of things, because the weapon that brought about its victory was the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity. The main product that economic development has transformed from a luxurious rarity to a commonly consumed item is thus history itself — but only in the form of the history of the abstract movement of things that dominates all qualitative aspects of life. While the earlier cyclical time had supported an increasing degree of historical time lived by individuals and groups, the irreversible time of production tends to socially eliminate such lived time.

143

The bourgeoisie has thus made irreversible historical time known and has imposed it on society, but it has prevented society from using it. “Once there was history, but not any more,” because the class of owners of the economy, which is inextricably tied to economic history, must repress every other irreversible use of time because it is directly threatened by them all. The ruling class, made up of specialists in the possession of things who are themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility within history. Meanwhile the worker at the base of society is for the first time not materially estranged from history, because the irreversible movement is now generated from that base. By demanding to live the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out

this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life.

**144**

The irreversible time of the bourgeoisie that had just seized power was at first called by its own name and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of general freedom that had served to overthrow the last remnants of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all the traditional forms of social organization, was already unable to completely conceal the real goal that it had draped in Roman costume: unrestricted freedom of trade. Commodity society, discovering its need to restore the passivity that it had so profoundly shaken in order to establish its own unchallenged rule, now found that, for its purposes, “Christianity with its cult of man in the abstract ... is the most fitting form of religion” (Capital). The bourgeoisie thus entered into a compromise with that religion, a compromise also reflected in its presentation of time: the Revolutionary calendar was abandoned and irreversible time returned to the straitjacket of a duly extended Christian Era.

**145**

With the development of capitalism, irreversible time has become globally unified. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is brought under the sway of this time’s development. But this history that is everywhere simultaneously the same is as yet nothing but an intrahistorical rejection of history. What appears the world over as the same day is merely the time of economic production, time cut up into equal abstract fragments. This unified irreversible time belongs to the global market, and thus also to the global spectacle.

The irreversible time of production is first of all the measure of commodities. The time officially recognized throughout the world as the general time of society actually only reflects the specialized interests that constitute it, and thus is merely one particular type of time.

GUY DEBORD

# Chapter 6

## SPECTACULAR TIME

"We have nothing of our own except time, which even the homeless can experience."

Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*

**147**

The time of production — commodified time — is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract, in which each segment need only demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all the others. It has no reality apart from its exchangeability. Under the social reign of commodified time, “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the carcass of time” (The Poverty of Philosophy). This devalued time is the complete opposite of time as “terrain of human development.”

**148**

This general time of human nondevelopment also has a complementary aspect — a consumable form of time based on the present mode of production and presenting itself in everyday life as a pseudocyclical time.

**149**

This pseudocyclical time is in fact merely a consumable disguise of the production system’s commodified time. It exhibits the latter’s essential traits: homogenous exchangeable units and suppression of any qualitative dimension. But as a by-product of commodified time whose function is to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life, it is loaded with pseudovalorizations and manifests itself as a succession of pseudoindividualized moments.

**150**

Pseudocyclical time is associated with the consumption of modern economic survival — the augmented survival in which everyday experience is cut off from decisionmaking and subjected no longer to

the natural order, but to the pseudo-nature created by alienated labor. It is thus quite natural that it echoes the old cyclical rhythm that governed survival in preindustrial societies, incorporating the natural vestiges of cyclical time while generating new variants: day and night, work and weekend, periodic vacations.

**151**

Pseudocyclical time is a time that has been transformed by industry. The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, one that recombines everything that the disintegration of the old unitary societies had differentiated into private life, economic life, and political life. The entire consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as a raw material for various new products put on the market as socially controlled uses of time. “A product that already exists in a form suitable for consumption may nevertheless serve as raw material for some other product” (Capital).

**152**

In its most advanced sectors, concentrated capitalism is increasingly tending to market “fully equipped” blocks of time, each functioning as a unified commodity combining a variety of other commodities. In the expanding economy of “services” and leisure activities, the payment for these blocks of time is equally unified: “everything’s included,” whether it is a matter of spectacular living environments, touristic pseudotravel, subscriptions to cultural consumption, or even the sale of sociability itself in the form of “exciting conversations” and “meetings with celebrities.” Spectacular commodities of this type, which would obviously never sell were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody, just as obviously reflect the modernization of sales techniques by being payable on credit.

## 153

Consumable pseudocyclical time is spectacular time, both in the narrow sense as time spent consuming images and in the broader sense as image of the consumption of time. The time spent consuming images (images which in turn serve to publicize all the other commodities) is both the particular terrain where the spectacle's mechanisms are most fully implemented and the general goal that those mechanisms present, the focus and epitome of all particular consumptions. Thus, the time that modern society is constantly seeking to "save" by increasing transportation speeds or using packaged soups ends up being spent by the average American in watching television three to six hours a day. As for the social image of the consumption of time, it is exclusively dominated by leisure time and vacations — moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, at a distance and as desirable by definition. These commodified moments are explicitly presented as moments of real life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. But all that is really happening is that the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity. What is presented as true life turns out to be merely a more truly spectacular life.

## 154

Although the present age presents itself as a series of frequently recurring festivities, it is an age that knows nothing of real festivals. The moments within cyclical time when members of a community joined together in a luxurious expenditure of life are impossible for a society that lacks both community and luxury. Its vulgarized pseudofestivals are parodies of real dialogue and gift-giving; they may incite waves of excessive economic spending, but they lead to nothing but disillusionments, which can be compensated only by the promise of some new disillusion to come. The less use value is present in the time of

modern survival, the more highly it is exalted in the spectacle. The reality of time has been replaced by the publicity of time.

**155**

While the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real labor of those societies, the pseudocyclical consumption of developed economies contradicts the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the really lived time of unchanging illusions. Spectacular time is the illusorily lived time of a constantly changing reality.

**156**

The production process's constant innovations are not echoed in consumption, which presents nothing but an expanded repetition of the past. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in spectacular time the past continues to dominate the present.

**157**

The lack of general historical life also means that individual life as yet has no history. The pseudo-events that vie for attention in spectacular dramatizations have not been lived by those who are informed about them; and in any case they are soon forgotten due to their increasingly frenetic replacement at every pulsation of the spectacular machinery. Conversely, what is really lived has no relation to the society's official version of irreversible time, and conflicts with the pseudocyclical rhythm of that time's consumable by-products. This individual experience of a disconnected everyday life remains without language, without concepts, and without critical access to its own past, which has nowhere



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

been recorded. Uncommunicated, misunderstood and forgotten, it is smothered by the spectacle's false memory of the unmemorable.

### 158

The spectacle, considered as the reigning society's method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a false consciousness of time.

### 159

In order to force the workers into the status of "free" producers and consumers of commodified time, it was first necessary to violently expropriate their time. The imposition of the new spectacular form of time became possible only after this initial dispossession of the producers.

### 160

The unavoidable biological limitations of the work force — evident both in its dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking and in the debilitating effects of irreversible time over each individual's lifetime — are treated by the modern production system as strictly secondary considerations. As such, they are ignored in that system's official proclamations and in the consumable trophies that embody its relentless triumphant progress. Fixated on the delusory center around which his world seems to move, the spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfillment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living he can no longer acknowledge his own death. Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system following the resultant economic loss, while the promoters of the "American

way of death” stress his capacity to preserve most of the appearances of life in his post-mortem state. On all the other fronts of advertising bombardment it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Everybody is urged to economize on their “youth-capital,” though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of economic capital. This social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life.

**161**

As Hegel showed, time is the necessary alienation, the terrain where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself. In total contrast, the current form of alienation is imposed on the producers of an estranged present. In this spatial alienation, the society that radically separates the subject from the activity it steals from him is in reality separating him from his own time. This potentially surmountable social alienation is what has prevented and paralyzed the possibilities and risks of a living alienation within time.

**162**

Behind the fashions that come and go on the frivolous surface of the spectacle of pseudocyclical time, the grand style of an era can always be found in what is governed by the secret yet obvious necessity for revolution.

**163**

The natural basis of time, the concrete experience of its passage, becomes human and social by existing for humanity. The limitations of human practice imposed by the various stages of labor have humanized time and also dehumanized it, in the forms of cyclical time and of the

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

separated irreversible time of economic production. The revolutionary project of a classless society, of an all-embracing historical life, implies the withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of a federation of independent times — a federation of playful individual and collective forms of irreversible time that are simultaneously present. This would be the temporal realization of authentic communism, which “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.”

### 164

The world already dreams of such a time. In order to actually live it, it only needs to become fully conscious of it.

# Chapter 7

## TERRITORIAL DOMINATION

“Whoever becomes the ruler of a city that is accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it can expect to be destroyed by it, for it can always find a pretext for rebellion in the name of its former freedom and age-old customs, which are never forgotten despite the passage of time or any benefits it has received. No matter what the ruler does or what precautions he takes, the inhabitants will never forget that freedom or those customs – unless they are separated or dispersed ...”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

**165**

Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market shattered all regional and legal barriers and all the Medieval guild restrictions that maintained the quality of craft production, it also undermined the autonomy and quality of places. This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China.

**166**

The free space of commodities is constantly being altered and redesigned in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony.

**167**

While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation.

**168**

Tourism — human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities — is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their equivalence. The modernization that has eliminated the time involved in travel has simultaneously eliminated any real space from it.

**169**

The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism — “city planning” — is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular decor.

**170**

The capitalist need that is satisfied by urbanism’s conspicuous petrification of life can be described in Hegelian terms as a total predominance of a “peaceful coexistence within space” over “the restless becoming that takes place in the progression of time.”

**171**

While all the technical forces of capitalism contribute toward various forms of separation, urbanism provides the material foundation for those forces and prepares the ground for their deployment. It is the very technology of separation.

**172**

Urbanism is the modern method for solving the ongoing problem of safeguarding class power by atomizing the workers who have been dangerously brought together by the conditions of urban production. The constant struggle that has had to be waged against anything that might lead to such coming together has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. The efforts of all the established powers since the French Revolution to increase the means of maintaining law

and order in the streets have finally culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Describing what he terms “a one-way system,” Lewis Mumford points out that “with the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control” (*The City in History*). But the general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together as isolated individuals. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the family cell, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images — images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation.

### 173

In all previous periods architectural innovations were designed exclusively for the ruling classes. Now for the first time a new architecture has been specifically designed for the poor. The aesthetic poverty and vast proliferation of this new experience in habitation stem from its mass character, which character in turn stems both from its function and from the modern conditions of construction. The obvious core of these conditions is the authoritarian decisionmaking which abstractly converts the environment into an environment of abstraction. The same architecture appears everywhere as soon as industrialization has begun, even in the countries that are furthest behind in this regard, as an essential foundation for implanting the new type of social existence. The contradiction between the growth of society’s material powers and the continued lack of progress toward any conscious control of those

powers is revealed as glaringly by the developments of urbanism as by the issues of thermonuclear weapons or of birth control (where the possibility of manipulating heredity is already on the horizon).

**174**

The self-destruction of the urban environment is already well under way. The explosion of cities into the countryside, covering it with what Mumford calls “a formless mass of thinly spread semi-urban tissue,” is directly governed by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile — the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance — has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centers and promote an ever-wider dispersal. Within this process various forms of partially reconstituted urban fabric fleetingly crystallize around “distribution factories” — giant shopping centers built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots. These temples of frenetic consumption are subject to the same irresistible centrifugal momentum, which casts them aside as soon as they have engendered enough surrounding development to become overburdened secondary centers in their turn. But the technical organization of consumption is only the most visible aspect of the general process of decomposition that has brought the city to the point of consuming itself.

**175**

Economic history, whose entire previous development centered around the opposition between city and country, has now progressed to the point of nullifying both. As a result of the current paralysis of any historical development beyond the independent movement of the economy, the incipient disappearance of city and country does not represent a transcendence of their separation, but their simultaneous



collapse. The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.

**176**

Universal history was born in cities, and it reached maturity with the city's decisive victory over the country. For Marx, one of the greatest merits of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class was the fact that it "subjected the country to the city," whose "very air is liberating." But if the history of the city is a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny — a history of state administrations controlling not only the countryside but the cities themselves. The city has served as the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom without yet having been able to win it. The city is the focal point of history because it embodies both a concentration of social power, which is what makes historical enterprises possible, and a consciousness of the past. The current destruction of the city is thus merely one more reflection of humanity's failure, thus far, to subordinate the economy to historical consciousness; of society's failure to unify itself by reappropriating the powers that have been alienated from it.

**177**

"The country represents the complete opposite: isolation and separation" (The German Ideology). As urbanism destroys the cities, it recreates a pseudocountryside devoid both of the natural relations of the traditional countryside and of the direct (and directly challenged) social relations of the historical city. The conditions of habitation and spectacular control in today's "planned environment" have created

an artificial neopeasantry. The geographical dispersal and the narrow-mindedness that have always prevented the peasantry from undertaking independent action and becoming a creative historical force are equally characteristic of these modern producers, for whom a world of their own making is as inaccessible as were the natural rhythms of work in agrarian societies. The peasantry was the steadfast foundation of “Oriental despotism,” in that its inherent fragmentation gave rise to a natural tendency toward bureaucratic centralization. The neopeasantry produced by the increasing bureaucratization of the modern state differs from the old in that its apathy must now be historically manufactured and maintained; natural ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of falsification. The landscape of the “new cities” inhabited by this technological pseudo-peasantry is a glaring expression of the repression of historical time on which they have been built. Their motto could be: “Nothing has ever happened here, and nothing ever will.” The forces of historical absence have been able to create their own landscape because historical liberation, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred.

**178**

The history that threatens this twilight world could potentially subject space to a directly experienced time. Proletarian revolution is this critique of human geography through which individuals and communities could create places and events commensurate with the appropriation no longer just of their work, but of their entire history. The ever-changing playing field of this new world and the freely chosen variations in the rules of the game will regenerate a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular. And this diversity will revive the possibility of authentic journeys — journeys within an authentic life that is itself understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.

The most revolutionary idea concerning urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or aesthetic. It is the project of reconstructing the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of workers councils, of the antistate dictatorship of the proletariat, of executory dialogue. Such councils can be effective only if they transform existing conditions in their entirety; and they cannot set themselves any lesser task if they wish to be recognized and to recognize themselves in a world of their own making.

# Chapter 8

## NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION WITHIN CULTURE

“Do you really believe that these Germans will make a political revolution in our lifetime? My friend, that is just wishful thinking... Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history – and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever newspapers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy.”

Ruge to Marx, March 1843

## 180

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies divided into classes. It is a generalizing power which itself exists as a separate entity, as division of intellectual labor and as intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society “when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connections and interactions and became autonomous” (The Difference Between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling). In thus gaining its independence, culture embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that ultimately led to the decline of that independence. The history that gave rise to the relative autonomy of culture, and to the ideological illusions regarding that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And this whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as a progressive revelation of the inadequacy of culture, as a march toward culture’s self-abolition. Culture is the terrain of the quest for lost unity. In the course of this quest, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

## 181

In the struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic theme of internal cultural development in historical societies, innovation always wins. But cultural innovation is generated by nothing other than the total historical movement — a movement which, in becoming conscious of itself as a whole, tends to go beyond its own cultural presuppositions and thus to move toward the suppression of all separations.

**182**

The rapid expansion of society's knowledge, including the understanding that history is the underlying basis of culture, led to the irreversible self-knowledge reflected by the destruction of God. But this "first condition of any critique" is also the first task of a critique without end. When there are no longer any tenable rules of conduct, each result of culture pushes culture toward its own dissolution. Like philosophy the moment it achieved full independence, every discipline that becomes autonomous is bound to collapse — first as a credible pretension to give a coherent account of the social totality, and ultimately even as a fragmented methodology that might be workable within its own domain. Separate culture's lack of rationality is what dooms it to disappear, because that culture already embodies a striving for the victory of the rational.

**183**

Culture grew out of a history that dissolved the previous way of life, but as a separate sphere within a partially historical society its understanding and sensory communication inevitably remain partial. It is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

**184**

The end of the history of culture manifests itself in two opposing forms: the project of culture's self-transcendence within total history, and its preservation as a dead object for spectacular contemplation. The first tendency has linked its fate to social critique, the second to the defense of class power.

**185**

Each of these two forms of the end of culture has a unitary existence, both within all the aspects of knowledge and within all the aspects of sensory representation (that is, within what was formerly understood as art in the broadest sense of the word). In the case of knowledge, the accumulation of branches of fragmentary knowledge, which become unusable because approval of existing conditions ultimately requires renouncing one's own knowledge, is opposed by the theory of praxis which alone has access to the truth of all these forms of knowledge since it alone knows the secret of their use. In the case of sensory representations, the critical self-destruction of society's former common language is opposed by its artificial reconstruction within the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of nonlife.

**186**

Once society has lost its myth-based community, it loses all the reference points of truly common language until such time as the divisions within the inactive community can be overcome by the inauguration of a real historical community. When art, which was the common language of social inaction, develops into independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it too becomes subject to the movement governing the history of all separate culture. Its declaration of independence is the beginning of its end.

**187**

The positive significance of the modern decomposition and destruction of all art is that the language of communication has been lost. The negative implication of this development is that a common language can no longer take the form of the unilateral conclusions that

characterized the art of historical societies — belated portrayals of someone else's dialogueless life which accepted this lack as inevitable — but must now be found in a praxis that unifies direct activity with its own appropriate language. The point is to actually participate in the community of dialogue and the game with time that up till now have merely been represented by poetic and artistic works.

**188**

When art becomes independent and paints its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old. Such a moment cannot be rejuvenated by dazzling colors, it can only be evoked in memory. The greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life.

**189**

The historical time that invaded art was manifested first of all in the sphere of art itself, beginning with the baroque. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its center with the collapse of the last mythical order: the Medieval synthesis of a unified Christianity with the ghost of an Empire, which had harmonized heavenly and earthly government. The art of change inevitably embodied the same ephemerality that it discovered in the world. As Eugenio d'Ors put it, it chose "life instead of eternity." The outstanding achievements of baroque were in theater and festival, or in theatrical festivals, where the sole purpose of each particular artistic expression was to contribute to the composition of a scene, a scene which had to serve as its own center of unification; and that center was the passage, the expression of a threatened equilibrium within the overall dynamic disorder. The somewhat excessive emphasis on the concept of baroque in contemporary aesthetic discussions reflects the awareness that an artistic classicism is no longer possible. The attempts to establish a normative classicism or neoclassicism during the



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

last three centuries have been nothing but short-lived artificial constructs speaking the official language of the state (whether of the absolute monarchy or of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas). What eventually followed baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, continually renewed its assaults until it had fragmented and destroyed the entire artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and which had its semi-independent social basis in the partially playful conditions still experienced by the last aristocracies, also reflects the fact that capitalism is the first form of class power that acknowledges its own total lack of ontological quality — a power whose basis in the mere management of the economy is symptomatic of the loss of all human mastery. The comprehensive unity of the baroque ensemble, which has long been lacking in the world of artistic creation, has in a sense been revived in today's wholesale consumption of the totality of past art. As all the art of the past comes to be recognized and appreciated historically, and is retrospectively reclassified as phases of a single "world art," it is incorporated into a global disorder that can itself be seen as a sort of baroque structure at a higher level, a structure that absorbs baroque art itself along with all its possible revivals. For the first time in history the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together, and the fact that it has become possible to collect and recollect all these art-historical memories marks the end of the world of art. In this age of museums in which artistic communication is no longer possible, all the previous expressions of art can be accepted equally, because whatever particular communication problems they may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication in general.

**190**

Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived — is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfillment. This art is necessarily avant-garde, and at the same time it does not really exist. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

**191**

Dadaism and surrealism were the two currents that marked the end of modern art. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they were contemporaries of the last great offensive of the revolutionary proletarian movement, and the defeat of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere whose decrepitude they had denounced, was the fundamental reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism were historically linked yet also opposed to each other. This opposition involved the most important and radical contributions of the two movements, but it also revealed the internal inadequacy of their one-sided critiques. Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since developed by the situationists has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.

**192**

The spectacular consumption that preserves past culture in congealed form, including coopted rehashes of its negative manifestations, gives overt expression in its cultural sector to what it implicitly is in its totality: the communication of the incommunicable. The most

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one's acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent. The critical truth of this destruction — the real life of modern poetry and art — is obviously concealed, since the spectacle, whose function is to use culture to bury all historical memory, applies its own essential strategy in its promotion of modernistic pseudoinnovations. Thus a school of neoliterature that baldly admits that it does nothing but contemplate the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something new. Meanwhile, alongside the simple claim that the death of communication has a sufficient beauty of its own, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture — which is also the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society — seeks by means of “collective projects” to construct complex neoartistic environments out of decomposed elements, as can be seen in urbanism's attempts to incorporate scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technical forms. This is an expression, in the domain of spectacular pseudoculture, of advanced capitalism's general project of remolding the fragmented worker into a “socially integrated personality,” a tendency that has been described by recent American sociologists (Riesman, Whyte, etc.). In all these areas the goal remains the same: to restructure society without community.

### 193

As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge already accounts for 29% of the gross national product of the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century the “knowledge

industry” will become the driving force of the American economy, as was the automobile in the first half of this century and the railroad in the last half of the previous century.

**194**

The task of the various branches of knowledge that are in the process of developing spectacular thought is to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness. This thought is totally conditioned by the fact that it cannot recognize, and does not want to recognize, its own material dependence on the spectacular system.

**195**

The official thought of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized subcommunication that it has to defend. It cannot understand that conflict is at the origin of everything in its world. The specialists of spectacular power — a power that is absolute within its realm of one-way communication — are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and by the success of that contempt, because they find their contempt confirmed by their awareness of how truly contemptible spectators really are.

**196**

As the very triumphs of the spectacular system pose new problems, a new division of tasks appears within the specialized thought of that system. On one hand, a spectacular critique of the spectacle is undertaken by modern sociology, which studies separation exclusively by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation. On the other, the various disciplines where structuralism has become entrenched

are developing an apologetics of the spectacle — a mindless thought that imposes an official amnesia regarding all historical practice. But the fake despair of nondialectical critique and the fake optimism of overt promotion of the system are equally submissive.

### 197

The sociologists who have begun to raise questions about the living conditions created by modern social developments (first of all in the United States) have gathered a great deal of empirical data, but they have failed to grasp the true nature of their object of study because they fail to recognize the critique that is inherent in that object. As a result, those among them who sincerely wish to reform these conditions can only appeal to ethical standards, common sense, moderation, and other measures that are equally inadequate for dealing with the problems in question. Because this method of criticism is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, it focuses on describing and deploring an excessive sort of negativity that seems to blight the surface of that world like some irrational parasitic infestation. This outraged good will, which even within its own moralizing framework ends up blaming only the external consequences of the system, can see itself as critical only by ignoring the essentially apologetic character of its assumptions and methods.

### 198

Those who denounce the affluent society's incitement to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous do not understand the purpose of this wastefulness. In the name of economic rationality, they ungratefully condemn the faithful irrational guardians that keep the power of this economic rationality from collapsing. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book *The Image* describes spectacle-commodity consumption in the United States, never arrives at the concept of the spectacle

because he thinks he can treat private life and “honest commodities” as separate from the “excesses” he deplors. He fails to understand that the commodity itself made the laws whose “honest” application leads both to the distinct reality of private life and to its subsequent reconquest by the social consumption of images.

**199**

Boorstin describes the excesses of a world that has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world. When, like a moral or psychological prophet, he denounces the superficial reign of images as a product of “our extravagant expectations,” he is implicitly contrasting these excesses to a “normal” life that has no reality in either his book or his era. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past, including the past that was dominated by religious resignation, he has no way of comprehending the true extent of the present society’s domination by images. We can truly understand this society only by negating it.

**200**

A sociology that believes that a separately functioning industrial rationality can be isolated from social life as a whole may go on to view the techniques of reproduction and communication as independent of general industrial development. Thus Boorstin concludes that the situation he describes is caused by an unfortunate but almost fortuitous encounter of an excessive technology of image-diffusion with an excessive appetite for sensationalism on the part of today’s public. This amounts to blaming the spectacle on modern man’s excessive inclination to be a spectator. Boorstin fails to see that the proliferation of the prefabricated “pseudo-events” he denounces flows from the simple fact that the overwhelming realities of present-day social existence prevent

people from actually living events for themselves. Because history itself haunts modern society like a specter, pseudohistories have to be concocted at every level in order to preserve the threatened equilibrium of the present frozen time.

**201**

The current tendency toward structuralist systematization is based on the explicit or implicit assumption that this brief freezing of historical time will last forever. The antihistorical thought of structuralism believes in the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never come to an end. Its illusion that all social practice is unconsciously determined by preexisting structures is based on illegitimate analogies with structural models developed by linguistics and anthropology (or even on models used for analyzing the functioning of capitalism) — models that were already inaccurate even in their original contexts. This fallacious reasoning stems from the limited intellectual capacity of the academic functionaries hired to expound this thought, who are so thoroughly caught up in their awestruck celebration of the existing system that they can do nothing but reduce all reality to the existence of that system.

**202**

In order to understand “structuralist” categories, one must bear in mind that such categories, like those of any other historical social science, reflect forms and conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, one cannot judge or admire this particular society by assuming that the language it speaks to itself is necessarily true. “We cannot judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, that consciousness must be explained in the light of the contradictions

of material life...” Structures are the progeny of established powers. Structuralism is thought underwritten by the state, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its method of studying code in isolation from content is merely a reflection of a taken-for-granted society where communication takes the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its overwhelming reality, that validates the frigid dream of structuralism.

### 203

The critical concept of “the spectacle” can also undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything in the abstract, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system. It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can only lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it unites with the practical current of negation in society; and that negation, the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, can for its part only become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle, which is the theory of its real conditions — the concrete conditions of present-day oppression — and which also reveals its hidden potential. This theory does not expect miracles from the working class. It envisages the reformulation and fulfillment of proletarian demands as a long-term task. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle (for the formulation and communication of the type of theory envisaged here is already inconceivable without a rigorous practice), it is certain that the



obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the fate of the practical movement acting on the scale of society.

**204**

Critical theory must communicate itself in its own language — the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a “zero degree of writing,” but its reversal. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

**205**

The very style of dialectical theory is a scandal and abomination to the prevailing standards of language and to the sensibilities molded by those standards, because while it makes concrete use of existing concepts it simultaneously recognizes their fluidity and their inevitable destruction.

**206**

This style, which includes a critique of itself, must express the domination of the present critique over its entire past. Dialectical theory’s mode of exposition reveals the negative spirit within it. “Truth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it” (Hegel). This theoretical consciousness of a movement whose traces must remain visible within it is manifested by the reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the détournement of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts. Hegel’s practice of reversing the genitive was an expression of historical revolutions, though that expression was confined to the form of thought. The young Marx, inspired by Feuerbach’s systematic reversal of subject and predicate, achieved the most effective use of this insurrectional

style, which answers “the philosophy of poverty” with “the poverty of philosophy.” *Détournement* reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies. Kierkegaard already used it deliberately, though he also denounced it: “But despite all your twists and turns, just as jam always returns to the pantry, you always end up introducing some little phrase which is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections” (*Philosophical Fragments*). As he acknowledged elsewhere in the same book, this use of *détournement* requires maintaining one’s distance from whatever has been turned into an official truth: “One further remark regarding your many complaints that I introduced borrowed expressions into my exposition. I do not deny that I did so. It was in fact done deliberately. In the next section of this work, if I ever write such a section, I intend to call this topic by its true name and to clothe the problem in its historical attire.”

## 207

Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author’s phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one.

## 208

*Détournement* is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation — a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework. *Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication that knows

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty. It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play. *Détournement* has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique.

### 209

The element of overt *détournement* in formulated theory refutes any notion that such theory is durably autonomous. By introducing into the theoretical domain the same type of violent subversion that disrupts and overthrows every existing order, *détournement* serves as a reminder that theory is nothing in itself, that it can realize itself only through historical action and through the historical correction that is its true allegiance.

### 210

The real values of culture can be maintained only by negating culture. But this negation can no longer be a cultural negation. It may in a sense take place within culture, but it points beyond it.

### 211

In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture is a unified critique, in that it dominates the whole of culture — its knowledge as well as its poetry — and in that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. This unified theoretical critique is on its way to meet unified social practice.

# Chapter 9

## IDEOLOGY MATERIALIZED

“Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself only insofar as it exists in and for another self-consciousness; that is, it exists only by being recognized and acknowledged.”

Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

**212**

Ideology is the intellectual basis of class societies within the conflictual course of history. Ideological expressions have never been pure fictions; they represent a distorted consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors that have in turn produced real distorting effects. This interconnection is intensified with the advent of the spectacle — the materialization of ideology brought about by the concrete success of an autonomized system of economic production — which virtually identifies social reality with an ideology that has remolded all reality in its own image.

**213**

Once ideology — the abstract will to universality and the illusion associated with that will — is legitimized by the universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion that prevail in modern society, it is no longer a voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but its triumph. Ideological pretensions take on a sort of flat, positivistic precision: they no longer represent historical choices, they are assertions of undeniable facts. The particular names of ideologies thus tend to disappear. The specifically ideological forms of system-supporting labor are reduced to an “epistemological base” that is itself presumed to be beyond ideology. Materialized ideology has no name, just as it has no formulatable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of different ideologies is over.

**214**

Ideology, whose whole internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls “total ideology” — the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as pseudoknowledge of a frozen totality, as a totalitarian worldview — has reached its culmination in the immobilized spectacle of nonhistory. Its

culmination is also its dissolution into society as a whole. When that society itself is concretely dissolved, ideology — the final irrationality standing in the way of historical life — must also disappear.

**215**

The spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. The spectacle is the material “expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man.” The “new power of deception” concentrated in it is based on the production system in which “as the mass of objects increases, so do the alien powers to which man is subjected.” This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. “The need for money is thus the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates” (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). Hegel’s characterization of money as “the self-moving life of what is dead” (Jenenser Realphilosophie) has now been extended by the spectacle to all social life.

**216**

In contrast to the project outlined in the “Theses on Feuerbach” (the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism), the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudoconcreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives the world as representation and not as activity — and which ultimately idealizes matter — is fulfilled in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatic masters of social life. Conversely, the dreamed activity of idealism is also fulfilled in the

spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and signals — which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.

**217**

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia demonstrated in Gabel's False Consciousness should be considered in the context of this economic materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was. The repression of practice and the antidialectical false consciousness that results from that repression are imposed at every moment of everyday life subjected to the spectacle — a subjection that systematically destroys the “faculty of encounter” and replaces it with a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.

**218**

“In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia,” says Gabel, “the disintegration of the dialectic of totality (with dissociation as its extreme form) and the disintegration of the dialectic of becoming (with catatonia as its extreme form) seem closely interrelated.” Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking glass. What he sees there are dramatizations of illusory escapes from a universal autism.

**219**

The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world. It also obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudoresponse to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities. The consumer's compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. As Gabel puts it in describing a quite different level of pathology, "the abnormal need for representation compensates for an agonizing feeling of being at the margin of existence."

**220**

In contrast to the logic of false consciousness, which cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and admit that it is nothing without them. By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudorevolutionary collective actions, those driven by an abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the latest news. In this way delirium reappears in the camp that claims to be opposing it. A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.



The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realized democracy — to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and surveys its own actions. This is possible only when individuals are “directly linked to universal history” and dialogue arms itself to impose its own conditions.

# Notes

The following notes are partially based on a 1973 list that Guy Debord himself made of many of the quotations and detournements in order to help translators of his book (“Releve provisoire des citations et des detournements de La Societe du Spectacle”)-a list that can be found in Debord’s Oeuvres (Gallimard Quarto, 2006, pp. 862-872). The same list, in some cases with additions by others, has been reproduced in pamphlet form and at various online sites. I have included all the material from Debord’s original list plus whatever additional items I have been able to discover. I have not included others’ additions unless I have been able to verify them. I have also added notes on some of the historical references. Debord’s list is sometimes not very specific (e.g. “detourned from Hegel”). For the convenience of readers who may want to examine the sources in their original contexts, I have added more specific chapter or page references when I have been able to locate them. Note that Debord almost always used French versions. In some cases the original texts (e.g. the German of Hegel or Marx) have been differently translated into English, so the quotations and detournements do not always match perfectly. I have also sometimes chosen to render passages slightly differently from the translations I quote here. I hope these notes will help to clarify certain aspects of Debord’s text and give some idea of how he worked. I would appreciate being informed of any errors or omissions.

**Chapter 1 epigraph:** Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* was published in 1841; the Second Edition appeared in 1843.

1. In societies . . . accumulation of spectacles: Cf. the opening sentence of Marx's *Capital*: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities."

2. the deceivers are deceived (literally: "the liar has lied to himself"): Debord says this is detourned from Hegel: "The truth verifies itself." an autonomous movement of the nonliving: Cf. Hegel's *First Philosophy of Spirit* (*Jenenser Realphilosophie*, Part I, 1803-1804): "Money is that materially existing concept, the unitary form or the possibility of all objects of need. By elevating need and work to this level of generality a vast system of common interest and mutual dependence is formed among a great people, a self-propelling life of the dead, which moves hither and thither, blind and elemental and, like a wild animal, it stands in constant need of being tamed and kept under control."

3. The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification: The first example among many in this chapter revealing that "the spectacle" is not some fixed, objective entity that can be defined once and for all, but a multifaceted process or tendency within the present society that must be seen and examined from different angles.

4. The spectacle is not a collection . . . mediated by images: Cf. Marx's *Capital* (Vol. I, chap. 33): "Capital is not a thing; it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by things."

6. it is the very heart of this real society's unreality: Cf. Marx's *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "Religion is

the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of spiritless conditions.”

**7-8.** Debord says that several phrases in these two theses are detoured from Hegel.

**9.** the true is a moment of the false: Cf. the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The false (though no longer as false) is a moment of the true.” This quotation follows the French translation used by Debord. The various English translations are somewhat different (Miller #39, p. 23; Baillie, p. 98; Kaufmann, p. 60). See Note 76 for information on these different editions.

**12.** “What appears is good; what is good appears”: Cf. the Preface to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: “What is rational is real, and what is real is rational.”

**13.** the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity: The phrase “the empire on which the sun never sets” was applied to the Spanish Empire of the sixteenth century and later to the British Empire.

**14.** goals are nothing, development is everything: Cf. the “Conclusion” of Eduard Bernstein’s *Evolutionary Socialism*: “To me that which is generally called the ultimate aim of socialism is nothing, but the movement is everything.”

**17.** degradation of being into having: Cf. the “Private Property and Communism” section of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* (a.k.a. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*): “Private property has made us so stupid and partial that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., in short, utilized in some way. But private property itself only conceives these various forms of possession as means of life, and the life for which they serve as means is the life of private property — labor and creation of

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

capital. Thus all the physical and mental senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses — the sense of having”

18. When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings: Cf. Marx and Engels’s *The Holy Family* (chap. VIII.3.a): “For one to whom the sensuously perceptible world becomes a mere idea, for him mere ideas are transformed into sensuously perceptible beings. The figments of his brain assume corporeal form.”

19. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality: Cf. Marx’s *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: “you cannot supersede philosophy without realizing it.”

20. This thesis contains several allusions to Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, which among other things examines the projection of humanity’s positive potentials into an imagined heavenly realm.

21. As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary: Debord says this is detoured from Marx. Perhaps he is alluding to Marx’s distinction between the “realm of necessity” and the “realm of freedom” in *Capital* (Vol. III, chap. 48). The spectacle is the bad dream . . . guardian of that sleep: Cf. Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (chap. 5, section C), which contends that dreams reflect “the wish for sleep” and that “dreams are the guardians of sleep.”

22. The fact that the practical power . . . in contradiction with itself: Cf. Marx’s “*Theses on Feuerbach*”: “But the fact that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the divisions and contradictions within this secular basis.”

23. The most modern . . . is thus also the most archaic: Cf. the *Introduction to Marx’s Grundrisse*: “Some determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient.”

24. The fetishistic appearance . . . conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes: Cf. Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923; translated by Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, p. 14): "The fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society . . . conceal the fact that they are the categories of the relations of men with each other. Instead they appear as things and the relations of things with each other." a second Nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment: Cf. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 128: "For, on the one hand, men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the 'natural,' irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and 'made,' a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form)."

28. "lonely crowds": allusion to David Riesman's book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

29. In the spectacle, a part of the world presents itself to the world and is superior to it: Cf. Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach": "It thus tends to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society." reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness: Cf. Hegel's "Love" (a fragmentary text included in his *Early Theological Writings*): "In love, the separate still exists, but it exists as unified, no longer as separate." This passage is quoted at greater length in Debord's dedication to his wife Alice Becker-Ho at the beginning of his film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973). See Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003, translated and edited by Ken Knabb), p. 43.

30-33. The alienation of the spectator . . . The more he contemplates, the less he lives . . . Workers do not produce themselves, they produce

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

a power independent of themselves . . . The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life: Cf. various passages of the “Alienated Labor” section of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, e.g. “The worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object. The more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the world of objects that he brings into being over against himself, and the poorer his inner world becomes, and the less he belongs to himself. . . . The greater his activity, the less he possesses. What is embodied in the product of his labor is no longer his own. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life he has bestowed on the object confronts him as a hostile and alien force.”

**31.** a map that is identical to the territory it represents: allusion to Alfred Korzybski’s phrase, “The map is not the territory,” and possibly also to Jorge Luis Borges’s story “On Exactitude in Science”: “the Cartographers Guild drew a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, coinciding point for point with it.”

**Chapter 2 epigraph:** from Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (pp. 86, 89, translation slightly modified).

**35.** In the spectacle’s basic practice . . . we recognize our old enemy: Cf. Marx’s “Toast” at the anniversary of the People’s Paper (London, 1856): “In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy and the poor prophets of regression, we do recognise our brave friend, Robin Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer — the Revolution.” Marx is making two Shakespeare allusions: Robin Goodfellow is a mischievous sprite in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the “old mole” is from *Hamlet* (see Note 77). the commodity

. . . metaphysical subtleties: Cf. the “Fetishism of the Commodity” section of Marx’s *Capital* (Vol. I, chap. 1, section 4): “A commodity appears at first glance to be something very trivial and obvious. Analysis reveals that it is in reality a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological abstrusities.”

**36.** “imperceptible as well as perceptible things”: quotation from the “Fetishism of the Commodity” section of *Capital*: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor. This is the reason why the products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.”

**40, 44, 47.** survival: For in-depth analysis of the situationists’ distinction between real life and mere “survival,” see the opening sections of Raoul Vaneigem’s “Basic Banalities” in the *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, translated and edited by Ken Knabb, pp. 89-95) or in the Revised and Expanded Edition of the same book (2006; pp. 117-124). “Basic Banalities,” incidentally, can be seen as a kind of preliminary draft for Vaneigem’s book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), a unique and essential work which examines the same social system as does *The Society of the Spectacle* but in a more lyrical and “subjective” manner. Get the new translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith (PM Press, 2012).

**41.** remaining unknown precisely because it was so familiar: Cf. the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller #31, p. 18; Baillie,



p. 92; Kaufmann, p. 48): “What is familiarly known is not really known, precisely because it is so familiar.”

43. “political economy considers the proletarian only as a worker” . . . and never considers him “in his leisure and humanity”: quotations from the “Wages of Labor” section of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “political economy regards the proletarian . . . as nothing more than a worker. It can therefore advance the proposition that, like a horse, he must receive just enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him when he is not working, as a human being” “total denial of man”: quotation from the “Private Property and Labor” section of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “Thus, although political economy, whose principle is labor, appears to recognize man, it is in fact nothing more than the denial of man carried to its logical conclusion.”

44. The spectacle is a permanent opium war: allusion to the Opium Wars of 1839-1842 and 1857-1860. The Chinese government wanted to ban the British opium trade, which was debilitating large sections of the Chinese population. England went to war against China to force it to accept that trade, which at the time was one of the main sources of the British Empire’s wealth. England (joined by France in the second one) won both wars and gained Hong Kong and several other port districts as “concessions” or “free trade” areas.

46. condottiere . . . for its own sake: Condottiere were mercenary leaders in Renaissance Italy who often ended up taking over the small states they were hired to fight for.

47. decline of use value: Cf. the “tendency of the general rate of profit to fall” (Capital, Vol. III, chap. 13).

51. The economy’s triumph . . . spells its own doom: Cf. Marx’s Letter to Ruge (September 1843): “he will force this party to supersede itself

— for its victory is also its defeat.” Freud: Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), founder of psychoanalysis. I have not been able to locate the source of the quote.

52. The economic Id must be replaced by the I: allusion to Freud’s The Ego and the Id.

53. the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making: Cf. the “Alienated Labor” section of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “He contemplates himself in a world that he himself has created.”

**Chapter 3 epigraph:** Red Flag was the official “theoretical journal” of the Chinese Communist Party from 1958-1988. The citation is full of ironies, not only because of the fact that the Chinese regime was itself part of the pseudo-opposition and actual unity of global capitalism examined in this chapter, but also because its crude (and very undialectical) ideological rhetoric unintentionally suggests the actual irreconcilable struggle of the global proletariat against both forms of capitalism (the Chinese Maoist-Stalinist form as well as the Western “free enterprise” form).

61. The admirable people . . . attain greatness by stooping below the reality of the most insignificant individual life: Cf. Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction (Nisbet., p. 84): “the great individuals of history . . . are admirable simply because they have made themselves the instruments of the substantial spirit.”

63. The spectacle exists in a concentrated form or a diffuse form: In chapter 4 of his 1988 book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (translated by Malcolm Imrie, Verso, 1990) Debord updated his analysis: “In 1967 I distinguished two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse. . . . The former, presenting an ideology concentrated around a dictatorial personality, had accompanied

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian counterrevolutions. The latter, inciting wage-earners to apply their freedom of choice to the vast range of new commodities now on offer, had represented the Americanization of the world. . . . Since then a third form has been established — a calculated combination of the two preceding forms, based on the victory of the form that had proven the stronger of the two: the diffuse. This is the integrated spectacle, which has since tended to impose itself globally.” Debord’s *Comments* book is largely concerned with examining the implications of this new form of spectacular power. an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm center of misery: Cf. Melville’s *Moby Dick* (chap. 87): “And thus, though surrounded by circle on circle of consternations and affrights, did those inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.”

**64.** bureaucratic capitalism (a.k.a. “state capitalism”): Although Western “free enterprise” capitalism has also become increasingly bureaucratized, when Debord uses the terms “the bureaucracy,” “bureaucratic capitalism,” “bureaucratic class,” etc., he is referring to the “Communist” parties’ evolution into a new type of totalitarian bureaucratic ruling class. See *Theses* 103-113.

**66.** epic poem of this struggle . . . fall of Troy: allusion to Homer’s *Iliad*. The spectacle does not sing of men and their arms: Cf. the opening line of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “I sing of arms and of the man . . .” In this blind struggle each commodity . . . absolute realization: Cf. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Nisbet, p. 89): “Particular interests contend with one another, and some are destroyed in

the process. But it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges. The universal Idea does not itself enter into conflict and danger; it remains in the background, untouched and unharmed, and sends forth the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead. With what we may call the cunning of reason, it sets the passions to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss.” globalization of the commodity . . . commodification of the globe: Cf. Marx’s *On the Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (note to Part I, chap. 4): “As the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly.”

67. accumulating commodity indulgences — glorious tokens of the commodity’s real presence among the faithful: This whole thesis plays on associations with classic religious delusions, in this case the “indulgences” for forgiveness of sins peddled by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages and the doctrine of the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.

70. Stalin: Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), totalitarian leader of the USSR from the late 1920s till his death in 1953. Following his death, his successors, who had slavishly followed him for decades, undertook a “de-Stalinization” campaign, denouncing the “excesses” of his reign. See Note 110.

71. Nothing stands still for it . . . inclination: Cf. Pascal’s *Pensées* (Brunschvicg #72): “When we try to anchor ourselves to any point, it wavers and leaves us; and if we pursue it, it continually eludes our grasp. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural condition, yet it is completely contrary to our inclination.”

**Chapter 4 title.** The Proletariat as Subject and Representation: Cf. Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*.

**Chapter 4 epigraph:** Insurrection of March 18: i.e. the Paris Commune (March 18-May 28, 1871). fearsome organization . . . army: the parliamentary committee's paranoically exaggerated characterization of the First International.

**73.** The real movement that transforms existing conditions: Cf. Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 2, section 5): "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. What we call communism is the real movement that is dissolving existing conditions." all static order crumbled into dust: Cf. Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (Part 1): "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind, in a clear and disabused manner."

**74.** obliged to view their relationships in a clear and disabused manner: See the previous *Communist Manifesto* quotation. the final unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era: i.e. Hegel's philosophy of history.

**76.** Hegel: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher. Although it is possible to understand most of *The Society of the Spectacle* without knowing anything about Hegel, some familiarity with his work is useful to anyone who wishes to engage in the dialectical type of radical practice initiated by Marx and further developed by the situationists. This dialectical method, which Alexander Herzen called "the algebra of revolution," cuts through traditional logic, expressing the dynamic manner in which things interact, how they divide, merge, grow, decay, and are transformed, sometimes even into their opposites. Because most of Hegel's work is quite difficult, commentaries and other secondary readings are almost essential. A good starting place might be Peter Singer's *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*. A more substantial

work, which puts Hegel in his historical context, is Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. The *Philosophy of History* is probably Hegel's most accessible book: the fact that he is dealing with concrete historical events may help you to see how his ideas play out in practice. The only translation of the complete work is rather old and based on an outdated German edition, but there is a good modern edition of the Introduction, published under the title *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1975, translated by H.B. Nisbet). More difficult, but very rich, is *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. I prefer the edition with that title (Oxford University Press, 1977, translated by A.V. Miller with commentary by J.N. Findlay) over the earlier translation by J.B. Baillie titled *The Phenomenology of Mind* (Allen & Unwin/Humanities Press, 1949). Walter Kaufmann's *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* (Anchor, 1966) contains an annotated translation of the Preface. the point was no longer to interpret the world, but to interpret the transformation of the world: Cf. Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach": "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point now is to change it." consciousness that always arrives too late: Cf. the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: "As for trying to teach the world what it ought to be, for this purpose philosophy always arrives too late. As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there." bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: notably in England (1640-1660 and 1688), America (1775-1788) and France (1789-1799). Karl Korsch, "Theses on Hegel and Revolution": This short but very pithy text, published in 1931, can be found in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (University of Texas Press, 1974, pp. 277-278) and online at [www.bopsecrets.org/CF/korsch.htm](http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/korsch.htm). "the glorification of existing conditions": another quotation from Korsch's text. absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done: Cf. Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (Vol. I, #140): "great men willed

what they did, and did what they willed.” only tribunal where truth could be judged is closed: Cf. Friedrich Schiller’s poem “Resignation” (1786): “World history is the tribunal that judges the world,” quoted in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (#340).

77. this historical thought has not been forgotten: Cf. Hegel’s *History of Philosophy* (Vol. III): “Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward as Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, ‘Well done, old mole’ — until grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from its sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away.” that thought’s conclusion: i.e. Hegel’s idealistic philosophical conclusion. its method: Hegel’s dialectical method.

78. Stirner: Max Stirner (1806-1856), German individualist anarchist philosopher, author of *The Ego and His Own*. Bakunin: Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), Russian anarchist revolutionary, collaborator and then opponent of Marx within the First International. Marx: Karl Marx (1818-1883), German revolutionary. The literature on Marx’s work is immense, and most of it is unreliable. (Anything that implies that Marx had anything to do with so-called “Marxist” or “Communist” regimes is totally unreliable.) An excellent general introduction is Karl Korsch’s *Karl Marx* (1938). Korsch’s book is out of print, but it can be found online at [www.bopsecrets.org/CF/korsch-karlm Marx.htm](http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/korsch-karlm Marx.htm).

79. Bernstein: Eduard Bernstein’s book *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (“The Prerequisites for Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy”) was published in 1899, and its “revisionist” positions provoked heated debates for many years afterwards. It has been translated as *Evolutionary Socialism* and more recently as *The Preconditions of Socialism*. 1847 Manifesto: i.e. the

Communist Manifesto. Engels: Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), German revolutionary, lifelong collaborator with Marx.

80. “salvage” . . . by “transplanting”: Cf. Korsch’s “Theses on Hegel and Revolution”: “The attempt made by the founders of scientific socialism to salvage the high art of dialectical thinking by transplanting it from German idealist philosophy to the materialist conception of nature and history, from the bourgeois to the proletarian theory of revolution, appears, both historically and theoretically, as a transitory step only. What has been achieved is a theory not of the proletarian revolution developing on its own basis, but of a proletarian revolution that has just emerged from the bourgeois revolution; a theory which therefore in every respect, in content and in method, is still tainted with the birthmarks of Jacobinism, that is, of the revolutionary theory of the bourgeoisie.” historical wounds leave no scars: Cf. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller #669, p. 407; Baillie, p. 676): “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.” “Of all the instruments . . . class itself”: Quotation from Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* (chap. 2).

81. “We recognize only one science: the science of history”: quotation from Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 1, section 1).

83. Utopian socialists: most notably Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837) and Robert Owen (1771-1858), whose theories were contrasted with the “scientific socialism” of Marx and Engels (see Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*). unarmed prophets: Machiavelli compares “armed prophets” and “unarmed prophets” in chapter 6 of *The Prince*. Sombart: The quotation is from Chapter 2 of Werner Sombart’s *Socialism and the Social Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (1896). Sombart is not presenting his own view,



but ironically paraphrasing the view of the utopians. did not include the awareness . . . reinforce it: Cf. Sombart, op. cit.: “So far as [Owen’s] followers assume that the present order of things is nothing other than a mistake, that only for this reason men find themselves in their present position, that misery rules in the world only because man has not known thus far how to make it better — that is false. The utopists fail to see, in their optimism, that a part of this society looks upon the status quo as thoroughly satisfactory and desires no change, that this part also has an interest in maintaining it, and that a specific condition of society always obtains because those persons who are interested in it have the power to maintain it.” Sorel: Georges Sorel’s *Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat* (1919) has not been translated into English, but a few selections are included in *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1976, ed. John L. Stanley).

**84.** “ideologization”: At the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that for both Marx and Debord ideology represents a rigidification of thought or theory into dogma. consciousness always comes too soon: Cf. the Preface to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: “philosophy always arrives too late.” “History has shown . . . ripe”: quotation from Engels’s Introduction to the 1895 reprinting of Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France* (1850).

**85.** German working class . . . 1848: See Engels’s *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Germany*. Paris Commune (1871): See Marx’s *The Civil War in France* and Debord, Kotányi and Vaneigem’s “Theses on the Paris Commune” (SI Anthology, 314-317; Expanded Edition, pp. 398-401).

**87.** “either in a revolutionary transformation . . . contending classes”: quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* (Part 1). “Bonapartist” prototype . . . “condemned to the same political nullity as all the other

classes”: See Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (chap. 4): “Accordingly, by now stigmatizing as ‘socialistic’ what it had previously extolled as ‘liberal,’ the bourgeoisie admits that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that in order to restore tranquility in the country, its own bourgeois parliament must be brought to a halt; that in order to preserve its social power intact, its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion and order only on the condition that their class be condemned to the same political nullity as all the other classes; that in order to save its purse, it must forfeit the crown.” Marx’s text analyzes the process in which the social instability following the French revolution of 1848 caused the bourgeoisie to support the 1852 coup d’état by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (nephew of the famous general Napoleon).

88. “immensity of its tasks”: Marx uses this phrase in several places, e.g. “Proletarian revolutions . . . recoil again and again before the immensity of their tasks, until a situation is finally created that goes beyond the point of no return” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, chap. 1). embody its own new form of power: literally “itself be the power.” The sense is that in contrast to bourgeois (or bureaucratic) seizure of state power, the proletariat as a whole will form a new nonstate mode of social organization in which everyone (and therefore no one) is “in power” — what the situationists elsewhere referred to as “generalized self-management.” See Note 179. Jacobin-style seizure of the state: allusion to the Jacobin Club, the radical bourgeois party during the French Revolution that seized state power in 1793. disguise partial goals as general goals: i.e. as the bourgeoisie had done during previous revolutions (e.g. by demanding unrestricted economic freedom in the name of “Freedom”).

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

89. letter . . . accompanying an article reviewing *Capital*: More precisely, Marx's letter included some suggestions for such a review, which he hoped that Engels would develop and submit.

90. theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory: Debord says this is detoured from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. The soviet . . . was not a theoretical discovery: The first soviet (Russian for "council") was spontaneously formed by striking workers during the 1905 Russian revolution. No previous radical theorists had envisaged this form of popular self-organization, however obvious it may have seemed in retrospect. the most advanced theoretical truth . . . was its own existence in practice: Cf. Marx's *The Civil War in France* (section 3): "The greatest social measure of the Paris Commune was its own working existence."

91. First International: The International Working Men's Association, founded in London in 1864 and dissolved in the 1870s following the split between the Marxist and Bakuninist factions. the conscious self-emancipation of the working class: Cf. the opening line of the Rules of the First International: "Considering that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves . . ." ". . . invisible pilots guiding the revolution . . . through the collective dictatorship of our Alliance . . .": quotation from Bakunin's Letter to Albert Richard (August 1870), excerpted in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy* (Vintage, 1971, pp. 177-182). The "Alliance" was Bakunin's secret organization, the International Alliance for Social Democracy. two ideologies of working-class revolution opposed each other . . . the result was very different from what had been sought: Cf. Engels's Introduction to the 1895 reprinting of Marx's *The Civil War in France*: "the Commune was consumed in unfruitful strife between the two parties which divided it, the Blanquists (the majority) and the Proudhonists (the minority), neither of which knew what was to be done."

92. anarchism: For a good historical overview, see Daniel Guérin's *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (AK Press, 2010, translated by Paul Sharkey). Another more eclectic and thematically organized collection is *Patterns of Anarchy* (Anchor, 1966, ed. Leonard Krimerman and Lewis Perry). The anarchists strive to realize an ideal: Cf. Marx's *The Civil War in France* (section 3): "The workers . . . have no ideals to realize." puts everything on the same level and eliminates any conception of historical evil: In his *Aesthetics* (Part III, Section III, chap. 1.3(c)), Hegel describes the classic Flemish painters (Bruegel, etc.) as presenting "the Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil; people who are so whole-heartedly cheerful cannot be altogether evil and base." "Historical evil" (*mal historique*), which could also be translated as "the bad side of history," also refers to Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* (chap. 2, section 1, Observation 7) where, in response to the anarchist Proudhon's simplistic distinctions between the "good" and "bad" sides of various historical phenomena, Marx notes that "it is the bad side that makes history by provoking struggles." Jura Federation: anarchist-leaning section of the First International based in the Jura mountain region of France and Switzerland.

94. 1936 . . . social revolution: The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) between the fascist forces of General Francisco Franco and the popularly elected Republic was accompanied by a massive anarchist-inspired revolution in much of the Republic's territory (particularly in Barcelona and the regions of Catalonia and Aragon). supported from abroad: Franco's forces were supported by Hitler and Mussolini. the camp of the Republic included various bourgeois forces and statist working-class parties: The Republic's Popular Front coalition included liberal bourgeois parties, a large Socialist Party, a smaller revolutionary Marxist party (the POUM), and an even smaller Communist Party. Its recognized leaders became government ministers: The anarchists,

though usually abstaining from electoral politics, had exceptionally supported the Popular Front government, in part because it promised to release thousands of anarchists and other political prisoners. Once the civil war had begun, the anarchists maintained an uneasy alliance with the Republican regime until they were eventually stabbed in the back by it (above all by the Stalinists, who had soon wormed their way into positions of power within the government and in particular within the police forces). During a period of several months, four prominent anarchist leaders formed part of the Republican government, destroying the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war: The French text, *pour perdre la guerre civile* (literally, in order to lose the civil war), mocks the Stalinist argument that it was necessary to destroy the revolution in order to win the civil war. The Stalinists accomplished the first part of that program, but not the second. Burnett Bolloten's *The Spanish Revolution and The Spanish Civil War* are probably the best general histories. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is a good first-hand account. Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution 1936-1939* documents the wealth of popular experimentation during the revolution. Several other relevant books are listed in the revised edition of the SI Anthology (p. 489, Note 358).

**95:** Second International (a.k.a. Socialist International): Founded in 1889, it essentially broke up in 1916 when most of its constituent parties abandoned their previous internationalist antiwar policy and rallied to their respective governments during World War I. Fourier: See *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* (Beacon, 1971, ed. Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu) or *Harmonian Man: Selected Writings of Charles Fourier* (Anchor, 1971, ed. Mark Poster). *Finance Capital*: quotation from the Preface to Rudolf Hilferding's *Das Finanzkapital* (1910).

The quotation is discussed in more detail in Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923; translated by Fred Halliday, NLB, 1970, pp. 54-58).

97. crushed the Spartakist revolutionaries: Following the German defeat in 1918, there were mutinies and revolts throughout Germany. The Kaiser's regime was replaced by a "Socialist" government headed by Friedrich Ebert, but revolts continued, culminating in a general strike and insurrection in Berlin in January 1919 involving the Spartakist League, a revolutionary socialist organization founded by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Ebert's regime, with the assistance of the rightwing paramilitary Freikorps, crushed the Spartakist revolt and murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg. For an account of the revolution in the context of the whole postwar period, see Richard M. Watt's *The Kings Depart: Versailles and the German Revolution*.

98. consistent Kautskyist . . . directing the proletariat from outside: Debord is noting that the Russian Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) and the German social-democratic leader Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), though bitterly at odds in certain respects, were fundamentally akin in many others, notably in promoting the notion of the "leading" or "vanguard" role of a revolutionary organization. In *What Is To Be Done?* (1903, chap. II.B) Lenin approvingly cited Kautsky's statement that revolutionary consciousness must be brought to the workers from outside: "The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia. . . . Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from outside and not something that arises within it spontaneously." Lenin himself stated (chap. II.A): "We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from outside. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is only able to develop trade-union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary

to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc.” As was noted in the situationist pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* (1966): “The 1905 revolution and the Russian workers’ spontaneous self-organization into soviets was already a critique in acts of [Lenin’s] baneful theory. But the Bolshevik movement persisted in believing that working-class spontaneity could not go beyond ‘trade-union consciousness’ and was thus incapable of grasping ‘the totality.’ This amounted to decapitating the proletariat so that the Party could put itself at the ‘head’ of the revolution. Contesting the proletariat’s historical capacity to liberate itself, as Lenin did so ruthlessly, means contesting its capacity to totally run the future society. In such a perspective, the slogan ‘All power to the soviets’ meant nothing more than the conquest of the soviets by the Party and the installation of the party state in place of the withering-away ‘state’ of the armed proletariat” (SI Anthology, pp. 334-335; Expanded Edition, pp. 426-427). The Kautsky-Lenin kinship is discussed in more detail in Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (pp. 102-103).

**100.** Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world: Expressed a bit more fully: “The triumph of the Bolshevik order coincided with the international counterrevolutionary movement that began with the crushing of the Spartakists by German ‘Social Democracy.’ The commonality of the jointly victorious Bolshevism and reformism went deeper than their apparent antagonism, for the Bolshevik order also turned out to be merely a new variation on the old theme, a new guise of the old order. . . Capitalism, in its bureaucratic and bourgeois variants, won a new lease on life, over the dead bodies of the sailors of Kronstadt, the peasants of the Ukraine, and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and finally Barcelona” (SI Anthology, p. 331; Expanded Edition, pp. 422-423).

**101.** Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919): Polish-German Marxist revolutionary. *Die Rote Fahne*: The Red Flag, newspaper of the Spartakist League. a few days before its destruction: i.e. before the January 1919 defeat of the Spartakist revolt (see Note 97).

**102.** The repeated failure . . . the *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* of the 1918-1920 period: Debord's sense is that the European workers movement failed to take advantage of the rare golden opportunities presented by that period. The aftermath of World War I, including the fall of many governments, the shifting of many national borders and other extreme disruptions of people's lives, provoked widespread questioning of the whole social order. There were mass protests and upsurges in many parts of Europe, but all of these were either co-opted or crushed, leaving the Russian Revolution as the only apparent "radical victory." *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* is a Latin translation from the Greek of one of Aesop's fables: A traveler boasts that when he was at Rhodes he made an incredibly long jump and there were many people there whom he could call as witnesses. One of the bystanders says that there is no need for such witnesses since he should be able to replicate the feat wherever he is: "Let's suppose that this is Rhodes: jump here!" The phrase was modified by Hegel (in his Preface to *The Philosophy of Right*) to mean "Here is the rose, dance here!" and Marx in turn interpreted this latter sense to mean "Here is the opportunity, seize it!" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (chap. 1): "proletarian revolutions . . . recoil again and again before the immensity of their tasks, until a situation is finally created that makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* — Here is the rose, here dance!"

**103.** "democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants": an early Bolshevik slogan. theory of permanent revolution: The prevalent notion among most socialists was that in underdeveloped countries such as Russia one would first have to overthrow the monarchical or



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

feudal system by way of a purely, or at least predominantly, “bourgeois” revolution; only some time afterwards, when capitalist development had created the necessary material conditions (including a larger and more sophisticated industrial proletariat), would it be possible to carry out a socialist revolution. Leon Trotsky and Alexander Parvus’s theory of permanent revolution (developed in the aftermath of the 1905 Russian revolution) held that it would be possible to proceed from the bourgeois to the proletarian stage in one continuous process (“permanent” in this context does not mean “eternal”; it means continuous, without stopping). Kronstadt soviet: In March 1921 the sailors of Kronstadt, who had been among the most ardent participants in the 1917 revolution, revolted against the Bolshevik government, calling for a genuine power of the soviets (democratic popular councils) as opposed to the rule of the “Soviet” state. Denounced as reactionaries, they were crushed by the Bolsheviks (under the direct leadership of Trotsky). See Ida Mett’s *The Kronstadt Commune*, Paul Avrich’s *Kronstadt, 1921*, or Israel Getzler’s *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy*. Workers’ Opposition: The program of this radical tendency within the Bolshevik Party, drafted by Alexandra Kollontai, is included in Kollontai’s *Selected Writings* (Allison & Busby, 1977, pp. 151-200). On the 1917 Russian Revolution in general, Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution* is well worth reading, but it should be supplemented with Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution* and Maurice Brinton’s *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control: 1917-1921* (included in the recent AK Press collection of Brinton’s works, *For Workers’ Power*).

104. state capitalism: i.e. a system in which the state had become the dominant capitalist enterprise. “New Economic Policy” (1921-1928): a temporary concession to the peasants that included loosening certain aspects of state economic control, eliminating forced grain requisitions and permitting the peasants to sell surplus production on

the open market. Third International (a.k.a. Communist International or Comintern): “The Third International, ostensibly created by the Bolsheviks to counteract the degenerate social-democratic reformism of the Second International and to unite the vanguard of the proletariat in ‘revolutionary communist parties,’ was too closely linked to the interests of its founders to ever bring about a genuine socialist revolution anywhere. In reality the Third International was essentially a continuation of the Second. The Russian model was rapidly imposed on the Western workers’ organizations and their evolutions were thenceforth one and the same. The totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy, the new ruling class, over the Russian proletariat found its echo in the subjection of the great mass of workers in other countries to a stratum of political and labor-union bureaucrats whose interests had become clearly contradictory to those of their rank-and-file constituents” (SI Anthology, p. 332; Expanded Edition, p. 423). Kuomintang regime in the China of 1925-1927: At the very moment when radical workers were attaining significant victories in the major cities of China, Stalin insisted that the Chinese Communist Party subordinate itself to the Kuomintang, the nationalist party led by General Chiang Kai-shek. When the workers of Shanghai had taken over the city in April 1927, the Communist leaders thus urged them to welcome Chiang Kai-shek’s army and to turn in all their weapons. Once they did so, Chiang’s army entered the city and massacred the radical workers by the thousands. See Harold Isaacs’s *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. Popular Fronts in Spain and France: The Russian alliance with the Spanish Popular Front government enabled the Spanish Stalinists to attack and destroy anarchist collectives and rival radical groups such as the POUM. The Russian alliance with the French Popular Front government led to the betrayal of the anticolonial struggle in French Indochina (see Ngo Van’s *In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary*, AK Press, 2010, translated by Ken Knabb et al.). subjecting the peasantry to a reign of terror: i.e. through the forced

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

collectivizations and “Five Year Plans” of 1928-1941. Bruno Rizzi: author of *The Bureaucratization of the World* (1939), which includes what can be considered the first in-depth analysis of the class nature of the “Soviet” Union. Ante Ciliga (1898-1992): Croatian revolutionary. Lenin and the Revolution was a pamphlet excerpted from his book *The Russian Enigma*.

**107.** The description of Stalin’s power quotes or echoes Hegel’s description of the power of the Roman emperors over their subjects in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller ##481-482, pp. 292-293; Baillie, pp. 504-506): “This lord and master of the world holds himself in this way to be the absolute person who embraces within himself the whole of existence and for whom there exists no superior spirit. He is a person, but the solitary person who stands over against all the rest. . . . In this knowledge of himself as the sum and substance of all actual powers, this lord and master of the world is the titanic self-consciousness that thinks of itself as being an actual living god. But since he is only the formal self which is unable to tame those powers, his activities and self-enjoyment are equally monstrous excesses. The lord of the world becomes truly conscious of what he is — the universal power of the actual world — through the destructive power he exerts against the self of his subjects, the self which stands over against him. For his power is not the union and harmony of Spirit in which persons would recognize their own self-consciousness. . . . They exist, therefore, in a merely negative relationship, both to one another and to him who is their bond of connection and continuity.”

**108.** The Napoleon quotation is from a conversation reported in General de Caulaincourt’s memoir *En traîneau avec l’Empereur* (chap. 4). Lysenko fiasco: Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976) was a Ukrainian pseudoscientist whose anti-Mendelian theories and new discipline of “agrobiology” became the official orthodoxy when Stalin put him in

charge of the USSR's Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Under his authority rival scientific positions were repressed, rival scientists were persecuted, and the country's agricultural policies and resources were oriented toward his schemes, whose supposed successes were vaunted in the official media (though scientists in other countries failed to replicate any of his claims). His dominance weakened with the death of Stalin and eventually collapsed in the early 1960s when massive crop failures revealed the fraudulence of his theories and Russian scientists began to openly resist his rule.

**110.** denounces the Stalinism at its origin: Three years after Stalin's death (1953), the new Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev initiated a "de-Stalinization" campaign, beginning with a "secret" report to the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 entitled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences." As the title suggests, Khrushchev's denunciation focused on Stalin as an individual who had for some unknown reason succumbed to paranoia and megalomania and dictatorial "excesses," and never questioned the nature of the system in which such enormities could arise. Although the de-Stalinization campaign engendered some elements of "thaw" (many people were released from the concentration camps and there was some loosening of censorship, etc.), the superficial nature of the campaign was revealed later the same year when Khrushchev sent Russian tanks to crush the Hungarian revolution.

**111.** public confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie: See the opening paragraphs of "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China" (SI Anthology, pp. 185-186; Expanded Edition, pp. 240-241): "The so-called 'socialist camp' . . . had in any case never been socialist; now, in spite of all sorts of attempts to patch it up, it has ceased even to be a camp. The disintegration of the Stalinist monolith is already manifested in the coexistence of some twenty independent 'lines,' from

Rumania to Cuba, from Italy to the Vietnamese-Korean-Japanese bloc of parties. . . . In the Sino-Soviet polemic, in which each power is led to impute to its opponent every conceivable antiproletarian crime, being only obliged not to mention the real crime (the class power of the bureaucracy), each side can only arrive at the sobering conclusion that the other's revolutionariness was only an inexplicable mirage. . . . For the bureaucracy, internationalism could be nothing but an illusive proclamation in the service of its real interests, one ideological justification among others, since bureaucratic society is the total opposite of proletarian community. Bureaucratic power is based on possession of a nation-state and it must ultimately obey the logic of this reality, in accordance with the particular interests imposed by the level of development of the country it possesses. Its heroic age passed away with the ideological golden age of 'socialism in a single country' that Stalin was shrewd enough to maintain by destroying the revolutions in China in 1927 and Spain in 1937. The autonomous bureaucratic revolution in China [1949] — as already shortly before in Yugoslavia [1946] — introduced into the unity of the bureaucratic world a dissolutive germ that has broken it up in less than twenty years." workers of East Berlin . . . : reference to the East German revolt of 1953. workers councils in Hungary: Although the 1956 Hungarian revolt against Russian domination was ostensibly rallied around the liberalizing regime of Imry Nagy, the country was in reality organized by nationally coordinated workers councils. See Andy Anderson's Hungary '56. See also the situationists' analysis of the 1968 "Prague Spring" (SI Anthology, pp. 256-265; Expanded Edition, pp. 326-336). this crumbling of the global alliance based on the bureaucratic hoax is also a very unfavorable development for the future of capitalist society: In his "Preface to the Third French Edition of The Society of the Spectacle" (1992; included in Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of The Society of the Spectacle, Zone Books, 1994, pp. 7-10), Debord noted that this process, which

scarcely anyone else had noticed at the time, had rapidly accelerated since the “fall of the Berlin Wall” in 1989.

**112.** Trotsky: Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), Russian Bolshevik leader. Following Lenin’s death in 1924, he was gradually out-manuevered by Stalin, forced into exile, and later murdered by one of Stalin’s agents. Lenin’s famous “Testament”: a letter written during Lenin’s last illness in December 1922 to the Russian Communist Party, stating his views on how the regime should proceed following his death. The letter featured a sharp attack on Stalin’s brutality and deceitfulness and urged his removal from the position of General Secretary of the Party. It also criticized Trotsky’s bureaucratic tendencies. The “Testament” was suppressed by the Stalinists and officially acknowledged only in 1956 by Khrushchev. Fourth International: an international alliance of Trotskyist parties founded in 1938 as an alternative to the Stalinist Third International. the second Russian revolution: i.e. the 1917 revolution (the first being in 1905). During the earlier period Trotsky maintained an independent position between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks; he only rallied to the Bolshevik Party in 1917 (at the same time that Lenin, in turn, adopted Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution). Lukács, in 1923: in the last chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*: “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization.” “a political party . . . party program”: quotation from Lenin’s “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion” (1909).

**113.** “underdeveloped” countries: See Mustapha Khayati’s “Setting Straight Some Popular Misconceptions About Revolutions in the Underdeveloped Countries” (SI Anthology, pp. 219-222; Expanded Edition, pp. 281-285). as happened in Egypt: allusion to the military coup of 1952. Algerian war of independence: 1954-1962. On its aftermath, see “The Class Struggles in Algeria” (SI Anthology, pp. 160-168; Expanded Edition, pp. 203-212).

114. the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong . . . real life: Cf. Marx's Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, which describes the proletariat as "a sector that has a general character because its sufferings are general, a sector that does not claim any particular right because the wrong it suffers is not any particular wrong but a general wrong."

115. failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism: "The assault of the first workers movement against the whole organization of the old world came to an end long ago, and nothing can bring it back to life. It failed. . . . The classical workers movement can be considered to have begun a couple decades before the official formation of the [First] International, with the first linkup of communist groups of several countries that Marx and his friends organized from Brussels in 1845. And it was completely finished after the defeat of the Spanish revolution, that is, after the Barcelona May days of 1937" (SI Anthology, p. 84; Expanded Edition, pp. 109-110). lost children (*enfants perdus*): old military term for soldiers or scouts assigned to particularly dangerous missions; by extension, people who are on the extreme cutting edge of a movement. Debord was obviously fond of this term, with its multiple evocative associations: it also appears in several of his other works, including three of his films (see Debord's Complete Cinematic Works, p. 227, note 35). rebellious youth: See the analysis of the merits and limitations of various such tendencies (delinquents, Provos, radical students, East European dissidents, etc.) in chapter 2 of *On the Poverty of Student Life* (SI Anthology, pp. 326-331; Expanded Edition pp. 416-422). "General Ludd": mythical leader of the "Luddite" revolts of the early nineteenth century. "Just as the first organization of the classical proletariat was preceded, during the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, by a period of isolated 'criminal' acts aimed at destroying the machines of production that were depriving

people of their work, we are presently witnessing the first appearance of a wave of vandalism against the machines of consumption that are just as certainly depriving us of our life. In both cases the significance obviously does not lie in the destruction itself, but in the rebelliousness which could potentially develop into a positive project going to the point of reconverting the machines in a way that increases people's real power over their lives" (SI Anthology, pp. 82; Expanded Edition, p. 108). Examples of the "new signs of negation" and of the vandalism against the "machinery of permitted consumption" in Italy, France, Belgium and Germany are described in the same article (pp. 82-84; Expanded Edition pp. 108-109). See also Debord's remarks on vandalism and looting in his analysis of the 1965 Watts riot, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy" (SI Anthology, pp. 153-160; Expanded Edition, pp. 194-203).

**116.** "The long-sought political form . . . economic liberation": Marx's characterization of the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France* (section 3). Pannekoek: Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960), Dutch revolutionary, author of *Workers' Councils* (1947). See also Serge Bricianer's *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*. "conditions of unity": Cf. Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 4, section 6): "Communism . . . turns existing conditions into conditions of unity."

**117.** This product is nothing other than the producers themselves, whose goal has become nothing other than their own fulfillment: Cf. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Nisbet, pp. 83, 86): "World-historical individuals . . . derive the universal principle whose realization they accomplish from within themselves; it is not, however, their own invention, but is eternally present and is merely put into practice by them and honored in their persons. But since they draw it from within themselves, from a source which was not previously available, they appear to derive it from themselves alone; and



the new world order and the deeds they accomplish appear to be their own achievement, their personal interest and creation. . . . Since the innovation they brought into the world was their own personal goal, they drew their conception of it from within themselves, and it was their own end that they realized.”

**118.** The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century: See René Riesel’s “Preliminaries on Councils and Councilist Organization” (SI Anthology, pp. 270-282; Expanded Edition, pp. 348-362), which discusses the councils in Russia (1905), Germany (1918-1919), Italy (1919-1920), Spain (1936-1939) and Hungary (1956).

**119-121.** These three theses substantially recapitulate the Situationist International’s “Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations” (SI Anthology, p. 223; Expanded Edition, pp. 285-286).

**121.** the combatants themselves are the fundamental weapons: Cf. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit (Miller #383, p. 230; Baillie, p. 404): “What will be the outcome of this conflict itself . . . must be decided by the nature of the living weapons borne by the combatants. For the weapons are nothing else but the nature of the combatants themselves, a nature which only makes its appearance for both of them reciprocally. What their weapons are is already evident from what is implicitly present in this conflict.”

**122.** it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle: Cf. Hegel’s Philosophy of History (Part 4, Section 2, chap. 3): “The Church fought the battle against the barbarism of sensuality in a manner equally barbaric and terroristic with that of its antagonist.”

**123.** “people without qualities”: allusion to Robert Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities*.

**Chapter 5 epigraph:** The quotation is from Shakespeare's King Henry IV, Part I (V.ii.81, 85).

**125.** Man . . . is identical with time: This phrase appears in Kostas Papaioannou's *Hegel: Présentation, choix de textes, bibliographie* (Seghers, 1962, p. 67). Papaioannou is simply summarizing Hegel, however, so Debord may have got the idea directly from one of Hegel's works. "the negative being who is solely to the extent that he suppresses Being": quotation from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This translation follows the French translation quoted by Debord. The standard English translations are somewhat different (Miller #322, pp. 193-194; Baillie, p. 349). "History is itself . . . nature into man": quotation from the "Private Property and Communism" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts. History has always existed, but not always in its historical form: Cf. Marx's Letter to Ruge (September 1843): "Reason has always existed, but not always in its rational form."

**126.** The quotations are from the "Private Property and Communism" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts.

**127.** "the wandering . . . spaces": quotation from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Nisbet, p. 156).

**128.** negative human restlessness: Debord says this is an allusion to Hegel's *Encyclopedia*: "[Man] is what he is not, and is not what he is." Similar statements are found in various places in Hegel, but the closest thing I have found to this in the *Encyclopedia* refers to time: "Time . . . is that being which, inasmuch as it is, is not, and inasmuch as it is not, is" (Vol. II, #258).

**131.** Novalis (Friedrich Von Hardenberg): German poet and philosopher (1772-1801). The quotation is from his collection of aphorisms, *Blüthenstaub* ("Pollen").

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

- 133.** “Herodotus . . . the deeds of men”: opening sentence of Herodotus’s *History of the Persian Wars*.
- 134.** The divisions among the Greek communities: See Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*.
- 136.** The quotation is from Bishop Bossuet’s *Panégryrique de Saint Bernard* (1653).
- 137.** The quotations are from Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 4, section 8).
- 138.** the waning of the Middle Ages: title of a book by Johan Huizinga (more recently and fully translated as *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*). *The Pursuit of the Millennium*: Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* was published in 1957 (expanded edition, 1970). See also Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (1986; translated by Randall Cherry and Ian Patterson, Zone Books, 1994) and Kenneth Rexroth’s *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (Seabury, 1974). Rexroth’s book, which also examines subsequent utopian communities, is out of print, but it can be found online at [www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/communalism.htm](http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/communalism.htm).
- 139.** Machiavelli: Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), author of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. the exuberant life of the Italian cities: Near the end of his Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of “*The Society of the Spectacle*” (1979), Debord says that a liberated society will be like “the reappearance of an Athens or a Florence from which no one will be excluded, extended to all the reaches of the earth.” “the very spirit of the Renaissance”: The quotation and the excerpt from Lorenzo de’ Medici’s song are from Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Part V, chap. 8).

**140.** the Fronde: a complex series of revolts and social conflicts in France (1648-1653). See Oreste Ranum's *The Fronde: A French Revolution*. Debord frequently expressed great interest in the Fronde (and in one of its major protagonists, the Cardinal de Retz) and even proposed to make a film about it: *Les aspects ludiques manifestes et latents dans la Fronde* ("Visible and Hidden Playful Aspects in the Fronde"). See Debord's *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 247. Scottish uprising in support of Charles Edward: failed uprising of 1745-1746 in support of Charles Edward Stuart ("Bonnie Prince Charlie"). The world now had a new foundation: Cf. "The Internationale": "The world shall rise on new foundations: we, who were nothing, shall be all!"

**141.** this new fate that no one controls: Cf. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (p. 129): "From this it follows that the powers that are beyond man's control assume quite a different character. Hitherto it had been that of the blind power of a — fundamentally — irrational fate, the point where the possibility of human knowledge ceased and where absolute transcendence and the realm of faith began. Now, however, it appears as the ineluctable consequence of known, knowable, rational systems of laws, as a necessity which cannot ultimately and wholly be grasped."

**143.** "Once there was history, but not any more": quotation from Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* (chap. 2, section 1, Seventh Observation).

**144.** draped in Roman costume: Cf. Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (chap. 1): "And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the

new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire . . . . Camille Desmoulin, Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern bourgeois society.” Year One of the Republic: During the French Revolution the calendar was revised to date from the beginning of the Republic (September 22, 1792). Napoleon reverted to the traditional Christian calendar in 1806. “Christianity . . . most fitting form of religion”: quotation from Marx’s *Capital* (Vol. I, chap. 1, section 4).

**Chapter 6 epigraph:** The quotation is from #247 of Gracián’s *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* (1647), translated into English as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*.

**147.** The first quotation is from Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* (chap. 1, section 2). “terrain of human development”: quotation from Marx’s *Wages, Price and Profit* (chap. 13).

**149.** maintain the backwardness of everyday life: See Debord’s talk “Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life” (*SI Anthology*, pp. 68-75; Expanded Edition 90-99), where he discusses how everyday life can be seen as “colonized.”

**151.** The quotation is from Marx’s *Capital* (Vol. I, chap. 7, section 1).

**156.** the past continues to dominate the present: Cf. the *Communist Manifesto* (Part 2): “In bourgeois society, the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past.”

157. This individual experience . . . remains without language: On the dialectics of language and poetry, see *SI Anthology*, pp. 114-117, 170-175; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 149-153, 222-228.

159. In order to force the workers . . . violently expropriate their time: Cf. the account of the original expropriation and dispossession of workers from the common land in the “Primitive Accumulation” chapters at the end of Volume I of Marx’s *Capital*.

160. “American way of death”: allusion to the book of that title about the funeral industry by Jessica Mitford (1963; updated edition, 1998).

163. withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of a federation of independent times: allusion to Marx’s notion of the “withering away of the state” and to the anarchist notion of replacing the state with federations of independent communities. “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals”: quotation from Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 4, section 6).

164. The world already dreams of such a time. . . . conscious of it: Cf. Marx’s *Letter to Ruge* (September 1843): “The world has for a long time possessed the dream of a thing, of which it now suffices to become aware so as to really possess it.”

**Chapter 7 epigraph:** The Machiavelli quotation is from chapter 5 of *The Prince*.

165. This homogenizing power . . . walls of China: Cf. the *Communist Manifesto* (Part 1): “The cheapness of its commodities is the heavy artillery that batters down all the walls of China.”

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

169. Urbanism — “city planning”: The French word *urbanisme* means “city planning,” but it has perhaps a slightly more impersonal and bureaucratic connotation.

170. “peaceful coexistence within space” . . . “the restless becoming that takes place in the progression of time”: Perhaps quoted or adapted from Hegel’s *The Philosophical Propaedeutic* (translated by A.V. Miller, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 66, 92, 144): “Space is the connection of the quiescent asunderness and side-by-sideness of things; Time is the connection of their vanishing or alteration. . . . In the spatial world the question is not of succession but of coexistence. . . . As a restless Becoming [Time] is not an element of a synthetic whole.”

172. “one-way system . . . keeping a population under control”: quotations from Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History* (chap. 16.8).

174. “a formless mass . . . semi-urban tissue”: quotation from Mumford’s *The City in History* (chap. 16.6).

176. “subjected the country to the city”: quotation from the Communist Manifesto (Part 1). “very air is liberating”: “*Stadtluft macht frei*” (“Urban air makes one free”) was a medieval German saying, expressing that fact that serfs could free themselves by escaping to the towns.

177. “the country . . . isolation and separation”: quotation from Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* (Part I, chap. 4, section 2). “Oriental despotism”: See Karl Wittfogel’s *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (1957), which examines the social structure of the empires that Marx had referred to as the “Asiatic mode of production.” A brief critique of Wittfogel’s book can be found in *Internationale Situationniste* #10, pp. 72-73.

**178.** critique of human geography: For some of the early “psychogeographical” explorations and visions that laid the groundwork for Debord’s analysis, see *SI Anthology*, pp. 1-8, 50-54, 65-67; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 1-14, 62-66, 69-73, 86-89. life . . . understood as a journey: Cf. the epigraph to Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*: “Our life is a journey in winter and night, we seek our passage in a sky without light.”

**179.** antistate dictatorship of the proletariat: Although Marx and Engels’s notion of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” was totally different from the Stalinist state dictatorships over the proletariat that emerged half a century later, some ambiguities remained regarding its nature and duration which enabled the latter to pretend to have some connection with the former. Debord’s phrase cuts through those ambiguities, making it clear that he is envisaging a distinctly nonstate form of social organization, what the situationists elsewhere referred to as “generalized self-management.” See Raoul Vaneigem’s “Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management” (*SI Anthology*, pp. 283-289; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 363-371) and “Total Self-Management” (the final chapter of Vaneigem’s book *From Wildcat Strike to Total Self-Management*, online at [www.bopsecrets.org/CF/selfmanagement.htm](http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/selfmanagement.htm)). I have examined some of the problems and possibilities of such a society in chapter 4 of *The Joy of Revolution*, which can be found in *Public Secrets* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997, pp. 62-88) or online at [www.bopsecrets.org/PS/joyrev4.htm](http://www.bopsecrets.org/PS/joyrev4.htm).

**Chapter 8 epigraph:** As noted in the opening paragraph of Debord’s article on the May 1968 revolt (“The Beginning of an Era,” *SI Anthology*, p. 225; *Expanded Edition*, p. 288), this quotation was chosen as “an amusing example of a type of historical unconsciousness constantly produced by similar causes and always contradicted by similar results.” In this particular case, a German revolution erupted in 1848, only five years after Ruge’s glib dismissal of such a possibility.



**180.** The Difference . . . Schelling: an early text by Hegel. The complete Hegel sentence is quoted in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (p. 139), translated as "When the power of synthesis vanishes from the lives of men and when the antitheses have lost their vital relation and their power of interaction and gain independence, it is then that philosophy becomes a felt need."

**182.** "first condition of all critique": Cf. Marx's Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: "the critique of religion is the essential precondition for all criticism."

**183.** It is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world: Cf. Marx's Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of spiritless conditions."

**188.** When art becomes independent . . . the dusk of life: Cf. the Preface to Hegel's Philosophy of Right: "When philosophy paints its gray on gray, a form of life has grown old. Gray philosophy can understand it, but it cannot rejuvenate it. The owl of Minerva [the goddess of wisdom] takes flight only at dusk."

**189.** Eugenio d'Ors: d'Ors's book *Lo Barroco* (1935) has been translated into French (*Du Baroque*), but not into English. passage: Debord may be playing on multiple connotations of this word, in the sense of movement or transition or ephemerality (the passage of time) but perhaps also in the sense of a literary or musical sequence (a musical passage).

**190.** Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence: This thesis and several others in the first few pages of this chapter recapitulate much more extensive analyses of art and its possible supersession in many situationist articles,

particularly during the early period (ca. 1957-1962) when the situationists focused on that terrain. See, for example, *SI Anthology*, pp. 143-147, 310-314; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 183-188, 393-397.

**191.** Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it: Cf. Marx's Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: "Philosophy cannot be realized without abolishing the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot be abolished without realizing philosophy." For more on Dadaism and Surrealism, see *SI Anthology*, pp. 18-20, 171-172; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 27-30, 224, and Raoul Vaneigem's *A Cavalier History of Surrealism* (1977; translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, AK Press, 1999). Situationists: This is the only mention of this word in *The Society of the Spectacle*. As Debord noted in *The Real Split in the International* (1972; translated by John McHale, Pluto Press, 2003, p. 120), this very minimal reference was deliberate.

**192.** Riesman: David Riesman (1909-2002), author of *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Whyte: William H. Whyte (1917-1999), author of *The Organization Man* (1956).

**193.** Clark Kerr . . . previous century: In *The Uses of the University* (1963) Kerr stated: "The production, distribution, and consumption of 'knowledge' in all its forms is said to account for 29 percent of the gross national product . . . and 'knowledge production' is growing at about twice the rate of the rest of the economy. . . . What the railroads did for the second half of the last century and the automobile for the first half of this century may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry." This reference had an additional pungency because Kerr was president of the University of California at Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement of 1964, which among other things challenged the notion of universities as "knowledge factories."

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

**195.** conflict is at the origin of everything in its world: Cf. Heraclitus: “Conflict is the origin of all things.” power that is absolute . . . absolutely corrupted: Cf. Lord Acton’s famous remark, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

**198.** Those who denounce the affluent society’s incitement to wastefulness: Probably an allusion to Vance Packard’s *The Waste Makers* (1960). *The Image*: Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream* was published in 1962. In later editions the title was changed to *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*.

**200.** haunts modern society like a specter: Cf. the opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*: “A specter is haunting Europe . . .”

**202.** In order to understand “structuralist” categories . . . reflect forms and conditions of existence: Cf. the Introduction to Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: “Just as in general when examining any historical or social science, so also in the case of the development of economic categories it is always necessary to remember that the subject — in this context contemporary bourgeois society — is presupposed both in reality and in the mind, and that therefore categories express forms of existence and conditions of existence — and sometimes merely separate aspects — of this particular society.” Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself . . . . “We cannot judge . . . contradictions of material life . . .”: paraphrase and quotation from the Preface to Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Structure is the daughter of present power: Cf. Jonathan Swift’s *Thoughts on Various Subjects, Moral and Diverting* (1706): “Praise is the daughter of present power.” Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity . . . frigid dream of structuralism: Cf. the Introduction to Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: “The example of labor strikingly demonstrates how even the

most abstract categories, despite their validity in all epochs — precisely because they are abstractions — are equally a product of historical conditions even in the specific form of abstractions, and they retain their full validity only for and within the framework of these conditions.”

**203.** ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle . . . practical force into motion: Cf. Marx and Engels’s *The Holy Family* (chap. VI.3.c): “Ideas can never lead beyond an old world order but only beyond the ideas of the old world order. . . . In order to carry out ideas men are needed who can exert practical force.” A similar statement can be found in the “Human Requirements” section of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts*: “In order to abolish the idea of private property, the idea of communism is quite sufficient. But it takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property.” This theory does not expect miracles from the working class: Cf. Marx’s *The Civil War in France* (section 3): “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune.”

**204.** “zero degree of writing”: title of a book by Roland Barthes (translated into English as *Writing Degree Zero*). It means writing totally stripped of substance and meaning, leaving nothing but the bare skeleton: writing “as such.” Its “reversal” is thus writing that has the fullest possible substance and significance.

**205.** The very style of dialectical theory . . . inevitable destruction: Cf. Marx’s *Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital*: “In its rational form dialectics is a scandal and an abomination to bourgeois society and its doctrinaire professors, because in comprehending the existing state of things it simultaneously recognizes the negation of that state, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and thus takes into account its transitory nature as well as its momentary existence.”

206. “Truth is not like some finished product . . . made it”: quotation from the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller #39, p. 23; Baillie, p. 99; Kaufmann, p. 60). reversal: The French word *renversement* can mean reversal or inversion, but it also has a more active connotation of overthrowing or overturning. *détournement*: The French word means deflection, diversion, rerouting, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose. Like most other English-speaking people who have actually practiced *détournement*, I have chosen to retain the French spelling and pronunciation of the noun (day-toorn-uh-maw) and to anglicize the verb (*detourn*). For more on *détournement*, see *SI Anthology*, pp. 8-14, 55-56; *Expanded Edition*, pp. 14-21, 67-68. answers “the philosophy of poverty” with “the poverty of philosophy”: Marx critiqued Proudhon’s *The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846) by writing *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). “But despite all your twists and turns . . . historical attire”: The two Kierkegaard quotations are from *Philosophical Fragments*, chap. 5.

207. Plagiarism is necessary . . . : This entire thesis is a verbatim plagiarism from Ducasse’s *Poésies* (Part II). Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), a.k.a. Lautréamont, was the mysterious author of *Maldoror* and *Poésies*, both of which make extensive use of *détournement*. In his autobiographical work *Panegyric* (1989; translated by James Brook and John McHale, Verso, 2004, pp. 42-43) Debord described his experience of storms in the mountainous region of central France: “Just once, at night, I saw lightning strike near me outside: you could not even see where it had struck; the whole landscape was equally illuminated for one startling instant. Nothing in art has ever given me this impression of an irrevocable brilliance, except for the prose that Lautréamont employed in the programmatic exposition that he called *Poésies*.”

208. *Détournement* has grounded its cause on nothing but . . . : Cf. the opening of Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*: "I have founded my cause on nothing."

**Chapter 9 epigraph:** The quotation is from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller #178, p. 111; Baillie, p. 229).

214. what Mannheim calls "total ideology": See Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, Part II.

215. "expression . . . between man and man": quotation from the "Alienated Labor" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts. "as the quantity of objects increases . . . man is subjected" and "The need for money . . . only need it produces": quotations from the "Human Requirements" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts (a.k.a. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). The quotation from Hegel's *Jenenser Realphilosophie* is from the same passage detourned in Thesis 2.

217. *False Consciousness*: Joseph Gabel's *La Fausse Conscience* (1962); translated by Margaret A. Thompson as *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification* (Harper, 1975). separation has built its own world: Cf. Proverbs 9:1: "Wisdom has built her own house."

218. "In clinical accounts . . . interrelated": quotation from *False Consciousness*, pp. 61-62 (translation slightly modified). "mirror sign" (*signe du miroir*): Psychiatric term referring to a patient's obsessively looking at himself in the mirror and/or to his confused belief that he has found interlocutors in the mirror images. The term is rendered as "mirror symptom" in the English translation of Gabel's book, as for example in the following passage (which also includes two other phrases cited by Debord): "I can affirm that behavior does exist on a societal level that is phenomenologically close to the psychiatrists' 'mirror symptom.' This is when the State — usually totalitarian — chooses a

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

fictional interlocutor in order to have an act of violence or a territorial conquest ratified in the form of a supposed negotiation. This is — just like the clinical phenomenon in question — an illusion of encounter with an artificial interlocutor; a behavior of schizophrenic structure” (False Consciousness, pp. 258-259).

**219.** “the abnormal need . . . edge of existence”: quotation from False Consciousness, p. 199.

**221.** “historic mission of establishing truth in the world”: Cf. Marx’s Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: “The task of history is thus to establish the truth about this world once the otherworld has proved illusory.” the class that is able to dissolve all classes: Cf. the same text, which refers to the proletariat as “a class that is the dissolution of all classes.” “directly linked to world history”: quotation from Marx and Engels’s The German Ideology (Part I, chap. 2, section 5).

# Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

In memory of Gerard Lebovici, assassinated in Paris on 5 March 1984, in a trap that remains mysterious.<sup>1</sup>

“However critical the situation and circumstances in which you find yourself, despair of nothing; it is on the occasions in which everything is to be feared that it is necessary to fear nothing; it is when one is surrounded by all the dangers that it is not necessary to dread any; it is when one is without resources that it is necessary to count on all of them; it is when one is surprised that it is necessary to surprise the enemy himself.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.<sup>2</sup>

1 For more on the assassination of Gerard Lebovici, see Jean-Francois Martos, *Words and Bullets: the Condemned of the Lebovici Affair* (1984), and Guy Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici* (1985). Note that in his letter to Editions Anagrama dated 7 June 1989, Debord explains that “ambush” is not the word he would use to translate *un guet-apens* because “I have employed the word that evokes banditry, the style of the *hampa*,” that is to say “the underworld.” If one could be trapped in such a thing, one might use the word “hit”: Lebovici was assassinated in a (gangland) hit.

2 Guy Debord’s epigraph is taken from the first European translation of *The Art of War*, by the Jesuit J.J.L. Amiot (1782). The best available English translation, by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford 1963), does not include this passage. [*Malcolm Imrie*] And so we have translated directly from Debord’s French.



## I

These comments are sure to be promptly known by fifty or sixty people; a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion. But then, of course, in some circles I am considered to be an authority. It must also be borne in mind that a good half of this elite that will be interested will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination,<sup>3</sup> and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite. Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to instruct just anybody.

The unhappiness of the times thus compels me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain lures, like the very hallmark of the era. As long as other pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate<sup>4</sup>; just as

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3 This might sound meglomaniacal, but it is a fact that, in the early 1970s, the French “Socialist” Party used the situationist demand “Change Life” as one of his campaign slogans. (See *Theses on the SI and Its Time*, thesis 37.) For more on the “Socialist” Party’s recuperation of the situationists, see NOT BORED! review of Jacques Attali’s *Noise*.

4 In the initial agreement that formed the the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, there was a secret clause that required that, before a nation could join NATO, it must establish its own national security service capable of “Civil Emergency Planning,” that is, of “intervening effectively [...] in the event of external socialist aggression or internal political upheavals.” Sometimes called “Operation Stay Behind,” this massive network consisted of secret bases, arms caches, recruitment centers and paramilitary cadres drawn from trusted anti-communists (mostly

some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others. However, in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.

## II.

In 1967, in a book entitled *The Society of the Spectacle*, I showed what the modern spectacle was already in essence: the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government that accompanied this reign. The disturbances of 1968, which in several countries lasted into the following years, having nowhere overthrown the existing organization of the society from which it springs apparently spontaneously, the spectacle has thus continued to reinforce itself, that is, to spread to the furthest limits on all sides, while increasing its density in the center. It has even learned new defensive techniques, as powers under attack always do. When I began the critique of spectacular society, what was particularly noticed — given the period — was the revolutionary content that could be discovered in that critique; and it was naturally felt to be its most troublesome element. As to the spectacle itself, I was sometimes accused of having invented it out of thin air, and was always accused of indulging myself to excess in my evaluation of its depth and unity, and its real workings. I must admit that others who later published new books on the same subject demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less. All they had to do was to replace the totality and its movement

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neo-Nazis, mafiosi and right-wing special operatives). The French branch of this network was called *Rose des Vents* (“Rose of the Winds”). Up until 1974, when the conspiracy was revealed, the same name (*La Rosa Dei Venti*) was used in Italy; after 1974, the Italian part of the network was called *Glaudio* (a two-sided Roman sword) and worked out of the “P2” Masonic Lodge. See footnotes [11] and [23].

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

by a single static detail on the surface of the phenomenon, with each author demonstrating his originality by choosing a different and all the less disturbing one. No one wanted to taint the scientific modesty of his personal interpretation by interposing reckless historical judgments.

Nonetheless, the society of the spectacle has continued to advance. It moves quickly for in 1967 it had barely forty years behind it, though it had used them to the full. And by its own development, which no one took the trouble to investigate, it has since shown with some astonishing achievements that it is effectively just what I said it was. Proving this point has more than academic value, because it is undoubtedly indispensable to have understood the spectacle's unity and articulation as an active force in order to examine the directions in which this force has since been able to travel. These questions are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that the next stage of the conflict in society will necessarily be played out. Since the spectacle today is certainly more powerful than it was before, what is it doing with this additional power? What point has it reached, that it had not reached previously? What, in short, are its present lines of advance? The vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread; but this is experienced rather like some inexplicable change in the climate, or in some other natural equilibrium, a change about which ignorance knows only that it has nothing to say. What is more, many see it as a civilizing invasion, as something inevitable, and even want to collaborate. Such people would rather not know the precise purpose of this conquest, and how it is advancing.

I am going to outline certain *practical consequences*, still little known, that result from the spectacle's rapid deployment over the last twenty years. I have no intention of entering into polemics on any aspect of this question; these are now too easy, and too useless. Nor will I try

to convince. The present comments are not concerned with moralizing. They do not propose what is desirable, or merely preferable. They simply record what is.

### III.

No one today can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle; on the contrary, one might doubt whether it is reasonable to add anything on a question which experience has already settled in such draconian fashion. *Le Monde* of 19 September 1987 offered a felicitous illustration of the saying, 'If it exists, there's no need to talk about it,' a fundamental law of these spectacular times which, at least in this respect, ensure there is no such thing as a backward country.

That modern society is a society of spectacle now goes without saying. It will soon be necessary to remark those who do nothing remarkable. One loses count of all the books describing a phenomenon which now characterizes all the industrialized nations yet equally spares none of the countries which have still to catch up. What is so droll, however, is that all the books which do analyze this phenomenon, usually to deplore it, must sacrifice themselves to the spectacle if they're to become known.

It is true that this spectacular critique of the spectacle, which is not only late but, even worse, seeks 'to make itself known' on the same level, inevitably sticks to vain generalities or hypocritical regrets; just as vain as the clowns who parade their disabused sagacity in newspapers.

The empty debate on the spectacle — that is, on the activities of the world's owners — is thus organized by the spectacle *itself*: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure that nothing is said about their extensive deployment. Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media.' And by this they mean to

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial ‘professionalism’ would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through *mass media* [English in original] — a form of communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for peaceful admiration. For what is communicated are *orders*; and with great harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them.

The power of the spectacle, which is so fundamentally unitary, a centralizer by the very weight of things, and entirely despotic in spirit, frequently rails at seeing the constitution under its rule of a politics-spectacle, a justice-spectacle, a medicine-spectacle and all the other similarly surprising examples of “mediatic excess.” Thus the spectacle would be nothing other than the excesses of the mediatic,<sup>5</sup> whose nature, unquestionably good since it facilitates communication, is sometimes driven to extremes. Often enough society’s bosses declare themselves ill-served by their media employees: more often they blame the plebian spectators for the common, almost bestial manner in which they indulge in mediatic pleasures. A virtually infinite number of supposed mediatic differences thus serve to dissimulate what is, on the contrary, the result of a spectacular convergence, pursued with remarkable tenacity. Just as the logic of the commodity reigns over capitalists’ competing ambitions, or the logic of war always dominates the frequent modifications in weaponry, so the harsh logic of the spectacle controls the abundant diversity of mediatic extravagances.

In all that has happened in the last twenty years, the most important change lies in the very continuity of the spectacle. This has nothing

5        The French here is *le médiatique*. Though “mediatic” is not commonly used in English, we have consistently employed it because Debord’s text is so insistent on its use: a different meaning from the standard and relatively limited meaning of “media” is clearly intended.

to do with the perfecting of its mediatic instrumentation, which had already reached a highly advanced stage of development; it means quite simply that the spectacle's domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws. The extraordinary new conditions in which this entire generation has effectively lived constitute a precise and sufficient summary of all that, henceforth, the spectacle will forbid; and also all that it will permit.

#### IV.

On the theoretical level, I only need add a single detail to my earlier formulations, albeit one which has far-reaching consequences. In 1967 I distinguished two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse. Both of them floated above real society, as its goal and its lie. The former, placing in the fore the ideology grouped around a dictatorial personality, had accompanied the totalitarian counter-revolution, Nazi as well as Stalinist. The latter, driving salaried workers to freely operate their choice upon the great variety of new commodities that confront them, had represented the Americanization of the world, a process which in some respects frightened but also successfully seduced those countries where it had been possible to maintain traditional forms of bourgeois democracy. Since then a third form has been established, through the rational combination of these two, and on the basis of a victory of the form which had showed itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the *integrated spectacular*,<sup>6</sup> which has since tended to impose itself globally.

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6 The French here is *spectaculaire integre*. We have consistently translated *spectaculaire* as "spectacular" because Debord's text carefully distinguishes it from "spectacle." It would appear that the author's intention in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* is to "detourn" the theory he originally presented in *The Society of the*

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Whereas Russia and Germany were largely responsible for the formation of the concentrated spectacular, and the United States for the diffuse form, the integrated spectacular seems to have been pioneered in France and Italy by the play of a series of shared historical features, namely, the important role of the Stalinist party and unions in political and intellectual life, a weak democratic tradition, the long monopoly of power enjoyed by a single party of government, and the necessity to eliminate an unexpected upsurge in revolutionary activity [since 1968].

The integrated spectacular shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse, and ever since the fruitful union of the two has learned to employ both these qualities on a grander scale. Their former mode of application has changed considerably. As regards the concentrated side, the controlling center has now become occult, never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacular influence has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the totality of socially produced behavior and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacular is that it integrates itself into reality to the same extent that it speaks of it, and that it reconstructs it as it speaks. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacular as something alien. When the spectacular was concentrated, the greater part of peripheral society escaped it; when it was diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle is mixed into all reality and irradiates it. As one could easily foresee in theory, practical experience of the unbridled accomplishment of commodity rationality has quickly and without exception shown that the becoming-world of the falsification was also the falsification of the world. Beyond a still important heritage of old books and old buildings, but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly selected and put into perspective according to the spectacle's requirements, there remains nothing, in culture or in nature,

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*Spectacle.*

which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily accessible to the dominant social forces.

The government of the spectacle, which now possesses all the means to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of projects that will shape the most distant future. It reigns unchecked; *it executes its summary judgments.*

It is in these conditions that a parodic end of the division of labor suddenly appears, with carnivalesque gaiety, all the more welcome because it coincides with the generalized disappearance of all true competence. A financier can be a singer, a lawyer a police spy, a baker can parade his literary tastes, an actor can be president, a chef can philosophize on the movements of baking as if they were landmarks in universal history. Each can join the spectacle, in order publicly to adopt, or sometimes secretly practice, an entirely different activity from whatever specialty first made their name. Where the possession of “mediatic status” has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing, it is normal for this status to be easily transferable and to confer the right to shine in the same fashion to anyone anywhere. Most often these accelerated media particles pursue their simple orbit of statutorily guaranteed admiration. But it happens that the mediatic transition provides the *cover* for many enterprises, officially independent but in fact secretly linked by various *ad hoc* networks. With the result that occasionally the social division of labor, along with the easily foreseeable solidarity of its use, reappears in quite new forms: for example, one can now publish a novel in order to arrange an assassination. Such picturesque examples also go to show that one should never trust someone because of their job.



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

But the greatest ambition of the integrated spectacular is still that secret agents become revolutionaries, and that revolutionaries become secret agents.

### V.

The society modernized to the stage of the integrated spectacular is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; fusion of State and economy; generalized secrecy, forgeries without reply; a perpetual present.

The movement of technological innovation has a long history, and is a constituent of capitalist society, sometimes described as industrial or post-industrial. But since its most recent acceleration (in the aftermath of the Second World War) it has greatly reinforced spectacular authority, by completely surrendering everybody to the ensemble of specialists, to their calculations and their judgments, which always depend on their calculations. The fusion of State and economy is the most evident trend of the century; it has at the very least become the motor of the most recent economic development. The defensive and offensive pact concluded between these two powers, the economy and the State, has assured them of the greatest common advantages in every field: each may be said to own the other; it is absurd to oppose them, or to distinguish between their rationalities and irrationalities. This union has also proved to be extremely favorable to the development of spectacular domination, which, precisely, from its formation, hasn't been anything else. The other three features are direct effects of this domination, in its integrated stage.

Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most important operation.

The simple fact of being without reply has given to the false an entirely new quality. At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis that can never be demonstrated. The false without reply has succeeded in making public opinion disappear: first it found itself incapable of making itself heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether. This evidently has significant consequences for politics, the applied sciences, the justice system and artistic knowledge.

The construction of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circular passage of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in its programmed self-destruction.

## VI.

Spectacular domination's first priority was to make historical knowledge in general disappear; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past. The evidence for this is so glaring it hardly needs further explanation. With mastery the spectacle organizes ignorance of what is about to happen and, immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood. The most important is the most hidden. Nothing in the last twenty years has been so thoroughly coated in obedient lies as the history of May 1968. Some useful lessons have been learned from certain demystifying studies of those days and their origins; these, however, are State secrets.

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

In France, it is a dozen years now since a president of the republic, long since forgotten but at the time still floating on the spectacle's surface, naively expressed his delight at "knowing that henceforth we will live in a world without memory, where images chase each other, like reflections on the water." Convenient indeed for those in business, and who know how to stay there. The end of history gives current-day power a pleasant break. Success is absolutely guaranteed in all of power's undertakings, or at least the rumor of success.

How drastically any absolute power will suppress history depends on the extent of its imperious interests or obligations, and especially on its practical capacity to execute its aims. Ts'ing Che Hoang Ti had books burned, but he never managed to get rid of all of them. In our own century Stalin went further, yet despite the various accomplices he managed to find outside his empire's borders, there remained a vast area of the world beyond the reach of his police, where his impostures could be laughed at. The integrated spectacular has done much better with very new procedures and this time operates globally. Ineptitude compels universal respect; it is no longer permitted to laugh at it; in any case, it has become impossible to show that one is laughing.

History's domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent. Inseparably, history was knowledge that must endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come: "a possession for all time," according to Thucydides. In this way history was the *measure* of genuine novelty; and those who sell novelty at any price have made the means of measuring it disappear. When the important makes itself socially recognized as what is instantaneous, and will still be the other and the same the instant afterwards, and will always replace another instantaneous importance, one can say that the means employed guarantee a sort of eternity of non-importance that speaks loudly.

The precious advantage that the spectacle has drawn from the *outlawing* of history, from having condemned the recent past to clandestinity, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own history of the movement of its recent world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have wanted to make us forget that *they have only just arrived*.

## VII.

With the destruction of history, contemporary events themselves retreat into a fabulous distance, among its unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning. For every imbecile who has advanced spectacularly, there are only the mediatics who can respond with a few respectful rectifications or remonstrations, and they are miserly, for besides their extreme ignorance, their personal and professional solidarity with the spectacle's general authority and the society it expresses, makes it their duty, and their pleasure, never to diverge from that authority whose majesty must not be damaged. It must not be forgotten that all mediatics, through wages and other rewards and recompenses, has a master, and sometimes to several; and that every one of them knows he is dispensable.

All experts are mediatics-Statists and only in that way are they recognized as experts. Every expert follows his master, because all former possibilities for independence have been almost been reduced to nil by present society's conditions of organization. The most useful expert, of course, is the one who lies. Those who need experts are, for different reasons, falsifiers and ignoramuses. Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there to offer a formal reassurance. Once there were experts in Etruscan art, and competent ones, for Etruscan art was not for sale. But a period

which, for example, finds it profitable to fake by chemical means various famous wines, can only sell them if it has created wine experts able to con connoisseurs into admiring their new, more recognizable flavors.<sup>7</sup> Cervantes remarks that “under a poor cloak you often find a good drinker.”<sup>8</sup> Someone who knows his wine may often understand nothing about the rules of the nuclear industry, but spectacular domination calculates that if one expert can make a fool of him with nuclear industry, another can easily do the same with wine. And it is well known, for example, that experts in mediatic meteorology, forecasting temperature or rainfall for the next forty-eight hours, are severely limited in what they say by the obligation to maintain certain economic, touristic and regional balances, when so many people make so many journeys on so many roads, between so many equally desolate places; thus they can only try to make their names as entertainers.

One aspect of the disappearance of all objective historical knowledge manifests itself concerning any personal reputation, which has become malleable and correctable at will by those who control all information, those who collect it and also those — an entirely different matter — who diffuse it. Their license to falsify is thus unlimited. Historical evidence, of which, in the spectacle, one does not want to know, is no longer

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7           The French here is *des experts en vins qui entra'neront les caves a aimer leurs nouveaux parfums, plus reconnaissables*.

Debord's pun on the two meanings of *caves* — wine-cellars (fem.) and hopeless dupes or suckers (masc.) — is unfortunately lost in English. The word's underworld etymology is instructive. It originally referred to anyone who worked in a legitimate job; hence to someone who did not know how to live; and hence to any kind of dupe. [Malcolm Imrie]

8           The proverb is from *Don Quixote*, quoted by the Duchess in her conversation with Sancho Panza (vol. II, book 3, ch. 1). The Spanish is, *Debajo de mala capa, suele haber buen bebedor*. [Malcolm Imrie]

evidence. When the only fame is that bestowed as a favor by the grace of a spectacular Court, disgrace may instantaneously follow. An anti-spectacular notoriety is becoming something extremely rare. I myself am one of the last people to possess one, having never had any other. But it has also become extraordinarily suspect. Society has officially declared itself to be spectacular. To be known outside spectacular relations is already to be known as an enemy of society.

It is permitted to change a person's whole past, radically modify it, recreate it in the manner of the Moscow trials — and without even having recourse to the clumsiness of a trial. One can kill at less cost.<sup>9</sup> Those who govern the integrated spectacular, or their friends, surely have no lack of false witnesses, though they may be unskilled — but what capacity to detect this clumsiness can remain among the spectators who will be witnesses to the exploits of the false witnesses? — or false documents, which are always highly effective. Thus it is no longer possible to believe anything about anyone that you have not learned for yourself, directly. But in fact false accusations are rarely necessary. Once one controls the mechanism that operates the only form of social verification to be fully and universally recognized, one can say what one likes. The movement of the spectacular demonstration proves itself simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirmation on the unique terrain where anything can be publicly affirmed, and be made believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is witness. Spectacular authority can similarly deny whatever it likes, once, or three times over, and say that it will no longer speak of it and speak of something else

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9 On the rewriting of a person's past, after he or she has been assassinated, see Guy Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici*, and Jean-Francois Martos, *Words and Bullets: the Condemned of the Lebovici Affair*.

instead, knowing full well there is no danger of any other riposte, on its own terrain or any other.

For the agora, the general community, no longer exists, nor even communities restricted to intermediary bodies or to autonomous institutions, to salons or cafes, or to workers in a single company; no place where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of mediatic discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it. Nothing remains of the guaranteed relatively independent judgment of those who once made up the world of learning; of those, for example, who used to base their pride on their ability to verify, to come close to what one called an impartial history of facts, or at least to believe that such a history deserved to be known. There is no longer even any incontestable bibliographical truth, and the computerized catalogues of national libraries are well-equipped to better suppress the traces. It is disorienting to consider what it meant to be a judge, a doctor or a historian not so long ago, and to recall the imperative obligations they often recognized, within the limits of their competence: *men resemble their times more than their fathers*.<sup>10</sup>

When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has then gone on to talk about something else, and it is that which henceforth, in short, exists. The practical consequences, as we see, are enormous.

We believe we know that in Greece, history and democracy appeared at the same time. We can prove that their disappearances have also been simultaneous.

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10 An Arab proverb, dating from the fourteenth century. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

To this list of the triumphs of power we should, however, add one result which has proved negative for it: a State, in which one has durably installed a great deficit of historical knowledge so as to manage it, can no longer be governed strategically.

### VIII.

Once it attains the stage of the integrated spectacular, self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realization of a *fragile perfection*. So that it must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer attackable, being perfect, which no other society has been. It is a fragile society because it has great difficulty managing its dangerous technological expansion. But it is a perfect society to be governed; and the proof is that all those who aspire to govern want to govern this one, in the same way, maintaining it almost exactly as it is. For the first time in contemporary Europe, no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change something important. The commodity can no longer be criticized by anyone: as a general system or even as the particular forms of junk which heads of industry choose to put on the market at any given time.

Wherever the spectacle rules, the only organized forces are those that want the spectacle. No one can any longer be the enemy of what exists, nor transgress the *omerta* that concerns everything. We have finished with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, according to which society was criticizable or transformable, reformed or revolutionized. And this has not been obtained by the appearance of new arguments, but quite simply because all argument has become useless. From this result we can measure not universal happiness, but the redoubtable strength of the networks of tyranny.



Never has censorship been more perfect. Never has the opinion of those who are still led to believe, in several countries, that they remain free citizens, been less authorized to make themselves known, whenever it is a matter of choices affecting their real lives. Never has it been possible to lie to them with a perfect absence of consequences. The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing. Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act: such must be the spectator's condition. People often cite the United States as an exception because there Nixon came to an end due to a series of denials whose clumsiness was too cynical: but this entirely local exception, for which there were some old historical causes, clearly no longer holds true, since Reagan has recently been able to do the same thing with impunity. All that is never sanctioned is veritably permitted. Talk of scandal is thus archaic. The most profound summing up of the period that the whole world entered shortly after Italy and the United States can be found in the words of a senior Italian statesman, a member, simultaneously, of both the official government and the parallel government called P2, *Potere Due*: "Once there were scandals, but not any more."<sup>11</sup>

11 Although Debord says that the "P" in P2 stands for *Potere* (Power), while other writers say that it stands for *Propaganda* (same in Italian and English), one is definitely speaking of the same organization. Founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, P2 was a "covered" masonic lodge: the identities of its members were not known by anyone, even the Grand Lodge. In 1964, General Licio Gelli — a fascist from the Mussolini days who had been sheltered in Argentina by its dictator Juan Peron — returned to Italy, took charge of P2 and used his extensive connections to establish a network of the various drug mafias and neo-Nazi extremists in Latin America and Southern Europe. After the exposure of "The Rose of the Winds" group in 1974 (footnote [4]), P2 took up the burden of maintaining NATO's "Operation Stay Behind" in Italy. In 1982, the existence

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx described the State's encroachment upon Second Empire France, then rich with half a million bureaucrats: "Everything became a subject for governmental activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse, the communal property of a village community, or the railways, the national property and the provincial universities." The famous question of the funding of political parties was already being posed, for Marx noted that, "The parties that struggled in turn for supremacy regarded the taking of possession of this immense State edifice as the main booty for the victor." Yet this may nonetheless sound somewhat bucolic and, as one says, surpassed, at a time when the State's speculations today concern new towns and highways, underground traffic and the production of electro-nuclear energy, oil drilling and computers, the administration of banks and socio-cultural centers, the modification of the 'audiovisual landscape' and secret arms exports, property speculation and the pharmaceutical industry, agribusiness and the management of hospitals, military credits and the secret funds of the ever-expanding departments charged with running society's numerous defense services. But Marx unfortunately remains all too up to date when in the same book he evokes this government, which "rather than deciding by night, and striking by day, decides by day and strikes by night."

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of P2 itself was discovered. At the time, the lodge counted among its members more than 2,400 people, including former-Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, the "senior Italian statesman" to whom Debord refers. In 1990, Andreotti was charged with ordering the assassination of journalist Mino Pecorelli; in his defense, Andreotti confirmed and deferred to the existence of Operation Gladio.

## IX.

This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. It wants, actually, *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*. The history of terrorism is written by the State and it is thus instructive. The spectating populations must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else seems rather acceptable, in any case more rational and democratic.

The modernization of repression has succeeded in perfecting — first in the Italian pilot-project under the name of *pentiti*<sup>12</sup> — sworn *professional accusers*; a phenomenon first seen in the seventeenth century after the Fronde, when such people were called ‘certified witnesses.’ This spectacular progress of Justice has filled Italy’s prisons with thousands of people condemned<sup>13</sup> to do penance for a civil war which did not take place, a kind of mass armed insurrection which, by chance, never actually happened, a putsch woven of such stuff as dreams are made of.

One can remark that interpretations of the mysteries of terrorism appear to have introduced a symmetry between contradictory views, as if there were two schools of philosophy professing absolutely incompatible metaphysical systems. Some would see terrorism as only several blatant manipulations by the secret services; others, on the contrary, estimate

12 A relevant example of an alleged accomplice who “repents” and — in exchange for favorable treatment — turns state’s evidence (becomes a “supergrass”) would be Aldo Tisei, a member of the Palladin organization (see footnote [46]) who murdered Judge Vittorio Occorsio (see footnote [48]).

13 On 7 April 1979, the Italian authorities arrested more than 20 left-wing intellectuals, including Antonio Negri. Many more arrests followed.

that it is only necessary to reproach the terrorists for their total lack of historical understanding.<sup>14</sup> The use of a little historical logic permits us to quite quickly conclude that there is nothing contradictory in recognizing that people who lack all historical sense can easily be manipulated; even more easily than others. It is much easier to lead someone to ‘repent’ when it can be shown that everything he thought he did freely was actually known in advance. It is an inevitable effect of clandestine forms of organization of the military type that it suffices to infiltrate a few people at certain points of the network to make many march and fall. Critique, when evaluating armed struggles, must sometimes analyze one of these particular operations without being led astray by the general resemblance that all will possibly share.<sup>15</sup> We should expect, as a logical possibility, that the State’s security services intend to use all the advantages they find on the terrain of the spectacle, which has exactly been organized with that in mind for some time: on the contrary, it is the difficulty of glimpsing this which is astonishing, and does not ring true.

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14        Among those who “see terrorism as simply a number of acts of blatant manipulation on the part of the secret services,” Debord would include Gianfranco Sanguinetti, author of *On Terrorism and the State*, which Debord criticized in his 23 February 1981 letter to Jaap Kloosterman. Among those who “reproach the terrorists for their total lack of historical understanding,” Debord would include Antonio Negri, Oreste Scalzone and other “doctrinaires of ‘armed struggle.’” See footnote [22].

15        Another reference to Debord’s critique of Sanguinetti’s *On Terrorism and the State*. Among those “particular operations” to be analyzed, Debord would include those conducted by “Blanqui, Varlan, [and] Durruti,” to whom he refers in the context of the inseparability of “political crime” and “social critique.” See also Debord’s 1980 comments concerning armed struggle in the Basque Country.

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Judicial repression's current objective here, of course, is to generalize matters as fast as possible. What is important in this sort of commodity is the packaging, or the labeling: the price codes. One enemy of spectacular democracy is the same as another, just like spectacular democracies themselves. Thus there must be no more right of asylum for terrorists, and even those who have not yet been accused of being terrorists can certainly become so, with extradition being imposed. In November 1978, in the case of a young print worker, Gabor Winter, wanted by the West German government mainly for having drafted certain revolutionary leaflets, Mlle Nicole Pradain, representing the Department of Public Prosecution in the Appeal Court of Paris, quickly showed that the 'political motives' that could be the only grounds for refusing extradition under the Franco-German agreement of 29 November 1951, could not be invoked: "Gabor Winter is a social criminal, not a political one. He refuses social constraints. A true political criminal doesn't reject society. He attacks political structures and not, like Gabor Winter, social structures." The notion of acceptable political crime only became recognized in Europe once the bourgeoisie had successfully attacked previously established social structures. The nature of political crime could not be separated from the diverse intentions of social critique. This was true for Blanqui, Varlin, Durruti. Nowadays there is a pretense of wishing to preserve a purely political crime, like some inexpensive luxury, a crime which doubtless no one will ever have the occasion to commit, since no one is interested in the subject any more; except for the professional politicians themselves, whose crimes are rarely pursued, nor for that matter no longer called political. All crimes and offenses are effectively social. But of all social crimes, none must be seen as worse than the impertinent pretension to still want to change something in this society, which thinks that it has only been only too kind and patient, but which *no longer wants to be blamed*.

## X.

According to the basic interests of the new system of domination, the dissolution of logic has been pursued by different, but mutually supportive, means. Some of these means involve the technical instrumentation that has experienced and popularized the spectacle; but others are more linked to the mass psychology of submission.

At the technological level, when the image constructed and chosen by someone has become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself at each place that he could go, one certainly knows that the image supports everything; because within the same image anything can be juxtaposed without contradiction. The flow of images carries everything and it is similarly someone else who governs at will this simplified summary of the perceptible world; he who chooses where the flow will lead, and the rhythm of what should be shown, as a perpetual, arbitrary surprise, doesn't want to leave any time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it. In this concrete experience of permanent submission, one finds the psychological origin of the general adhesion to what is; an adhesion that the spectator recognizes *ipso facto* as a sufficient value. Beyond what is properly secret, spectacular discourse obviously silences anything it finds inconvenient. It isolates what it shows from its context, its past, the intentions and the consequences. It is thus completely illogical. Since no one can contradict it, the spectacle has the right to contradict itself, to correct its own past. The arrogant attitude of its servants, when they have to make known some new, and perhaps still more dishonest version of certain facts, is to harshly correct the ignorance and bad interpretations they attribute to their public, while the day before they themselves were busily disseminating the error, with their customary assurance. Thus the spectacle's instruction and the spectators' ignorance are wrongly seen as antagonistic factors when in fact they give

birth to each other. In the same way, the computer's binary language is an irresistible inducement to the continual and unreserved acceptance of what has been programmed according to the wishes of someone else and passes for the timeless source of a superior, impartial and total logic. Such increased speed and a vocabulary to judge everything! Political? Social? You must choose. You cannot have both. My choice is inescapable. They are jeering at us, and we know whom these structures are for.<sup>16</sup> Thus it is not surprising that children should glibly start their education at an early age with the Absolute Knowledge of computer science; while they still do not know how to read, for reading demands making veritable judgments at every line; and is the only access to the vast areas of pre-spectacular human experience. Because conversation is almost dead, and soon so too will be many of those who knew how to speak.

On the level of the means of thought of contemporary populations, the primary cause of decadence clearly derives from the fact that all discourse shown in the spectacle leaves no place for response; and logic is only socially formed in dialogue. Furthermore, when respect for those who speak in the spectacle is so widespread, when they are supposed to be rich, important, prestigious, to be *authority itself*, the spectators tend to want to be just as illogical as the spectacle, so as to display an individual reflection of this authority. And finally, logic is not easy, and no one has desired to teach it to them. Drug addicts do not study logic, because they no longer need it, because they no longer have the

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16 "They are jeering at us, and we know whom these programmes are for." The French here is, *On nous siffle, et l'on sait pour qui sont ces structures*. Debord is playing on a famous line from Racine's *Andromache*, Act V, Scene 3: *Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes?* [*Malcolm Imrie*] That last French phrase means, "Who are those serpents jeering at your heads?"

possibility. The spectator's laziness also that of any intellectual cadre or overnight specialist, who do their best to conceal the narrow limits of their knowledge by the dogmatic repetition of arguments with illogical authority.

## XI.

It is generally believed that those who have displayed the greatest incapacity in matters of logic are precisely those who proclaim themselves revolutionaries. This unjustified reproach dates from an age when almost everyone thought with a minimum of logic, with the striking exception of cretins and militants; and in the case of the latter bad faith played its part, intentionally, because it was held to be effective. But today there is no escaping the fact that intense use of the spectacle has, as we should have expected, turned most of our contemporaries into ideologues, if only in fits and starts, bits and pieces. Absence of logic, that is to say, loss of the ability to perceive immediately what is important and what is insignificant or irrelevant, what is incompatible or, inversely, what could well be complementary; all that a particular consequence implies and at the same time all that it excludes — high doses of this disease have been intentionally injected into the population by the spectacle's *anaesthetists/resuscitators*. Protesters have not been any more irrational than submissive people. It is simply that in the former one sees a more intense manifestation of the general irrationality, because while displaying their project, they have actually tried to carry out a practical operation — even if it is only to read certain texts and show that they know what they mean. They have given themselves diverse obligations to dominate logic, even strategy, which is precisely the entire field of the deployment of the dialectical logic of conflicts; but, like everyone else, they are greatly deprived of the basic ability to orient



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

themselves by the old, imperfect tools of formal logic. No one worries about them; and hardly anyone thinks about the others.

The individual who has been marked by impoverished spectacular thought more deeply *than by any other aspect of his experience* puts himself at the service of the established order right from the start, even though subjectively he may have had quite the opposite intention. He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to show himself as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax. This is one of the most important aspects of the success obtained by spectacular domination.

The swift disappearance of our former vocabulary is merely one moment in this operation. It serves it.

## XII.

The erasure of the personality is the fatal accompaniment to the conditions of existence that is concretely submissive to spectacular norms, and thus more separated from the possibilities of knowing experiences that are authentic and thus from the discovery of individual preferences. Paradoxically, the individual must permanently repudiate them if he wants to be respected a little in such a society. This existence postulates a fluid fidelity, a succession of continually disappointing commitments to false products. It is a matter of running quickly behind the inflation of devalued signs of life. Drugs help one to conform to this organization of things; madness allows one to flee it.

In all sorts of affairs in this society, where the *distribution* of goods is centralized in such a way that it becomes master — both notoriously and secretly — of the very definition of what could be the good, it happens that certain people are attributed with qualities, knowledge or

even vices, all perfectly imaginary, in order to explain in such cases the satisfactory development of particular enterprises; and this with the only aim of hiding, or at least dissimulating as much as possible, the function of various *agreements that decide everything*.

Nevertheless, despite its frequent intentions and its clumsy means to highlight the full stature of supposedly remarkable personalities, current society more often shows quite the opposite, and not merely in what has today replaced the arts, or discussion of the arts: one total incompetent will collide with another; panic ensues and it is then simply a matter of who will fall apart first. A lawyer, for example, forgetting that he is supposed to represent one side in a trial, will be sincerely influenced by the arguments of his opposite number, even when these arguments are as lacking in rigor as his own. It can also happen that an innocent suspect temporarily confesses to a crime he did not commit, simply because he is impressed *by the logic* of the hypothesis of an informer who wanted him to believe he was guilty (see the case of Dr. Archambeau in Poitiers, in 1984).<sup>17</sup>

McLuhan himself, the spectacle's first apologist, who had seemed to be the most convinced imbecile of the century, changed his mind when he finally discovered in 1976 that "the pressure of the *mass media* leads to irrationality," and that it was becoming urgent to modify their usage. The thinker of Toronto had formerly spent several decades marveling at the numerous freedoms created by a 'global village' instantly and effortlessly accessible to all. Villages, unlike towns, have

<sup>17</sup> In 1984, seemingly motivated by professional jealousy, certain colleagues of a Dr Archambeau at a hospital in Poitiers caused the death of some of his patients in the operating-theater by reversing the oxygen and nitrogen supplies during resuscitation. Archambeau was eventually acquitted of any blame, but the real culprits were never discovered. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

always been dominated by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families. And this also presents the vulgarity of this spectacular planet, where it is no longer possible to distinguish the Grimaldi-Monaco or Bourbon-Franco dynasties from those who succeeded the Stuarts. However, McLuhan's ungrateful disciples are now trying to make people forget him, so as to rejuvenate his early works and, in their turn, develop a career in mediatic eulogy for all these new freedoms to 'choose' at random from ephemera. And probably they will retract their claims even faster than the man who inspired them.

### XIII.

The spectacle doesn't hide the fact that certain dangers surround the marvelous order it has established. Ocean pollution and the destruction of equatorial forests threaten the Earth's oxygen renewal; its ozone layer is menaced by industrial growth; radiation of nuclear origin accumulates irreversibly. The spectacle merely concludes that none of these things matter. It only wants to talk about dates and doses. And on these alone, it succeeds at reassuring — something which a pre-spectacular mind would have thought impossible.

The methods of spectacular democracy are of great subtlety, contrary to the brutality of the totalitarian *diktat*. It can keep the original name when the thing has been secretly changed (beer, beef or philosophers). And it can just as easily change the name when the thing itself has been secretly continued. In England, for example, the nuclear waste reprocessing plant at Windscale was renamed Sellafield in order to better allay suspicions, after a disastrous fire in 1957, but this toponymic reprocessing did nothing to prevent the rise in local mortality rates from cancer and leukemia. The British government, as the population democratically learned thirty years later, had decided to suppress a report

on the catastrophe which it judged, no without reason, would probably shake public confidence in nuclear power.

Nuclear practices, both military and civil, necessitate a far higher dose of secrecy than in other fields — which already have plenty, as we already know. To make life — that is to say, lying — easier for the sages chosen by the system's masters, it has discovered the utility of changing measurements, to vary them according to a large number of points of view, and refine them, finally juggle them, according to the case, with several figures that are hard to convert. Hence, to measure radioactivity levels, one can choose from a range of units of measurement: curies, becquerels, roentgens, rads alias centigrays, and rems, not forgetting the humble millirads, and sieverts which are worth 100 rems.<sup>18</sup> This evokes the memory of the subdivisions of British currency, the complexity of which foreigners could not quickly master, back in the days when Sellafield was still called Windscale.

One can imagine the rigor and precision which would have been achieved in the nineteenth century by military history, and consequently  
 18 See the following passage in *Abyss*, an unsigned essay that appeared in French the August 1986 issue of *L'Encyclopedie des Nuisances* and was translated into English by the ex-situationist Donald Nicholson-Smith: "How many curies, how many becquerels, were now thrust upon us in order to satisfy our hunger and thirst for knowledge! Not a day would pass without the authorities producing figures purporting to show that the (formerly nonexistent) radioactivity level had dropped considerably and was now "insignificant." They also worried about how difficult it probably was for us to calculate our chances of survival in so many different units of measurement, and suggested "standardizing the definition of the level at which radioactivity begins to present a threat to human beings" — in other words, pushing that danger level high enough to spare us all those endless calculations."

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

by theorists of strategy, if, so as not to give too much confidential information to neutral commentators or enemy historians, one habitually reported a campaign in these terms:

“The preliminary phase involved a series of engagements in which, from our side, a strong advance force made up of four generals and the units under their command, met an enemy force of 13,000 bayonets. In the subsequent phase, a fiercely disputed pitched battle developed, in which our entire army advanced, with 290 canons and a heavy cavalry of 18,000 sabers; the confronting enemy alignment comprised no less than 3,600 infantry lieutenants, 40 captains of hussars and 24 of cuirassiers. Following alternate failures and successes on both sides, the battle can finally be considered inconclusive. Our losses, somewhat lower than the average figure one habitually certified in combats of comparable duration and intensity, were perceptibly superior to those of the Greeks at Marathon, but remained inferior to those of the Prussians at Jena.”

After this example, it is not impossible for a specialist to gather some vague idea of the forces engaged. But the conduct of operations is assured of remaining below all judgment.

In June 1987, Pierre Bacher, deputy director of installations at Electricite de France, revealed the latest safety doctrine for nuclear power stations. By installing valves and filters, it becomes much easier to avoid major catastrophes, like cracks or explosions in the reactors, which would affect the entirety of a ‘region.’ Such catastrophes are produced by excessive containment. Whenever the machine looks like its going to blow, it is better to decompress gently, showering only a restricted area of a few kilometers, an area which on each occasion will be differently and haphazardly extended depending on the wind. He discloses that in the past two years, discreet experiments carried out at Cadarache, in the Drome, “have concretely showed that the rejected matter — waste gas

essentially — doesn't surpass several units per thousand, at worst one per cent of the radioactivity in the power station itself." Thus a very moderate worst case: one per cent. Formerly, we were assured there was no risk at all, except in the case of accidents, which were logically impossible. The experience of the first few years changed this reasoning as follows: since accidents are always possible, what must be avoided is their reaching a catastrophic threshold, and that is easy. All that is necessary is to contaminate little by little, in moderation. Who would not agree that it is infinitely healthier to limit yourself to an intake of 140 centilitres of vodka per day for several years, rather than getting drunk right away like the Poles?

It is indeed a shame that human society should encounter such burning problems just when it has become materially impossible to make heard the least objection to commodity discourse, just when domination — quite rightly because it is shielded by the spectacle from any response to its fragmentary and delirious decisions and justifications — *believes that it no longer needs to think*; and truly no longer knows how to think. Would not even the staunchest democrat have preferred to have chosen more intelligent masters?

At the international conference of experts held in Geneva in December 1986, the question was quite simply whether to introduce a worldwide ban on the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), the gases which have recently and rapidly made disappear the thin layer of ozone that protects this planet — one will remember — from the harmful effects of solar rays. Daniel Verilhe, representing Elf-Aquitaine's chemicals subsidiary, and in this capacity part of a French delegation firmly opposed to this ban, made a sensible point: 'it will take at least three years to develop substitutes and the costs will be quadrupled.' As we know, this fugitive ozone layer, so high up, belongs to no one and has no market value. This *industrial* strategist could thus show his

opponents the extent of their inexplicable disregard for economics by an appeal to reality: "It is highly dangerous to base an industrial strategy on environmental imperatives."

Those who long ago began the critique of political economy by defining it as "the final denial of humanity" were not deceived.<sup>19</sup> One still recognizes this trait in it.

#### XIV.

It is sometimes said that science today is subservient to the imperatives of economic profitability, but that has always been true. What is new is that the economy has now come to openly make war on human beings, not only on our possibilities for life, but also those of survival. Against a great part of its own anti-slavery past, scientific thought has chosen to serve spectacular domination. Until it got to this point, science possessed a relative autonomy. It thus knew how to understand its own portion of reality and thus it made an immense contribution to increasing the means of the economy. When the all-powerful economy became mad — and these spectacular times are nothing other than that — it suppressed the last traces of scientific autonomy, both in methodology and, by the same token, in the practical conditions of activity of its 'researchers.' No longer is science asked to understand the world, or to improve any part of it. It is asked to instantaneously justify everything that happens. As stupid in this field, which it exploits with the most ruinous thoughtlessness, as it is everywhere else, spectacular domination has cut down the gigantic tree of scientific knowledge in order to make itself a truncheon. So as to obey this ultimate social demand for a manifestly impossible justification, it is better not to be able to think too much, but rather, on

19 It was Marx who defined political economy as "the final denial of humanity." [*Malcolm Imrie*]

the contrary, to be well trained in the comforts of spectacular discourse. And it is actually in this career that the prostituted science of these despicable times has, with much good will, deftly found its most recent specialization.

The science of lying justifications naturally appeared with the first symptoms of bourgeois society's decadence, with the cancerous proliferation of the pseudo-sciences called 'human'; yet modern medicine, for example, had once been able to pass for useful, and those who eradicated smallpox or leprosy were other than those who basely capitulated in the face of nuclear radiation or chemical farming. One quickly remarks that medicine today, of course, no longer has the right to defend the health of the population against a pathogenic environment, for that would be to oppose the State, or at least the pharmaceuticals industry.

But it is not only by what it is obliged to keep quiet that current-day scientific activity avows what it has become. It is also by what it has the simplicity to say very often. In November 1985, professors Even and Andrieu at Laennec hospital announced that they had perhaps found an effective cure for AIDS, following an experiment on four patients which had lasted a week. Two days later, the patients having died, several other doctors, less advanced or perhaps jealous, expressed several reservations as to the professors' precipitate haste in registering what was only the misleading appearance of victory — a few hours before the collapse. Even and Andrieu defended themselves nonchalantly, affirming that "after all, false hopes are better than no hope at all." Their ignorance was too great for them to recognize this argument was a complete denial of the spirit of science and had historically always served to cover up the profitable daydreams of charlatans and sorcerers, long before such people were put in charge of hospitals.



When official science has come to such a pass, like all the rest of the social spectacle that, beneath its materially modernized and enhanced presentation, has only revived the ancient techniques of fairground mountebanks — *illusionists, barkers and stool-pigeons*<sup>20</sup> — it is not surprising to see which great authority takes up Magi and sects, vacuum-packed Zen or Mormon theology. Ignorance, which has served the established authorities well, has also always been exploited by ingenious ventures on the fringes of the law. And what better moment than one where illiteracy has become so widespread? But this reality in its turn is denied by another display of sorcery. From its inception, UNESCO had adopted a very precise scientific definition of the illiteracy that it strove to combat in backward countries. When the same phenomenon was unexpectedly seen to be returning, but this time in the so-called advanced nations, rather in the way that the one who was waiting for Grouchy instead saw Blucher join the battle<sup>21</sup>, it sufficed to bring on the Guard of experts; they carried the day with a single, irresistible assault, replacing the *term* illiteracy [*analphabétisme*] by *illettrisme* [unlettered-ism]: just as a ‘false patriot’ can opportunely appear to support a good national cause. And to ensure that the pertinence of this neologism was, among

20        The French here is *illusionnistes, aboyeurs et barons*. Baron, a word still in common use, refers to a trickster’s accomplice, planted in the crowd, who helps to dupe others either by raising objections which the trickster can easily refute, or by pretending to buy whatever is on offer. This was also the nineteenth-century meaning of “stool-pigeon,” although the word is now used in a different sense. I cannot find a modern English equivalent, though some American meanings of “stooge” might be adequate. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

21        The battle is Waterloo, the “one,” Napoleon. The allusion is to Victor Hugo’s description of Waterloo in his poem “L’Expiation”: seeing the battle was going badly for the French, Napoleon summoned the Imperial Guard to enter the fray. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

pedagogues, carved in stone, a new definition was quickly passed — as if it had always been accepted — according to which, while the illiterate was, one knew, someone who had never learned to read, the unlettered in the modern sense is, on the contrary, someone who had learned to read (and had even learned *better* than before, the more gifted official theorists and historians of pedagogy coolly testified), but who had by chance immediately forgotten. This surprising explanation might have risked being more disturbing than reassuring, if, by ignoring the fact that it was deliberately missing the point, it didn't have the cleverness to avoid the first consequence that would have come to anyone's mind in more scientific eras: the recognition that this new phenomenon merited being explained and combated, since it had never been observed, nor even imagined, anywhere, before the recent progress of damaged thought, where explanatory and practical decadence go hand in hand.

## XV.

More than a century ago, A.-L. Sardou's *New Dictionary of French Synonyms* defined the nuances which must be grasped between *fallacious, deceptive, impostrous, seductive, insidious, captious*; and which taken together constitute today a kind of palette of colors with which to paint a portrait of the society of the spectacle. It was beyond the scope of his time, and his experience as a specialist, for Sardou to distinguish with equal clarity the related, but very different, perils normally expected to be faced by any group devoted to subversion, following, for example, this progression: *misled, provoked, infiltrated, manipulated, usurped, inverted*. These important nuances have never appeared to the doctrinaires of 'armed struggle.'<sup>22</sup>

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22 A reference to Italian writers such as Antonio Negri, Oreste Scalzone, Franco Piperno, Lanfranco Pace, and Paolo Virno, among others.

Fallacious [*fallacieux*], from the Latin *fallaciosus*, skillful at or accustomed to deception, full of deceit: the termination of this adjective is equivalent to the superlative of deceptive [*trompeur*]. That which deceives or leads into error in any way is deceptive: that which is done in order to deceive, abuse, throw into error by a design intended to deceive with artifice and imposed display most fitting to abuse, is *fallacious*. *Deceptive* is a generic and vague word; all the genres of signs and uncertain appearances are *deceptive*: fallacious designates falsity, deceit, studied imposture; sophistic speech, protests or reasoning are *fallacious*. The word has affinities with impostrous [*imposteur*], seductive [*seducteur*], insidious [*insidieux*] and captious [*captieux*], but without equivalence. *Impostrous* designates all forms of false appearances, or conspiracies to abuse or injure; for example, hypocrisy, calumny, etc. *Seductive* expresses action calculated to take hold of someone, to lead them astray by artful and insinuating means. *Insidious* only indicates the act of artfully laying traps and making people fall into them. *Captious* is restricted to the subtle act of surprising someone and making him fall into error. *Fallacious* encompasses most of these characters.

## XVI.

The relatively new concept of disinformation was recently imported from Russia, along with many other inventions useful in the management of modern states. It is always openly employed by a power, or, consequently, by the people who hold a fragment of economic or political authority, in order to maintain what is established; and always in a *counter-offensive* role. Whatever can oppose a single official truth must necessarily be disinformation emanating from hostile or at least rival powers, and must have been intentionally falsified by malevolence. Disinformation would not be simple negation of a fact which suits the authorities, or the simple affirmation of a fact which does not suit them:

that is called psychosis. Unlike the pure lie, disinformation — and here is why the concept is interesting to the defenders of the dominant society — must inevitably contain a degree of truth but deliberately manipulated by a skillful enemy. The power that speaks of disinformation does not believe itself to be absolutely faultless, but knows that it can attribute to any precise criticism the excessive insignificance which is in the nature of disinformation, and of the sort that it will never have to admit to a particular fault.

In short, disinformation would be the bad usage of the truth. Whoever issued it is culpable, whoever believes it is stupid. But who precisely would this artful enemy be? In this case, it cannot be terrorism, which is in no danger of ‘disinforming’ anyone, since it is charged with ontologically representing the grossest and least acceptable *error*. Thanks to its etymology and to contemporary memories of those limited confrontations which, around mid-century, briefly opposed East and West, concentrated spectacular and diffuse spectacular, today the capitalism of the integrated spectacular still pretends to believe that the capitalism of totalitarian bureaucracy — sometimes even presented as the terrorists’ base camp or inspiration — remains its fundamental enemy, just as the other would say the something about it, despite the innumerable proofs of their alliance and profound solidarity. In fact, all the established powers, despite several genuine local rivalries, and without ever wanting to spell it out, continually remember what one of the rare German internationalists after the outbreak of the war of 1914 managed to recall from the side of subversion and without great immediate success: “The principal enemy is in our country.” In the end, disinformation is the equivalent of what was represented in the discourse of social war in the nineteenth-century as ‘dangerous passions.’ It is all that is obscure and threatens to oppose the unprecedented happiness that this society offers to those who trust it, a happiness that is worth

more than various insignificant risks and disappointments. And all those who *see* this happiness in the spectacle agree that one should not haggle over the price; everyone else is a disinformant.

The other advantage derived from denouncing a particular instance of disinformation by explaining it in this way is that there is no suspicion that the global discourse of the spectacle might contain the same thing, since it can designate, with the most scientific assurance, the terrain where one recognizes the only disinformation: all that can be said and that will displease it.

It is doubtless by mistake — if it isn't a deliberate decoy — that a project was recently set in motion in France to officially place a label on mediatics 'guaranteed free of disinformation': this wounded certain professionals of the media, who still like to believe, or more modestly would like it to be believed, that until now they had not actually been censored. But the concept of disinformation must obviously not be used *defensively*, still less in a static defense, strengthening a Great Wall or a Maginot Line, that must absolutely cover a space from which disinformation is supposedly prohibited. There must be disinformation, and it must be something fluid and potentially ubiquitous. Where spectacular discourse is not under attack, it would be stupid to defend it; and the concept would wear out extremely fast if one were to try to defend it against all the evidence on points which ought on the contrary to be kept from mobilizing public opinion. Moreover the authorities have no real need to guarantee that any particular information does not contain disinformation. And they do not have the means to do so: they are not respected to that extent, and would only draw suspicion on the information concerned. The concept of disinformation is only good for counter-attack. It must be kept in reserve, then instantaneously thrown into the fray to drive back any truth which has managed to arise.

If sometimes a kind of disorderly disinformation threatens to appear, in the service of particular interests temporarily in conflict, and threatens to be believed, becoming uncontrollable and thus opposing itself to the concerted work of a less irresponsible disinformation, there is no reason to fear that in this one finds other manipulators who are more expert or more skilled: it is simply because disinformation now deploys itself *in a world where there is no longer room for any verification*.

The confusionist concept of disinformation is pushed into the limelight instantaneously to refute, by the very noise of its name, all critique that has not been sufficiently made to disappear by the diverse agencies of the organization of silence. For example, it could one day be said, should this appear desirable, that this text is a disinformation campaign against the spectacle; or indeed, since it is the same thing, a piece of disinformation harmful to democracy.

Contrary to what is affirmed by its inverted spectacular concept, the practice of disinformation can only serve the State here and now, under its direct command, or at the initiative of those who defend the same values. In fact, disinformation resides in all existing information and as its principal characteristic. It is only named where passivity must be maintained by intimidation. Where disinformation is *named* it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named.

When there were still conflicting ideologies, which claimed to be for or against some recognized aspect of reality, there were fanatics, and liars, but there were no 'disinformers.'

When it is no longer permitted, out of respect for spectacular consensus, or at least for a wish for spectacular glory, to say truly what someone is against, or equally what one wholeheartedly approves; and when one often meets the obligation to dissimulate a side of what one is supposed to admit that one nevertheless finds to be dangerous for some

reason; then one practices disinformation, as if by thoughtlessness or forgetfulness or by *allegedly* false reasoning. And, by example, on the terrain of contestation after 1968, the incapable recuperators who were called ‘pro-situs’ were *the first disinformers*, because they dissimulated as much as possible the practical manifestations through which the critique that they flattered themselves to have adopted were confirmed: and, not embarrassed by weakening the expression of this critique, they never referred to anything or anyone, in order to suggest that they themselves had actually discovered something.

## XVII.

Reversing a famous maxim of Hegel, I already noted in 1967 that “in a world *really inverted*, the truth is a moment of the false.” The years since then have shown the progress of this principle in each specific domain, without exception.

Thus, in an era when contemporary art can no longer exist, it becomes difficult to judge the classical arts. Here as elsewhere, ignorance is only produced in order to be exploited. At the same time the meaning of history and taste are lost, one organizes networks of falsification. It suffices to hold onto the experts and appraisers, which is easy enough, to get things to go through, since in affairs of this kind, as in the others, it is the sale which authenticates all value. Afterwards, it is the collectors and museums, particularly in America, which, gorged on falsehood, will have an interest in upholding its good reputation, just as the International Monetary Fund maintains the fiction of a positive value in the huge debts of a hundred nations.

The false form of taste, and support of the false, deliberately make the possibility of reference to the authentic disappear. One even remakes the true as soon as possible to resemble the false. Being the richest and

the most modern, the Americans have been the principal dupes of this commerce of the false in art. And they are exactly the same people who pay for restoration work at Versailles or in the Sistine Chapel. This is why Michelangelo's frescoes will acquire the bright colors of a cartoon strip, and the authentic furniture at Versailles acquire the brilliant quickness of gilt that will make them resemble the fake Louis XIV suites imported by Texans at such great expense.

Feuerbach's judgment on the fact that his time preferred "the image to the thing, the copy to the original, representation to reality," has been entirely confirmed by the century of the spectacle, and in several domains where the nineteenth century preferred to keep its distance from what was already its fundamental nature: industrial capitalist production. Thus it was that the bourgeoisie had widely spread the rigorous spirit of the museum, the original object, precise historical criticism, the authentic document. But today, the artificial tends to replace the true everywhere. At this point, it is fortuitous that pollution due to automobile traffic has necessitated the replacement of the Marly Horses in place de la Concorde, or the Roman statues in the doorway of Saint-Trophime in Arles, by plastic replicas. In short, everything will be more beautiful than before, so as to be photographed by tourists.

The highest point has without doubt been reached by the Chinese bureaucracy's laughable fake of the great statues of the *industrial army* of the First Emperor, which so many visiting statesmen have been taken to admire *in situ*. Since one could mock them so cruelly, this thus proves that in all the masses of their advisors, there was not a single individual who knew the history of art, in China or anywhere else. One knows that their instructions were quite different: 'Your Excellency's computers have not been informed.' This confirmation that, for the first time, it is possible to govern without any artistic knowledge, nor any sense of the authentic or the impossible, could alone suffice to make us conjecture



that the naive dupes of the economy and the administration will probably lead the world to some great catastrophe; if their actual practice had not already demonstrated that fact.

### XVIII.

Our society is built on the secret, from the ‘screen companies’ that shelter from all light the concentrated wealth of their members, to the ‘defense secrets’ that today cover an immense domain of full extra-judicial liberty of the State; from the often frightening secrets of *shoddy production*, which are hidden by advertising, to the projections of variants in an extrapolated future, in which domination alone reads the most probable routes of things that it affirms have no existence, calculating the responses it will mysteriously make. One can make several observations.

There are always more places, in the great cities as in the spaces reserved in countryside, which remain inaccessible, that is to say, guarded and protected from all gazes; which are out of bounds to innocent curiosity, and well-guarded against espionage. Without all being properly military, they are on this model placed beyond all risk of inspection by passers-by and inhabitants; or even by the police, whose functions have long been reduced to surveillance and repression of the most commonplace forms of delinquency. And it was thus in Italy, when Aldo Moro was a prisoner of *Potere Due*<sup>23</sup>, he was not held in a building more or less unfindable, but simply impenetrable.

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23 Strictly speaking, the ex-Premier of Italy, Aldo Moro, wasn't held prisoner by *Potere Due*, but by the Italian State itself. And so, Debord appears to be making a sarcastic remark, to the effect that there's no difference between the “parallel” and official governments of the country.

There is always a large number of men trained to act in secret; instructed and practiced only for that. There are special detachments armed with confidential archives, that is to say, with secret data and analysis. And others armed with diverse techniques for the exploitation and manipulation of these secret affairs. Finally, when it is a question of their 'action' branches, they can equally be equipped with other means to simplify the problems studied.

While the means attributed to these men specialized in surveillance and influence continue to increase, they also encounter general circumstances that favor them more each year. When, for example, the new conditions of the society of the integrated spectacular have forced its critique to remain really clandestine, not because it hides itself but *because it is hidden* by the heavy stage-management of the thought of diversion, those who are nonetheless charged with surveilling this critique and, if necessary, for denying it, can now employ traditional methods in the milieu of clandestinity: provocation, infiltrations, and various forms of elimination of authentic critique to the profit of a false one which will have been put in place for this purpose.<sup>24</sup> When the general imposture of the spectacle is enriched with the possibility of recourse to a thousand individual impostures, uncertainty grows at

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24 In the summer of 1968, an Italian neo-Nazi and *agent provocateur* named Mario Merlino succeeded in infiltrating Roman anarchist circles by forming the "XXII March Group," whose name was a close echo of the "22d March Movement," the French group from Nanterre that included Daniel Cohn-Bendit and several *enrages* who later joined the Situationist International. One of the first actions taken by the XXII March Group was the destruction of several cars after a demonstration in front of the French Embassy in Rome. The Italian press quickly blamed the violence on the Italian Communist Party.

every turn. An unexplained crime can also be called suicide<sup>25</sup>, in prison as elsewhere; the dissolution of logic allows inquiries and trials that soar vertically into irrationality, and which are frequently false, right from the start, through absurd autopsies, performed by singular experts.<sup>26</sup>

One has long been accustomed to seeing summary executions of all kinds of people. Known terrorists, or those considered as such, are openly fought in a terrorist manner. Mossad can kill Abou Jihad<sup>27</sup> from afar, the English SAS can do the same with Irish people,<sup>28</sup> and the parallel police of GAL with Basques.<sup>29</sup> Those whose killings are arranged

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25 A reference to the 15 December 1969 “suicide” of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who was murdered by Italian police officers during their investigation into his non-existent role in the December 1969 bombing of the Piazza Fontana in Milan. Pinelli later became the protagonist of Dario Fo’s famous play, *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

26 A reference to the investigation into the 1972 death of the Italian left-wing publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who supposedly blew himself up while trying to destroy an electricity pylon.

27 In early 1988, Abou Jihad, a Palestinian leader, was assassinated in Tunisia by the Mossad, an Israeli secret service.

28 Formed during World War II, England’s “Special Air Service” (SAS) became a paramilitary “anti-terrorist” unit in the post-war years. All through the 1970s and 1980s, the SAS conducted a “dirty war” against the Irish Republican Army.

29 Grupo Anti-Terrorista de Liberacion. [*Malcolm Imrie*] The “Antiterrorist Liberation Group” was a group of hired killers who, under the direction of Spain’s “security” forces and the Ministry of the Interior, hunted down and assassinated suspected ETA terrorists who had fled to or were based in France. Between 1983 and 1987, nearly 30 people were killed, reputedly with the help of the French Civil Guard.

by supposed terrorists are not chosen without reason; but it is generally impossible to be sure of knowing these reasons. One can know that the Bologna railway station was blown up to ensure that Italy continued to be well governed<sup>30</sup>; and what the ‘death squads’ in Brazil are; and that the Mafia can burn down a hotel in the United States to facilitate a *racket* [English in original]. But how can we know what purpose was ultimately served by the ‘mad killers of Brabant’?<sup>31</sup> It is hard to apply the principle *Cui prodest?*<sup>32</sup> in a world where so many active interests are so well hidden. The result is that, under the integrated spectacular, we live and die at the confluence of a very great number of mysteries.

Media/police rumors instantly, or at worst after three or four repetitions, acquire the unquestionable weight of secular historical proofs. According to the legendary authority of the spectacle of the day, strange characters eliminated in silence can reappear as fictive survivors,

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30 On 2 August 1980 — the first day of an Italian national holiday — a bomb exploded at the Bologna railway station, killing 85 and wounding over 200 people. Among those eventually implicated in the execution of the massacre was the neo-Nazi Stefano Delle Chiaie.

31 *Les tueurs fous de Brabant* was the media’s name for the perpetrators of a series of murders in Belgium in the 1980s. The murders were carried out during a number of raids on supermarkets: on each occasion the gang, armed with military weapons, shot six or seven people, apparently at random, and stole very small amounts of money. Recent newspaper revelations have suggested that the choice of victims may not have been entirely random, and that the murderers may have been linked to right-wing organizations. [Malcolm Imrie] Between 30 September 1982 and 9 November 1985, the “mad killers of Brabant” murdered a total of 28 people. No arrests were ever made. Something similar seems to have taken place in Italy, beginning in June 1976.

32 Latin for “who profits?”

whose return can always be evoked or calculated, and *proved* by the mere say-so of specialists. They are somewhere between the Acheron and the Lethe, these dead people whom the spectacle has not properly buried<sup>33</sup>, supposedly slumbering while awaiting the summons which will awake them all: the terrorist once again come down from the hills, the pirate from the sea; and the thief who no longer needs to steal.<sup>34</sup>

Thus is uncertainty organized everywhere. The protection of domination very often precedes by false attacks, of which the mediatic treatment will lose from view the true operation: such was the case with the bizarre assault by Tejero and his civil guards on the Cortes in 1981, whose failure hid another more modern, that is to say, more disguised *pronunciamiento*, which succeeded.<sup>35</sup> Equally showy, the failure of the

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33 A reference to the hundreds of striking students who were killed by the Mexican army in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, on 2 October 1968. It is thought by some that the bodies were dropped by airplane into the Gulf of Mexico.

34 The allusion is to Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem." But some of the references here are more specific. Debord has pointed out that "the thief who no longer needs to steal," for example, was Francois Besse, the former accomplice of Jacques Mesrine, who has disappeared without trace. [*Malcolm Imrie*] Jacques Mesrine was a notorious French bank-robber who was killed by the police in 1979. Gerard Lebovici reprinted his autobiography, *L'instinct de mort* — which had been banned by the Ministry of Justice — shortly thereafter. For more on Lebovici, see footnote [1].

35 On 23 February 1981, Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero — together with an armed group of 200 officers from the Civilian Guard — stormed into the Spanish Congress of Deputies, which was the lower house of the Cortes. Several hours later, King Juan Carlos held a nationally televised speech, during which he proclaimed his condemnation of

French secret services' sabotage attempt in New Zealand in 1985 has sometimes been seen as a stratagem, perhaps designed to divert attention from the numerous new uses of these services, by making people believe in their caricatural clumsiness both in their choice of target and in their modalities of operation.<sup>36</sup> And more assuredly, it has been almost universally accepted that the geological explorations for oil-beds in the subsoil of *the city of Paris*, so noisily conducted in the autumn of 1986, had no other serious purpose than to measure the inhabitants' current level of stupefaction and submission: by showing them supposed research so absolutely contradicted on the economic level.

Power is becoming so mysterious that after the affair of the illegal arms sales to Iran by the US presidency<sup>37</sup>, one might wonder who was really commanding the United States, the strongest power in the so-called democratic world. And which devil could thus command the democratic world?

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the coup and his belief that Spain's "democratic" process (the election of a new Prime Minister) should continue peacefully. At noon, Tejero and his men surrendered without harming anyone. It is thought that the King himself ordered the phony coup as a way of increasing his dwindling power and popularity.

36 On 7 July 1985, the French secret services blew up the "Rainbow Warrior," the flagship of the Greenpeace Organisation, while it was docked in Auckland Harbour, New Zealand. At the time, Greenpeace was conducting protests against the testing of nuclear weapons by the French government in the South Pacific.

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More profoundly, in this world which is officially so full of respect for economic necessities, no one ever knows the real cost of anything which is produced: actually, the most important part of the real cost *is never calculated; and the rest is kept secret.*

**XIX.**

At the beginning of 1988, General Noriega suddenly became known world-wide. He was the unofficial dictator of Panama, a country without an army, where he commanded the National Guard. Panama is not really a sovereign state: it was dug out for its canal, rather than the reverse. Its currency is the dollar, and the true army which is stationed there is similarly foreign. Noriega had thus devoted his entire career — precisely like that of [General] Jaruzelski in Poland — to serving the occupying power as its chief of police. He imported drugs into the United States, since Panama was not bringing him sufficient revenue, and exported his 'Panamanian' capital to Switzerland. He had worked with the CIA against Cuba and, to provide adequate cover for his economic activities, had also denounced some of his rivals in the import trade to the US authorities, obsessed as they are with this problem. To the jealousy of Washington, his chief security advisor was the best on the market: Michael Harari, a former officer with Mossad, the Israeli secret service. When the Americans finally decided to get rid of this person [Noriega], some of their courts having imprudently condemned him, Noriega declared that he was ready to defend himself for a thousand years, for Panamanian patriotism and, at the same time, against his own people in revolt and foreigners; in the name of anti-imperialism, he quickly received public approval from the more austere bureaucratic dictators in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Far from being a peculiarly Panamanian strangeness, this General Noriega, who *sells and simulates everything*, in a world which

everywhere does the same thing, was altogether a perfect representative of the integrated spectacular, and of the successes that it allows the most varied managers of its internal and international politics: a sort of man of a sort of state, a sort of general, a capitalist. He is the very model of the *prince of our times*<sup>38</sup> and, of those destined to come to power and remain there, the most able to resemble him closely. It is not Panama which produces such marvels, it is our era.

## XX.

For any intelligence service [*service de renseignements*], on this point in accord with the exact Clausewitzian theory of war, *knowledge* must become *power*. From this these services draw their prestige, their species of special poetry. Whilst intelligence [*intelligence*] has been absolutely chased from the spectacle, which does not permit action and does not say much of the truth about the actions of others, it almost seems to have taken refuge among those who analyze and secretly act on realities. The recent revelations that Margaret Thatcher had done everything to suppress, but in vain, and authenticated by the attempt, have shown that in Britain these services have already been capable of

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38 A reference to Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written in Italian in 1512. The following passage from this classic work is clearly relevant to Debord's discussion of Noriega's relationship with the CIA: "I shall remind princes who have seized a new state for themselves by encouraging subversion that they should carefully reflect on the motives of those who helped him. If these were not based on a natural affection for the new prince, but rather on discontent with the existing government, he will retain their friendship only with considerable difficulty and exertion, because it will be impossible for him in his turn to satisfy them."



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

bringing down a minister whom they judged politically dangerous.<sup>39</sup> The general scorn aroused by the spectacle thus, for new reasons, restored the attraction of what in Kipling's day was called 'the great game.'

'The police conception of history' was, in the nineteenth century, a reactionary and ridiculous explanation, at a time when so many powerful social movements agitated the masses. Today's pseudo-opponents are well aware of this, thanks to hearsay or some books, and believe that this conclusion remains true for eternity; they never want to see the real praxis of their time; because it is too sad for their cold hopes. The State isn't ignorant of this, and plays on it.

At the moment when almost every aspect of international political life and a growing number of those aspects that count in internal politics are conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services, with decoys, disinformation and double explanations (one *might* conceal another, or may only seem to), the spectacle confines itself to making known a wearisome world of obligatory incomprehensibility, a boring series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels. It is true that the realistic direction of a fight between negroes, at night, in a tunnel, must pass for a sufficiently dramatic motive.

Imbecility believes that all is clear when television has shown a beautiful image and commented on it with a brazen lie. The demi-elite is content to know that almost everything is obscure, ambivalent, 'mounted' by unknown codes. A more exclusive elite would like to know the true, hard as it is to distinguish in each singular case, despite all the reserved information and confidences of which it can dispose. This is

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39 A reference to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who was forced to resign on 16 March 1976, three years before the next scheduled election.

why this elite would love to know the method of truth, though their love usually remains unlucky.

### XXI.

The secret dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination. According to the spectacle, the secret would only be a necessary exception to the rule of abundant information offered on the entire surface of society, just as domination in the ‘free world’ of the integrated spectacular would be restricted to only an executive department in the service of democracy. But no one really believes the spectacle. How then do the spectators accept the existence of the secret that alone guarantees that they cannot manage a world, the principal realities of which they know nothing about, if one were to truly ask them for their opinions on the manner of managing it? It is a fact that the secret doesn’t appear to hardly anyone in its inaccessible purity and its functional universality. Everyone accepts that there is inevitably a small zone of secrecy reserved for specialists; as for the generality of things, many believe that *they are in on the secret*.

In the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, La Boetie showed how the power of a tyrant must encounter many supports among the concentric circles of individuals who find, or believe to find, their advantage in it. Likewise, many politicians and mediatics who are flattered that no one can suspect them of being *irresponsible*, know many things through their connections and confidences. Someone who is happy to be taken into confidence is hardly likely to criticize it; nor to remark that in all the confidences, the principal part of reality will always be hidden from him. Thanks to the benevolent protection of the cheaters, he knows a few more of the cards, but they can be false; and he never knows the method that directs and explains the game. Thus he immediately identifies himself with the manipulators and scorns the

ignorance which in fact he shares. Because the scraps of information offered to the familiars of a lying tyranny are normally infected with lies, manipulated and uncheckable.<sup>40</sup> They are, however, pleased to get these scraps, for they feel themselves superior to those who know nothing. They only know better than the rest so as to better approve of domination and never to actually comprehend it. They constitute the privilege of *first-class spectators*: those who have the stupidity to believe they can understand something, not by making use of what is hidden from them, but *by believing what is revealed to them!*

Domination is at least lucid in that it expects that its free and unhindered management will very shortly lead to a quite large number of major catastrophes of the highest grandeur; and this as much as on ecological terrains (chemical, for example) as on economic terrains (in banking, for example). It has for some time already been in a position to treat these exceptional misfortunes by other means than its habitual handling of soft disinformation.

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40 For example: the relationship between the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (Federal Intelligence Service, founded after World War II by Richard Gehlen), and the CIA: “The Pentagon absorbed [Gehlen’s] organization in its entirety in the belief Gehlen had an efficient intelligence network stretching right into the Kremlin itself. As early as 1949, an informer in one of the emigre organizations used by Gehlen reckoned that about ninety percent of all intelligence reaching the Americans was false [...] False intelligence from the Gehlen organization to the Americans was a major factor in the rise of the Cold War.” Stuart Christie, *Stephano Delle Chiaie: Portrait of a Black Terrorist* (London, 1984). See recently declassified documents for more information.

## XXII.

As to the rising number of assassinations over the last two decades, which have remained entirely unexplained — because, if one has sometimes sacrificed some nobody, it has never been a question of going back to the sponsors — their character of production in series has its mark: patent and changing lies in the official declarations; Kennedy, Aldo Moro, Olaf Palme, ministers and bankers, a pope or two, some others who were worth more than all of them.<sup>41</sup> This syndrome of a recently acquired social disease has quickly spread all over, as if, following the first documented cases, it *descended* from the summits of the State (the traditional sphere for this type of attack) and, at the same time, *ascended* from the underworld, the traditional place for illegal trafficking and protection rackets, where this kind of war has always gone on, among professionals. These activities tend to meet each other *in the middle* of the affairs of society, as if the State didn't disdain from mixing itself up in it and the Mafia elevated itself by attaining it; thus a kind of junction operates there.<sup>42</sup>

41 The American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, supposedly by Lee Harvey Oswald, on 22 November 1963. The former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was executed, supposedly by the Red Brigades, on 9 May 1978. (For more on Moro, see footnotes [23] and [44].) The Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme was assassinated by an unknown gunman on 28 February 1986. Pope John Paul I died of a very mysterious heart attack on 28 September 1978, only 33 days after his election. Among “some others who were worth more than all of them,” Debord would surely include his friend and publisher, Gerard Lebovici (see footnote [1]).

42 The precise beginning of this confluence might be set in 1942, when — in the aftermath of the mafia's destruction of a luxury cruise ship (the Normandie) that, while docked in New York's harbor, was being renovated to serve as a troop-carrier — the Office of Naval Intel-

One has heard the occurrence of accidents used to explain this new genre of mystery: police incompetence, stupid magistrates, untimely press revelations, crisis of growth in the secret services, malevolent witnesses, or categorical strikes by informers. But Edgar Allan Poe had already found the certain path to truth, in his celebrated reasoning in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*:

“It appears to me that this mystery is considered insoluble, for the very reason which should cause it to be regarded as easy of solution — I mean for the *outré* character of its features... In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked ‘what has occurred,’ as ‘what has occurred that has never occurred before.’”

### XXIII

In January 1988 the Colombian drug Mafia issued a communique aimed at correcting public opinion about its supposed existence. The greatest requirement of any Mafia, wherever it may be constituted, is naturally to establish that it does not exist, or that it has been the victim of unscientific calumnies; and that is its first point of resemblance with capitalism. But in this particular circumstance, this Mafia was so irritated at being the only one placed in the spotlight that it went so far as to evoke the other groupings that wanted to make themselves forgotten by abusively using it as a scapegoat. It declared: “We ourselves don’t belong to the Mafia of politicians and bureaucrats, nor that of bankers and financiers, nor that of millionaires, nor to the Mafia of great fraudulent

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ligence (ONI) sought out and received assistance from the imprisoned mob boss Charles (“Lucky”) Luciano. Eventually granted early release from prison, Luciano also helped the ONI negotiate an agreement with the Mafia concerning the invasion of Sicily. On 9 July 1943, the Allies landed on the Italian island flying Mafia colors.

contracts, to that of monopolies or oil, nor to the great means of communication.’

One can without doubt estimate that the authors of this declaration have, like all the rest, an interest in emptying their own practices into that vast river of troubled water of criminality and more banal illegalities, which irrigates the whole of present society; but it is also just to agree that here we have people who by their very profession know better than the others what they are talking about. The Mafia flourishes in the soil of modern society. Its growth is as rapid as that of all the other products of the labor by which the society of the integrated spectacular society fashions its world. The Mafia grows along with the immense progress of computers and industrial food processing,<sup>43</sup> with complete urban reconstruction and shanty-towns, secret services and illiteracy.

#### XXIV.

When it began to manifest itself at the beginning of the century in the United States, with the immigration of Sicilian workers, the Mafia was only a transplanted archaism; at the same time, there appeared on the West Coast the gang wars between Chinese secret societies. Founded on obscurantism and poverty, the Mafia at that time was not even able to implant itself in Northern Italy. It seemed condemned to vanish before the modern State. It was a form of organized crime that could only prosper through the ‘protection’ of backward minorities, outside the world of the towns, where the laws of the bourgeoisie and the control of a rational police force could not penetrate. The defensive tactics of the Mafia could only suppress witnesses, neutralize the police and judiciary, and install as ruler in its sphere of activity the secret that is necessary to it. Subsequently it found a new field in the *new obscurantism* of the society of the diffuse spectacular, then in its integrated form:

43 In 1981, Debord devoted an essay to this subject.

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

with the total victory of the secret, the general resignation of citizens, the complete loss of logic, and universal cowardice, all the favorable conditions were united for it to become a modern and offensive power.

Prohibition in America — a great example of the pretensions of this century's States to the authoritarian control of everything, and of the results that ensue — left to organized crime the management of commerce in alcohol. The Mafia, enriched and experienced, moved into electoral politics, commerce, the development of the market in professional killers, and certain details of international politics. Thus, during the Second World War, it was favored by the US government, and helped with the invasion of Sicily.<sup>44</sup> Legalized alcohol was replaced by drugs, which then constituted the star commodity in illegal consumption. Then the Mafia took considerable importance in property dealing, in banking and in high-level politics and the great affairs of state, and then in the industries of the spectacle: television, films and publishing. In the United States at least, it is already in the recording industry, as in every other activity where publicity of a product depends on a quite concentrated number of people. It is easy to apply pressure to them, with bribes and intimidation, since there is obviously quite a great deal of capital and hitmen who can not be recognized nor punished. By corrupting the *disc-jockeys*, one thus decides what will succeed, from equally wretched commodities.

It is undoubtedly in Italy that the Mafia, in the wake of its experiences and conquests in America, has acquired the greatest strength: since the period of its historic compromise with the parallel government<sup>45</sup>, it has found itself in a position to kill magistrates and

44 See footnote [42].

45 Here Debord makes sarcastic use of the phrase “historic compromise,” which was first used to describe the *highly publicized and ultimately unsuccessful* efforts of Prime Minister Aldo Moro to bring

police chiefs:<sup>46</sup> a practice it inaugurated through its participation in the setting up of political ‘terrorism.’ The similar evolution of the Mafia’s Japanese equivalent, in relatively independent conditions, proves the unity of the epoch.

One deceives oneself every time one wants to explain something by opposing the Mafia and the State: they are never rivals. Theory easily verifies what all the rumors in practical life have all too easily shown. The Mafia is not an outsider in this world; it is perfectly at home in it. At the moment of the integrated spectacular, it in fact reigns as the *model* for all advanced commercial enterprises.

## XXV.

With the new conditions that now predominate in the society crushed under the *iron heel* of the spectacle, one knows, for example, that a political assassination finds itself placed in another light; can in a sense be sifted. Everywhere the mad are more numerous than before, but what is infinitely more convenient is that they can be talked about

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the Italian Communist Party into Italy’s ruling coalition. Upon this first “compromise,” Debord has superimposed another one: the *secret and very successful* compromise reached between the Mafia and the Italian state, which is once again identified with or reduced to “the parallel government” (see footnote [23]). The intent of this superimposition is itself doubled: to underline the point made about false attacks (see footnote [35]), and to suggest the degree of collusion between apparently unrelated and even opposing forces active in the spectacle.

46 To pick two examples among many: Luigi Calabresi, the Police Inspector in charge of investigating various terrorist bombings that took place in 1969, was killed on 17 May 1972; and Vittorio Occorsio, the judge investigating the Italicus train bombing of 1974, was killed on 14 June 1976.



madly. And it is not some kind of reign of terror that imposes such mediatic explanations. On the contrary, it is the peaceful existence of such explanations which should cause terror.

When in 1914, the war being imminent, Villain assassinated Jaures, no one doubted that Villain, though without doubt a somewhat unbalanced man, had believed he had to kill Jaures, because in the eyes of the extremists of the patriotic right who had deeply influenced him, Jaures seemed to be someone who would certainly be harmful to the country's defense. These extremists had only underestimated the tremendous strength of patriotic consent within the Socialist Party, which would immediately push it into "the sacred union," whether or not Jaures was assassinated or allowed the occasion to hold to his internationalist position in rejecting the war. Today, in the presence of such an event, journalists/police officers and well-known experts on the 'facts of society' and 'terrorism' would immediately explain that Villain was well known for having several times sketched out attempted murders, the impulse each time seeing men who, despite the variety of their political opinions, all by chance looked and dressed rather like Jaures. Psychiatrists would attest to this, and the *media*, only attesting to what the psychiatrists had said, would thus attest to, by the same fact, their own competence and impartiality as *incomparably* authorized experts. The next day, the official police investigation would establish that one discovered several honorable people ready to bear witness to the fact that this same Villain, considering he had been rudely served at the 'Chope du Croissant,' had, in their presence, loudly threatened to take revenge on its proprietor by murdering, in front of everyone and on the premises, one of his best customers.<sup>47</sup>

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47        Jaures was assassinated in the Chope du Croissant (now the Cafe Chope du Croissant), 146 rue Montmartre, on 31, July 1914. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

This is not to say that, in the past, the truth often or quickly imposed itself, for Villain was eventually acquitted by the French courts. He was not shot until 1936, at the start of the Spanish revolution, because he had committed the imprudence of residing at the Balearic Islands.

## XXVI.

It is because of the new conditions of a profitable handling of economic affairs, at the moment when the State holds a hegemonic part in the orientation of production and when the demand for all of the commodities depends strictly on the centralization achieved by spectacular information/promotion, to which all forms of distribution must also adapt, that one sees the imperative demand that networks of influence or secret societies constitute themselves everywhere. It is thus only a natural product of the movement of concentration of capital, production and distribution. Whatever does not spread must disappear; and businesses can only spread with the values, techniques and means of today's industry, spectacle and State. It is, in the final analysis, the particular development that has been chosen by the economy of our era that imposes everywhere the formation of *new personal links of dependency and protection*.

It is precisely here that resides the profound truth of this formula, so well appreciated throughout Italy, used by the Sicilian Mafia: "When you've got money and friends, you can laugh at Justice." In the integrated spectacular, *the laws are asleep*; because they were not made for the new production techniques, and because they are outflanked in distribution by new types of agreement. What the public thinks, or prefers, is no longer of importance. This is what is hidden by the spectacle of so many opinion polls, elections, modernizing restructurings. No matter who the winners are, the amiable clientele will get what's inferior, because that is exactly what has been produced for it.

One only continually speaks of a “State of rights” since the moment that the modern, so-called democratic State generally ceased to be one: it is not by chance that the expression was only popularized shortly after 1970 and exactly in Italy. In many domains, laws are even made precisely *so that they may be outflanked* by exactly those who have all the means to do so. Illegality in some circumstances — for example, around the global trade in all sorts of weaponry, most often concerning the products of the highest technology — is only a kind of back-up for the economic operation, which will find itself all the more profitable. Today many business deals are necessarily as *dishonest as the century*, and not like those once made within a strictly limited range by people who had chosen the paths of dishonesty.

To the extent that the networks of promotion/control grow so as to mark and hold on to exploitable sectors of the market, there is also an increase in the number of personal services which can not be refused to those in the know and who have not refused their help; and these are not always the police or guardians of the interests and security of the State. Functional complicities communicate at a distance and for a very long time, because their networks dispose of all the means to impose those sentiments of recognition and fidelity that, unfortunately, have always been so rare in the free activity of bourgeois times.

One always learns something from one’s adversary. It is necessary to believe that the people of the State have also read the young Lukacs’ remarks on the concepts of legality and illegality; at the moment that they had to deal with the brief passage of a new generation of the negative<sup>48</sup> — Homer said that “A generation of men passes as quickly as a generation of leaves.” Since then, the people of the State have, like us, ceased to trouble themselves with any kind of ideology on the question;

48 The “new generation of the negative” to which Debord refers included the Dadaists.

and it is true that the practices of spectacular society no longer favor ideological illusions of this kind. Finally, concerning us all, one could conclude that what has often prevented us from enclosing ourselves in a single illegal activity is the fact that we have had several.

## XXVII.

In book VIII, chapter 5 of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides said, concerning the operations of another oligarchic conspiracy, something that has relevance to the situation in which we find ourselves:

Those who took the floor were of the conspiracy and the speeches that they pronounced had been submitted in advance to the examination of their friends. No opposition manifested itself among the remainder of the citizens, who were frightened by the number of conspirators. When someone tried, despite everything, to contradict them, one soon found a convenient way of making him die. The murderers weren't found and no pursuit was made of those one suspected. The people didn't react and were so terrorized that they estimated themselves happy, even in remaining mute, if they escaped the violence. Believing the conspirators much more numerous than they were, the people felt completely impotent. The town was too large and they didn't quite know each other, so that it was not possible for them to discover what it really was. In these conditions, so shameful were the people that they could not confide their grief to anyone. Thus, one had to renounce engaging in an action against the guilty ones, because it would have been necessary to address oneself either to an unknown person or a person of knowledge in whom one didn't have confidence. In the democratic party, personal relations were everywhere stamped with scorn, and one always asked oneself if he with whom one had business wasn't coniving with the conspirators. There were actually among the conspirators men

whom one could never believe that they had rallied themselves to the oligarchy.<sup>49</sup>

If history should return to us after this eclipse, which depends on factors still in struggle and thus on an outcome which no one can exclude with certainty, these *Comments* may one day serve in the writing of a history of the spectacle; without any doubt the most important

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49 In Donald Lateiner's revision of Richard Crawley's translation (Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006), pp. 495–496, this passage reads as follows: "However, the Assembly and the Council chosen by lot still met notwithstanding, although they discussed nothing that was not approved of by the conspirators, who both supplied the speakers, and reviewed in advance what they were to say. Fear, and the sight of the numbers of the conspirators, closed the mouths of the rest; or if any ventured to rise in opposition, he was presently put to death in some convenient way, and there was neither search for the murderers nor justice to be had against them if suspected; but the people remained motionless, being so thoroughly cowed that men thought themselves lucky to escape violence, even when they held their tongues. An exaggerated belief in the numbers of the conspirators also demoralized the people, rendered helpless by the magnitude of the city, and by their want of intelligence with each other, and being with means of finding out what those numbers really were. For the same reason it was impossible for any one to open his grief to a neighbor and to concert measures to defend himself, as he would have to speak either to one he did not know, or whom he knew but did not trust. Indeed all the popular party approached each other with suspicion, each thinking his neighbor concerned in what was going on, the conspirators having in their ranks persons whom no one could ever have believed capable of joining an oligarchy; and these it was who made the many so suspicious, and so helped to procure impunity for the few, by confirming the commons in their mistrust of one another."

event to have occurred this century, and also the event that one least ventures to explain. In different circumstances, I believe I could have considered myself greatly satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left it to others to consider subsequent developments. But in the moment at which we are, it seemed to me that no one else would do it.

### XXVIII.

From the networks of promotion/control one slides imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation. Formerly, one only ever conspired against an established order. Today, *conspiring in its favor* is a new and rapidly developing trade. Under spectacular domination, one conspires to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its progress. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning.

One has already begun to put in place several means for a kind of preventive civil war, adapted to different projections of the calculated future. These are the 'specific organizations' charged with intervening at several points, according to the needs of the integrated spectacular.<sup>50</sup> One has thus foreseen, for the worst possibilities, a tactic that, in a pleasantry, has been called 'Three Cultures,' an evocation of a square in Mexico City in the summer of 1968,<sup>51</sup> though this time the gloves will

50 One example would be the "Palladin" organization (also known as "The Guerillas of Christ the King"), which was founded in Spain by ex-Nazi Otto Skorzeny in the late 1960s. Like the GAL (foot-note [29]), Palladin was involved in the assassination of ETA separatists who had escaped to France. Other "special [death] squads" include the Bolivian group of ex-Nazis called "The Fiances of Death," and Stefano Delle Chiaie's international network, "The Black Orchestra."

51 On 2 October 1968, police opened fire on student demonstrators in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, killing many. During the preceding fortnight, at least fifty more students had been killed during

be off and the tactic will be applied before the day of the revolt. And beyond such extreme cases, it is not necessary, so as to be a good means of government, that the unexplained assassination touches much of the world or returns quite frequently: the sole fact that one knows that its possibility exists immediately complicates calculations in a very large number of domains. It no longer needs to be intelligently selective, *ad hominem*. The use of the procedure in a purely aleatory fashion would perhaps be more productive.

One is also placed in a position to compose fragments of a social critique of *rearing*,<sup>52</sup> which would no longer be entrusted to academics or mediatics, whom it is henceforth better to keep apart from the excessively traditional lies in this debate; but a better critique, advanced and exploited in a new way, handled by another, better trained species of professional. In a quite confidential manner, lucid texts are beginning to appear, anonymously, or signed by unknown authors — a tactic moreover facilitated by the concentration of the attentions of all on the clowns of the spectacle, which makes unknown people appear exactly the most admirable — not only on subjects never approached in the spectacle but also with arguments of which the justness is rendered more striking by the calculable species of originality, which comes from the fact that they are *never used, despite being quite evident*. This practice can serve at least as a first stage in initiation to recruit more alert minds,

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police attacks on strike meetings and the university campus. [*Malcolm Imrie*] See footnote [33].

52 It is possible that this paragraph and the one that follows it are discussing the *Encyclopedia of Nuisances* (EdN), a situationist-inspired journal founded in 1984 by Jaime Semprun and the ex-situ Christian Sebastiani. For a critique of the *EdN*, and Debord's role in it, see the text by Jean-Francois Martos and Jean-Pierre Baudet entitled *The Encyclopedia of Powers*.

who will later be told a much larger share of the possible consequences, if they seem suitable. And what for certain people will be the first step in a career, will be for others with a lower ranking the first degree of a trap in which one takes them.

In certain cases, on questions that threaten to become controversial, it will be a matter of creating another pseudo-critique; and between the two opinions which will thus arise — both foreign to impoverished spectacular conventions — naive judgment can oscillate indefinitely, and the discussion weighing upon them can be renewed each time that it is fitting. Most often this concerns a general discourse on what is mediatically hidden, and this discussion can be strongly critical, and on some points obviously intelligent, yet remaining curiously decentered. The themes and words have been artificially selected, with the aid of computers informed in critical thought. These texts contain certain gaps, quite hard to spot but nonetheless remarkable: the vanishing point of perspective is always abnormally absent. They resemble those *facsimiles* of a famous weapon, which only lacks the firing-pin. This is necessarily a *lateral critique*, which perceives several things with much frankness and exactness, but places itself to the side. Not because it affects some sort of impartiality, because on the contrary it must seem to find much fault, but without ever apparently feeling the need to reveal *its cause*, thus to state, even implicitly, where it is coming from and where it wants to go.

To this kind of counter-journalistic false critique can be joined the organized practice of the *rumor*, which one knows to be originally a sort of wild ransom of spectacular information, since everyone, however vaguely, perceives a deceptive character in the latter and trusts it as little as it deserves. Rumor was at the origin superstitious, naive, self-poisoning. More recently, however, surveillance has begun introducing into the population people susceptible of immediately starting rumors that suit it. Here one has decided to apply in practice the observations of



## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

a theory formulated some thirty years ago, and of which the origins lie in American sociology of advertising: the theory of individuals known as ‘trend-setters,’ that is, those whom others in their milieu come to follow and imitate; but in passing this time from spontaneity to well-rehearsed. Budgetary, or extrabudgetary, means have also been released to maintain numerous auxiliaries, besides the former academic and mediatic specialists, the sociologists and police of the recent past. To believe that models known in the past are still mechanically applied is as misleading as a general ignorance of the past. “Rome is no longer in Rome,”<sup>53</sup> and the Mafia is no longer the underworld. And the surveillance and disinformation services as little resemble the works of the police and informers of former times — for example, the roussins and mouchards of the Second Empire — as current-day special services in all countries resemble the activities of the officers of the Second Bureau of the army’s headquarters in 1914.

Since art is dead, it has become extremely easy to disguise police as artists. When the latest imitations of an inverted neo-Dadaism are authorized to pontificate gloriously in the media, and thus also to slightly modify the decor of official palaces, like court jesters to the kings of junk, one sees that by the same movement a cultural cover is guaranteed for all the agents or auxiliaries of the State’s networks of influence.<sup>54</sup> Empty pseudo-museums, or pseudo-research centers on the

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53 “Rome is no longer in Rome.” The quotation is from a line in Racine’s *Mithridates: Rome n’est plus dans Rome; elle est toute ou je suis.* [Malcolm Imrie] That last phrase in French means, “It [Rome] is everywhere I am.”

54 It is said that one of the reasons why Donald Nicholson-Smith’s 1994 translation of *The Society of the Spectacle* was not “authorized” by Debord was the fact that he believed that Zone Books (distributed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) was funded by

complete works of nonexistent personalities, can be opened just as fast as reputations are made for journalist-cops, historian-cops, or novelist-cops. No doubt Arthur Cravan foresaw this world when he wrote in *Maintenant*: “Soon we will only see artists in the streets, and it will take all the troubles of the world to find a single man.” This is indeed the sense of the revived form of an old quip of Parisian hoodlums: “Hi, artists! So much the worse if I deceive myself.”<sup>55</sup>

Things having become what they are, one can now see the use of collective authorship by the most modern publishing house, that is to say, the one with the best commercial distribution. Since the authenticity of pseudonyms are only assured by the newspapers, they can swap them around, collaborate, replace each other, enlist new artificial brains. Their task is to express the lifestyles and thought of the era, not by virtue of their personalities, but because they are ordered to. Those who believe that they are veritably individual, literary entrepreneurs can thus vouch for the fact that Ducasse has had a row with the Comte de Lautreamont, that Dumas isn't Maquet and that we must especially not confuse Erckmann with Chatrian; that Censier and Daubenton are no longer on speaking terms.<sup>56</sup> It might be best to say that this type of modern author was a follower of Rimbaud, at least in so far as “I is another.”

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the Central Intelligence Agency.

55        The French is, *Salut, les artistes! Tant pis si je me trompes*. The old low-life greeting was, *Salut, les hommes*. Debord has substituted “artists” for “men.” [*Malcolm Imrie*]

56        Isidor Ducasse was of course the Comte de Lautreamont. Auguste Macquet (or Maquet), a historian, was one of Dumas Pere's chief literary collaborators. Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian (1822–99 and 1826–90) wrote several novels and plays together over some forty years, many of them set in their native Alsace. Censier-Daubenton is a Paris Metro station. [*Malcolm Imrie*] Debord was greatly influenced by

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

The whole history of spectacular society called for the secret services to play the pivotal role; because it is in them that the characteristics and means of execution of such a society are concentrated to the highest degree. They are always further tasked with arbitrating the general interests of this society, despite their modest title of 'services.' There is no abuse here, for they faithfully express the ordinary morals of the century of the spectacle. And it is thus that surveillers and those surveilled set forth on a boundless ocean. The spectacle has made the secret triumph, and must always be in the hands of *specialists in the secret*, who of course are not all of the functionaries who have to different degrees made themselves autonomous with respect to State control; who are not all of the functionaries.

### XXIX.

A general law of the functioning of the integrated spectacular, at least for those who manage its administration, is that, in this framework, *everything which can be done, must be done*. This is to say that every new instrument must be employed, whatever the cost. New equipment becomes the goal and the driving force of the entire system, and will be the only thing which can notably modify its progress, each time its use is imposed without further reflection. Society's owners indeed want above all to maintain a certain 'social relation between people,' but they must also pursue incessant technological innovation; because such was one of the obligations that they accepted with their inheritance. This law thus

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Lautreamont, especially his *Poesies* (1870), from which *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) plagiarized the following famous passage: "Ideas improve. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. Plagiarism takes an author's phrase, uses his expressions, erases a false idea, replaces it with the correct one. </quote>"

applies equally to the services that safeguard domination. The instrument that has been completed must be used, and its use will reinforce the very conditions that favor this use. It is thus that emergency procedures become permanent.

The coherence of the society of the spectacle proves revolutionaries right, since it has become clear that one cannot reform the poorest detail without taking the whole thing apart. But, at the same time, this coherence has suppressed every organized revolutionary tendency by suppressing the social terrains where they had more or less expressed themselves: from trade unions to newspapers, towns to books. In the same movement, one has highlighted the incompetence and thoughtlessness of which this tendency was quite naturally the bearer. And on the individual level, the reigning coherence is quite capable of eliminating, or buying off certain possible exceptions.

**XXX.**

Surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been pushed along the path of absolute control of everyone, to the point where it encounters difficulties created by its own progress. There is a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyze it, or simply its actual interest. The abundance of material demands summarizing at each stage: much of it will disappear and what remains will still be too long to be read. Management of surveillance and manipulation is not unified. Indeed there is a widespread struggle for a share of the profits, and thus also for the priority of the development of this or that potential in the existing society, to the detriment of the other potentials, which nonetheless, so long as they are all part of the same mix, are considered equally respectable.

*One also struggles through play.* Each officer is led to over-value his agents, as well as the opponents' agents with whom he occupies himself. Each country, not to mention the numerous supranational alliances, currently possesses an undetermined number of police and counter-espionage services, along with secret services, both State and para-State. There are also many private companies dealing in surveillance, security and investigation. The large multinationals naturally have their own services; but so do nationalized companies, even those of modest scale, which no less pursue independent policies at a national and sometimes an international level. One can see that an industrial nuclear group will fight against an oil group, even though both are the property of the same State and, what is more, are dialectically united by their attachment to maintaining high oil prices on the world market. Each particular industry's security service combats sabotage, and needs to organize it against their rivals: a company with important interests in undersea tunnels will be favorably disposed to the insecurity of *ferry-boats* [English in original] and may bribe newspapers in financial trouble to ensure they mention it on the first possible occasion and without too much reflection; a company competing with Sandoz will be indifferent to ground water in the Rhine valley. One secretly surveils what is secret. Thus each of these organizations, confederated with flexibility around those who are in charge of the *raison of the State*, aspires, for its own account, to a species of private hegemony of meaning. Because meaning has been lost along with the knowable center.

Modern society, which, up to 1968, went from success to success, and was persuaded that it was loved, has since then had to renounce these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that "its innocent air will no longer return."<sup>57</sup>

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57        Debord is quoting from his film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. [Malcolm Imrie]

Thus, a thousand of conspiracies in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere, with the overlapping of networks and secret questions or actions always pushed harder; and the process of rapid integration is pushed into each branch of the economy, politics and culture. The degree of intermingling in surveillance, disinformation and special activities continually grows in all areas of social life. The general conspiracy has become so dense that it is almost out in the open, each of its branches starts to hinder or trouble the others, because all these professional conspirators are spying on each other without exactly knowing why, or encounter each other by chance, yet without recognizing each other with certainty. Who is observing whom? On whose behalf, apparently? And actually? The real influences remain hidden, and the ultimate intentions can only be suspected with great difficulty and almost never understood. So that while no one can say he is not deluded or manipulated, it is only in rare instances that the manipulator himself can know he has succeeded. And, besides, finding oneself on the winning side of manipulation does not mean that one has justly chosen the strategic perspective. It is thus that tactical successes can get great forces stuck on bad paths.

In the same network, apparently pursuing the same goal, those who only constitute a part of the network are obliged to be ignorant of the hypotheses and conclusions of the other parts, and especially of their ruling nucleus. The quite well known fact that all information on whatever subject under observation may well be entirely imaginary, or in large part false, or very inadequately interpreted, complicates and renders unsure to a great degree the calculations of the inquirers; because what is sufficient to condemn someone is not sufficient when it comes to recognizing or using him. Since sources of information are in competition, so are falsifications.

## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

It is in these conditions of its existence that we can speak of a tendency to the falling profitability of control, to the extent that it approaches the totality of social space and consequently increases its personnel and its means. Because here each means aspires and labors to become an end. Surveillance spies on and conspires against itself.

Its principal present contradiction, finally, is that it is surveilling, infiltrating and influencing *an absent party*: that which is supposed to want the subversion of the social order. But where can it be seen at work? Because conditions certainly have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments that think so. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago. Because of this, it is only a vague, yet very worrisome threat, and surveillance in its turn has been deprived of the best field of its activity. These powers of surveillance and intervention are exactly led by current necessities, which command their terms of engagement, to operate on the very terrain of this threat in order to combat it *in advance*.<sup>58</sup> This is why surveillance has an interest in organizing poles of negation itself, which it will instruct with more than the discredited means of the spectacle, so as to influence, not terrorists this time, but theories.<sup>59</sup>

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58 According to Luis Manuel Gonzales Mata, a spy in the employ of the Franco regime: "Agents, when they have no further information to report, invent some; when there are no more outrages to be prevented, they provoke some; when there is no longer any extremist organization to infiltrate, they set some up."

59 Likely candidates for manipulated theories would have to include those advanced by the "doctrinaires of 'armed struggle'" (see footnote [22]); and such "new philosophers" as Bernard-Henri Levy. Note as well that, in his 1975 film, *Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle,"* Debord refers to "the desolate walls of Vincennes University," and goes

## XXXI.

Baltasar Gracian, that great connoisseur of historical time, tells us with much pertinency in *El Oraculo manual y Arte de Prudencia*: “Governing, discoursing, everything must be done with purpose. Love when you can, because neither the season nor time wait for anyone.”<sup>60</sup>

But Omar Khayyam was less of an optimist. “So as to speak clearly and without parables — We are the pieces of the game that plays the sky; — We amuse ourselves with ourselves on the chessboard of Being, — and then we are returned, one by one, to the box of Nothingness.”

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on to say: “Within living memory no Vincennes student has ever come up with a single theory. This is no doubt why we are currently seeing some of them advocate ‘anti-theory.’ What else could they parlay into an assistant professorship in that neo-university?” Debord’s dislike of Vincennes theorists was in part a response to their theories, but also to their means of supporting themselves. Michel Foucault “undertook a number of research projects for the Ministère de l’Équipement in the 1970s [...] Many well known sociologists and philosophers participated in research financed by this Ministry, such as Deleuze and Guattari who also undertook contract research [...] Lefebvre points out that recuperation has taken a specific form in the years after 1968 in that technocrats got the critics themselves to work out what would be applicable out of the radical critique. Many Marxist sociologists at this time accepted contracts from State ministries.” Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, translators’ introduction to Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Blackwell, 1996). As for “cadrist,” it refers to *cadres*, business executives.

60 Following Debord’s letter to Editions Anagrama dated 7 June 1989, we have translated this passage directly from the Spanish.



## XXXII.

The French Revolution involved great changes in the art of war. It was after this experience that Clausewitz could establish the distinction according to which tactics are the use of forces in battle so as to obtain victory, whereas strategy is the use of victories to attain the goals of a war. Europe was subjugated, immediately and lastingly, by the results. But the theory was not established until later, and was developed unequally. First to be appreciated were the positive features directly brought about by a profound social transformation: the enthusiasm and mobility that lived off the land in rendering itself relatively independent of stores and supply trains, the multiplication of numerical strength. These practical elements found themselves counterbalanced by the appearance on the enemy side of similar elements: in Spain, the French armies encountered another popular enthusiasm; in the vast spaces of Russia, a land they could not live off; after the rising in Germany, numerically far superior forces. However, the effect of a total break in the new French tactics, which was the simple basis on which Bonaparte founded his strategy — which consisted of using victories *in advance*, as if acquired on credit: conceiving manoeuvres and their diverse variants from the start as consequences of a victory that was not yet obtained, but would certainly be at the first onslaught — derived also from the forced abandonment of false ideas. This tactic brusquely obliged an abrupt break with false ideas and, at the same time, by the concomitant play of the other innovations outlined above, found the means to achieve such a break. The newly levied French soldiers were incapable of fighting in line, that is, of keeping ranks and firing on command. They would thus be deployed as sharpshooters and practiced firing at will as they advanced on the enemy. Therefore, firing at will found itself exactly to be the only effective kind, which really operated a destructive use of musketry, which proved the most decisive factor in military engagements of the period. Yet military thinking had universally rejected this conclusion in the century that was

ending, and the discussion on the question continued through most of the new century, despite constant examples from the practice of combat and the ceaseless progress in range and rate of fire.

The establishment of spectacular domination is seemingly a social transformation so profound that it has radically altered the art of government. This simplification, which has quickly borne such fruit in practice, has not been fully comprehended theoretically. Old prejudices everywhere contradicted, precautions become useless, and even the traces of scruples from other times still hinder this comprehension, which practice establishes and confirms every single day, in the thinking of quite a number of rulers. Not only are the subjugated made to believe that, essentially, they are still living in a world which in fact disappeared, but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the thoughtlessness of still believing in it. They come to believe in a part of what they have suppressed, as if it remained a reality and had still to be included in their calculations. This delay will not last long. Those who have achieved so much so easily must necessarily go further. One must not believe that those who have not quickly understood the pliability of the new rules of their game and its form of barbaric grandeur will durably maintain themselves like an archaism in the surroundings of real power. The destiny of the spectacle is certainly not to end in enlightened despotism.

We must conclude that a change is imminent and ineluctable in the co-opted cast who manage the domination and, notably, those who direct the protection of that domination. In such an affair, the novelty of course will never be displayed on the stage of the spectacle. It will only appear like lightning, which we know only when it strikes. This change, which will decisively complete the work of these spectacular times, will occur discreetly and, although it concerns those already installed in the sphere of power, conspiratorially. It will select those who will take

part part in it on this central requirement: that they clearly know what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.<sup>61</sup>

**XXXIII.**

The same Sardou also wrote:

*Vainly* relates to the subject; *in vain* to the object; *uselessly* without use for anyone. One has worked *vainly* when one has done so without success, so that one has wasted one's time and effort: one has worked *in vain* when one has done so without attaining the intended goal, because of the defectiveness of the work. If I cannot complete my task, I work *vainly*; I am uselessly wasting my time and effort. If the task I have done does not have the effect I was expecting, if I have not attained my goal, I have worked *in vain*; that is to say, I have done something useless...

It is also said that someone has worked *vainly* when he has not been rewarded for his work, or when this work has not been accepted; because

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61 Because of Debord's use of a series of predictions to conclude his *Comments*, one feels comfortable in mentioning that, just four years after his book was published and in the aftermath of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, some of the people who would later go on to form the "Project for a New American Century" were trying to convince then-President George H. Bush that the time was right for the USA to take over the world. Though these people (Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld, among them) failed to convince him, they eventually succeeded with his son, George W. Bush, who was the self-avowed President of the country on 11 September 2001. Ever since then — with and through America's military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Haiti — the efforts to create a New American Empire have been going full-steam.

**GUY DEBORD**

in this case the worker has wasted his time and effort, without this at all prejudicing the value of his work, which can be very good.

— Paris, February-April 1988.