# Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture

Endnotes

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> "We do not know whether the [contrasting] destinies of Luxemburg … and Lenin were to be tied to the fact that Lenin and his group armed the workers, while the Spartacists continued to view the organisation as coordination … and the refusal to work as the only adequate workers' weapon. The essence of Leninism shifts from the relationship between spontaneity and the party to the relationship between the party and insurrection."[1]

Are present-day struggles unfolding towards revolution? We try to find our bearings, with respect to this question, in the only way we can: not only in our experience of the present, but also, by consulting the revolutionary theories of the past. However, to look to past revolutionary theories is a problematic venture: those theories emerged in response to a set of problems which arose in the course of a particular era — an era that is not our own. Indeed, the revolutionary theories of the twentieth century were developed in the course of a sequence of struggles that we call the workers' movement. Those theories do not only bear the traces of the workers' movement in general. They formed in response to the limits that movement confronted at its highest point of intensity — that is, in the era of revolutions, 1905–21.

The limits of the workers' movement had everything to do with the problem of instilling a class consciousness in a population that had been proletarianised only incompletely. Facing a large peasantry in the countryside and a motley assortment of working classes in the cities, the strategists of the workers' movement looked forward to a future moment, when full proletarianisation — attendant on a further development of the productive forces — would eradicate existing divisions among proletarians. The objective unity of the class would then find a subjective correlate. As it turned out, this dream never became a reality. The further development of the productive forces reinforced certain divisions among proletarians, while creating others. Meanwhile, that development eradicated the basis of workers' unity. Workers found that they were no longer the vital force of the modern era; instead, they were made over into appendages — attachments to a sprawling set of machines and infrastructures that escaped their control.[2]

Returning, however briefly, to the revolutionary high point of the last century — before the destitution of the workers' movement — may help us to understand the context in which the revolutionary theories of the past were born. On that basis, we will begin to articulate a revolutionary theory for our own times. But we should be wary in undertaking such a project today: the emergence of revolutions is, by its very nature, unpredictable; our theory must somehow incorporate this unpredictability into its very core. The revolutionaries of an earlier era mostly refused to open themselves towards the unknown — even though the revolutions they experienced never played out as they had imagined.

After all, twentieth-century revolutions turned out not to be the result of methodical projects, of slowly building up union and/or party memberships, which were expected to expand in step with the industrialisation and homogenisation of the class. Instead, the revolutionary waves of 1905–21 emerged chaotically, with self-organising struggles forming around the tactic of the *mass strike*. Neither the emergence nor the development of the mass strike was foreseen by rev-

[1] Sergio Bologna, 'Class composition and the theory of the party at the origins of the workers' council movement' (1972).

[2] See 'A History of Separation', forthcoming in *Endnotes* 4.

olutionary strategists, in spite of decades of reflection (and the historical examples of 1848 and 1871).[3]

Among the few revolutionaries who did not oppose this new form of struggle outright, Rosa Luxemburg came to identify it as the revolutionary tactic *par excellence*. Her book, *The Mass Strike*, is one of the best texts in the history of revolutionary theory. However, even Luxemburg saw the mass strike as a means of revitalising the Germany Social Democratic Party. As Dauvé points out: "if [Luxemburg] was the author of the formula, 'After August 4, 1914, social democracy is nothing but a nauseating corpse,' she proved to be quite the necrophiliac."[4]

## Prelude: The Mass Strike

The history of the mass strike is a subterranean history; it is largely unwritten. But it can be outlined as follows.[5]

In 1902, roving strikes occurred in Belgium and Sweden, as a means of pressing for universal male suffrage. The tactic then spread to the Netherlands and Russia before arriving in Italy, in 1904, as a protest against the violent repression of workers' uprisings. In Italy, workers' councils were formed for the first time. This first wave reached its high point in the enormous Russian mass strikes of 1905, which culminated in an insurrection — the first Russian Revolution — in December of that year. With the Russian example serving as the model, the mass-strike tactic circulated rapidly through European cities.

It soon appeared in Germany, the heart of Second International Marxism, where the question of the "purpose" of the mass strike — which had already been used to a variety of different ends — was first raised. For union representatives, the mass strike appeared to be an obstacle to their unions' own, plodding attempts to organise the class. A German trade-unionist declared: "To build our organisations, we need calm in the workers' movement."[6] Yet the tactic continued to spread, and its scope widened, despite the pronouncement of the Second International that it supported the mass-strike tactic only as a defensive weapon.

After the wave of 1902–07, struggles quieted down before bursting forth again in 1910–13. In the course of these two waves, union membership surged; the vote was won in Austria and Italy, while the Scandinavian states were forced to liberalise. Anarcho-syndicalism and Left Communism appeared as distinct tendencies. The start of World War I put an end to the second strike wave, which was already beginning to peter out. But this seemingly permanent blockage turned out to be another temporary impediment. Across Europe, the number of strikes was already rising from low levels in 1915. Activity spilled outside the workplace: there were rent strikes in Clydeside and demonstrations against food prices in Berlin. In 1916, mass strikes were called in Germany, but this time in order to protest the imprisonment of Karl Liebknecht, a symbol of principled opposition to the War. By 1917, labour unrest was matched by mutinies in the army and food riots in the streets, among other actions. These actions proliferated through new forms of organisation: the shop-stewards' movements in England and Germany and the "internal commissions" in Italy.

[3] The mass strike of the early twentieth century had little in common with the dream of the general strike, the *grand soir*, of the late nineteenth century.

[4] Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier, *The Communist Left in Germany, 1918–1921* (1976), Chapter 4.

[5] See Philippe Bourrinet, 'The workers' councils in the theory of the Dutch-German communist left.'

[6] Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917* (Harvard University Press 1955), 39.

Thus, even before the Bolshevik Revolution in October, struggle was heating up across European cities. Mass strikes in Austria and Germany were the largest ever in each country's history. People forget that World War I ended, not because of the defeat of one side, but because more and more of the countries involved in hostilities collapsed in a wave of revolutions, which surged and then receded from 1917 to 1921. We will not dwell on this final wave of struggle, except to quote the words that Friedrich Ebert, leader of the SPD, spoke to the frightened German bourgeoisie, in 1918: "We are the only ones who can maintain order"…

What can we learn from this brief history of the mass-strike tactic? Were a revolution to occur today, it would also have to emerge out of a massive intensification of spontaneous, self-organising struggles. Those struggles would have to break out and extend themselves across vast geographic spaces, in an ebb and flow that lasts for decades. It is only within such a context — that is, a context of an unfolding sequence of struggles — that revolution becomes possible, not just theoretically, but actually. It is thus also only in the course of intensifying struggles that the strategic questions of an era can be asked and answered, in a concrete way.

However, we cannot learn much more than that, from the past. The tactic of the mass strike was specific to its time, a time that witnessed: (1) an unprecedented consolidation of firms and workplaces; (2) the arrival, in new industrial towns, of recently proletarianised peasants, bringing with them certain cultures of solidarity; (3) the fight of workers to defend their control over the labour process, against mechanisation and rationalisation; and finally, (4) the fight against a persistent old regime — a fight for equality of citizenship, the right to organise, and the vote — which elites refused to grant proletarians. The horizon of struggle is very different today, yet the tools that we have for grasping the relation between struggles and revolution still bear the traces of the workers' movement.

Those tools must be re-forged. The quotation from Bologna, with which we began, touches on the key concepts of revolutionary theory, as it was understood in the course of the workers' movement: spontaneity and organisation, party and insurrection. The question that faces us is: how do we articulate the relations among this constellation of concepts today, that is, after the end of the workers' movement (which has meant also, and necessarily, the end of all the revolutionary traditions that animated the last century: Leninism and the ultra-left, social democracy and syndicalism, and so on)? We offer the following reflections on three concepts — spontaneity, mediation, rupture — as an attempt to re-fashion the tools of revolutionary theory, for our times. By taking cognisance of the gap that separates us from the past, we hope to extract from past theories something of use to us in the present.

## The Coordination Problem

Before we discuss the key concepts of revolutionary theory, we must pause to say something about the specificity of struggle in capitalist societies. Outside of those societies, human beings are mostly organised into face-to-face communities. When they clash, they do so as communities that pre-exist those clashes. By contrast, in capitalist societies, human beings are mostly atomised. Proletarians confront one another, not as members of face-to-face communities, but rather, as strangers. This atomisation determines the character of contemporary struggles. For the basis on which proletarians struggle does not pre-exist those struggles. Instead, the foundations of

struggle have to be built (out of the materials of social life) in the course of struggle itself. This feature of capitalist societies has two basic causes:

1. In the markets where they sell their labour-power, proletarians compete with one another for jobs. It is given in the nature of the exploitative relation that there are never enough jobs to go around. In this situation, some proletarians find it worthwhile to form gangs and rackets — based on gender, race, nation, creed — and to oppose other groups of workers on that basis.[7] The opposition between proletarians plays out, not only with respect to jobs and wage differentials, but also with respect to working conditions, family time, educational opportunities and so on. Intra-class competition is also reflected outside of labour markets, in ruthlessly enforced status hierarchies, on display through conspicuous consumption (flashy cars) and countless lifestyle markers (tight pants). Thus, an increasingly universal situation of labour-dependence has not led to a homogenisation of interests. On the contrary, proletarians are internally stratified. They carefully differentiate themselves from one another. Where collective interests have been cultivated by organisations, that has often re-inscribed other competitive differences in the boundaries of race, nation, gender, etc.

2. Labour-dependency not only issues in competition between workers, repelling them from one another. Insofar as individuals are able to secure work, the wage also frees proletarians from having to deal with one another. No longer dependent on an inheritance, wage-earners are not beholden to their parents or anyone else (except their bosses!).[8] They can escape from the countryside to the cities, from the cities to the suburbs, or from the suburbs back to the cities. As long as they find work, proletarians are free to move about as they please. They can flee the admonishing eyes of ancestral and religious authorities, as well as former friends and lovers, in order to partner with whomever they want, to pray to whatever gods, and to decorate their homes any which way. Proletarians do not have to see anyone they do not like, except at work. Thus, the community dissolves not only by force; its dissolution is also actively willed. The result is an historically unique social structure, in which people don't really have to depend on each other, directly, for much of anything. Yet, proletarians' individual autonomy is won at the expense of a collective powerlessness. When revolt ends, proletarians tend to revert to atomisation. They dissolve back into the cash nexus.

Because proletarians begin from a situation of nearly universal atomisation, they face a unique *coordination problem*. Proletarians have to find ways to band together, but in order to do so, they have to overcome the real opposition of their interests. Insofar as they have not yet overcome these barriers, they find that they are powerless in their struggle with both capital and the state.

[7] Gangs and rackets act to ensure that some proletarians get 'good jobs' at the expense of others.

[8] Not all who are labour-dependent have achieved the autonomy that comes with it. For example, proletarian women have always worked, at least for part of their lives. But for another part of their lives (especially before 1970), they were relegated to a domestic sphere, where they earned no wages of their own. Even when women did earn wages, their wages were sometimes handed over directly to their husbands. In this way, the development of the capitalist mode of production prevented women from winning the autonomy from fathers and husbands that young men were able to achieve, early on. That women, today, do earn and retain their own wages has given them an increased autonomy, even though they are still saddled with most of the domestic work.

Thus, the problem proletarians face — in non-revolutionary times — is not the lack of a proper strategy (which could be divined by clever intellectuals), but rather, the presence of real power asymmetries, attendant on their atomisation. Nothing in the individual workers' arsenal can match the power of capitalists to hire and fire at will, or the proclivity of policemen to shoot, beat or jail.

Workers have historically overcome their atomisation — and the power imbalances that result — in waves of coordinated, disruptive activity. But workers face a *double-bind*: they can act collectively if they trust one another, but they can trust one another — in the face of massive risks to themselves and others — only if that trust has already been realised in collective action. If revolutionary activity is exceptional, it is not because ideology divides workers, but rather because, unless revolutionary action is already taking place, it is suicidal to try to "go it alone". The ideas in our heads, no matter how revolutionary they are, mostly serve to justify — and also to help us to cope with — the suffering borne of this situation.

The seemingly indissoluble problem of struggle, of the double bind, is finally solved only by struggle itself, by the fact that struggle unfolds over time. Computationally, this solution can be described as the possible result of an iterated prisoners' dilemma.[9] Our term is spontaneity.

## 1 Spontaneity

Spontaneity is usually understood as an absence of organisation. Something spontaneous arises from a momentary impulse, as if occurring naturally. Second International Marxists believed that workers' revolt was spontaneous, in this sense: it was a natural reaction to capitalist domination, which must be given shape by the party. This notion relies on what might be called a derivative meaning of the term spontaneity. In the eighteenth century, when Kant described the transcendental unity of apperception — the fact that I am aware of myself as having my own experiences — he called this a spontaneous act.[10] Kant meant the opposite of something natural. A spontaneous act is one that is freely undertaken. In fact, the word spontaneous derives from the Latin *sponte*, meaning "of one's own accord, freely, willingly". In this sense, spontaneity is not about acting compulsively or automatically. It is a matter of acting without external constraint. We participate in capitalist social relations everyday: by going to work, by making purchases, etc. But we are free to decide not to do that, whatever the consequences may be (in fact, the consequences are sometimes severe, because our participation in capitalism is not a choice, but rather, a compulsion).[11]

Four points follow, from this re-interpretation of the term:

1. Spontaneity — precisely because it is freely willed — is inherently unpredictable. For this reason, there can be no fixed theory of struggle. There can only be a phenomenology of the experience of revolt. Of course, revolt does bear a relation to crisis, economic or otherwise, since crises make proletarians' existing ways of life untenable. But the relation between crisis and revolt is never mechanical. Revolt remains fundamentally un- or overdetermined:

[9] See, for example, Robert Alexrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Basic Books 1984).

[10] See Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism* (Cambridge University Press 1989), 16–24.

[11] Individuals act spontaneously, in this sense, all the time. Sometimes they have a plan and sometimes they do not. We are interested, however, not in such individual acts of freedom, but rather, in collective acts of spontaneity. That is to say, we are interested, here, only in mass activity.

it never happens just when it is supposed to, and when it does happen, it often arises from the unlikeliest of corners. Discontent may simmer, but then a police murder or a rise in bread prices suddenly "triggers" revolt. However, no one knows beforehand what will be the trigger event, in any given case. This is not to say that revolt is unplanned — or that militants do not play a role in sparking revolts. In fact, militants try to spark revolt all the time. The point is that their success lies in something outside of themselves (that something reveals itself in key moments, when the human material on which militants work suddenly stops responding to their micro-management — a struggle either leaps out in an unexpected direction, or else, it wilts).[12] Who can predict when showing up at a park will lead to just another protest, and when it will explode into a civil war?

2. Spontaneity — being a break with the everyday — is also necessarily disruptive. Spontaneity appears as a set of disruptive acts: strikes, occupations, blockades, looting, rioting, self-reduction of prices and self-organisation more generally. But spontaneity is not merely a concoction of these ingredients. Spontaneity has a history, and in the history of spontaneity, there is a primacy of particular tactics, in two senses. (a) Tactics are what resonate, across workplaces or neighbourhoods, across countries or even continents. Someone sets themselves on fire, or some individuals occupy a public square. Spontaneously, other people start doing something similar. In the course of events, proletarians adapt a given tactic to their own experiences, but what is key is that — insofar they are adopting tactics that are taken from somewhere else — there is an interruption of the continuous flow of time. Local history becomes something that can only be articulated globally. (b) The primacy of tactics is also given in the fact that people take part in waves of disruptive activity, even while debating why they are doing so. Participants may make contradictory demands; the same tactics are used towards different ends, in different places. Meanwhile, as struggles grow in intensity and extent, participants become more bold in making demands — or in not making any at all. Barriers between people begin to break down. As the walls fall, individuals' sense of collective power increases. The risks of participation drop as more and more people participate. In its unfolding, the struggle builds its own foundations.

3. Spontaneity is not only disruptive, it is also creative. Spontaneity generates a new content of struggle, which is adequate to proletarians' everyday experiences. These experiences are always changing, along with changes in capitalist social relations (and culture more generally). That's why revolt that arises from within — spontaneously — tends to spread more widely and wildly than revolt that comes from the outside — from militants, etc. This is true, even when militants intervene on the basis of their own prior experiences of revolt (in the sixties, many militants denounced sabotage and absenteeism as "infantile" forms of struggle; in fact, they presaged a massive wave of wildcat strikes). Thus, militants place themselves in a difficult position. Militants are the human traces of past conflict, mobile across time and space. If there are local/national histories of struggle, that is partly because militants establish continuities of experience. Strong militant formations can become agents of intensification in the present; however, in trying to apply lessons learned

[12] To point that out is not to denigrate militants: it is to remind us that while militants are an active agent in any wave of struggle, they do not hold the key to it. They solve the coordination problem much as computers solve math problems: by trying every possible solution, until one of them fits.

in the past to an ever changing present, militants run the risk of trivialising the new, in the moment of its emergence. This is a dangerous position, insofar as it remains axiomatic, for us, that we have to put our trust in the new as the only way out of capitalist social relations.

4. Spontaneous revolt involves, not only the creation of a new content of struggle, but also, necessarily, of new forms of struggle, adequate to or matching up with that content. Hegel once said, "regarding the antithesis of form and content": "it is essential to remember that the content is not formless, but that it has the form within itself, just as much as the form is something external to it".[13] That form may be incipient at first; it may exist only in potential, but it comes into its own as struggles extend and intensify. Here, too there is something creative — the emergence of a form without historical precedent. History bears witness to this fact, again and again: newly emergent struggles disdain existing forms. Instead, they generate their own forms, which are then disdained, in turn, in future waves of revolt. This feature of spontaneity, its tendency towards formal innovation, undermines any account of communisation that makes it seem as if a communising revolution would be fundamentally formless. We cannot know what forms of spontaneous organisation will play a role in — and will have to be overcome in the moment of — communisation.

Against the revolutionary theories of the past, we can say today that organisation is not external to spontaneity. On the contrary, mass revolt is always organised. To give this term a definition proper to its role in revolutionary theory, we might say that organisation is the necessary accompaniment to the coordination and extension of spontaneous disruptive activity. But that does not mean that organisation is always formal. It can also be completely informal, and in fact, at the highest levels, it is always informal. Coordination means the spread of tactics by word of mouth, newspapers, radio, television, videos captured on cell phones, etc. (not that any particular technology is necessary: a global strike wave already spread across the British Empire in the 1930s; technologies merely afford different opportunities for struggle).

Within any revolt, debates take place around the question of organisation: "what is the best way to coordinate and extend this particular disruptive activity?" The answers to this question are always specific to the context of the revolt in question. Many individuals, whether out of ignorance or fear, ask themselves different questions: "how can we bring this disruption to an end?" "how can we wrap it up or get a win, so we can return to the familiar miseries of our everyday lives?" Overcoming ignorance and fear — coming to trust one another to act and to do so in a coordinated way, with hundreds, thousands, millions and finally billions of people — this coordination problem cannot be worked out in advance. It is only solved in and through an unfolding sequence of struggles.

## 2 Mediation

We usually come across the term mediation in its privative form, as immediacy, taken to mean, "now, at once". Again, this meaning is a derivative one. Immediacy means, first and foremost, lacking mediation. What, then, is mediation? It is the presence of an intervening term (in its

[13] Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic* (Hackett 1991) § 133, p. 202.

early usage, the word "mediation" described the position of Jesus Christ, who intervened between God and man). To speak of the immediacy of the revolution does not mean to call for revolution "immediately", in the sense of "right now", but rather, "immediately", in the sense of "lacking an intervening term". But which term is lacking, in this case?

It should be clear that the immediacy of the revolution is not simply a matter of lacking organisation (although any revolution will be chaotic). On the contrary, disruptive activities must be highly coordinated and extensive — in a word, organised — so much so as to precipitate a desertion from the armed forces (which is the *sine qua non* of a revolutionary moment). Nor is this point clarified by saying that the revolution will take place without an intervening, or transitional period. Because in fact, there will inevitably be a transition, even if there will be no "transitional economy" or "transitional state" in the sense these terms had in the twentieth century. The communisation of social relations among seven billion people will take time. It will involve sudden surges as well as devastating setbacks, zones of freedom emerging alongside zones of unfreedom, etc. Even if communisers were to rout the counter-revolution, there would inevitably follow a period of de- and reconstruction. Relations among individuals, no longer mediated by markets and states, would have to realise themselves, in the world, as a thoroughgoing transformation of material infrastructures.[14]

For us, it is not so much the revolution as a process that should be understood with the category of "immediacy". To speak of immediacy, with respect to the revolution, is merely a shorthand for the fact that the revolution abolishes the mediations of the modern world. To speak of the immediacy of communism is thus to affirm that, unlike the revolutionaries of the past, communisers will have to take seriously the coherence of the modern world. The worker, the machine, the factory, science and technology: none of these terms appears as an unqualified good, to be opposed to capital and the state, as unqualified evils. There is no neutral ordering of this world that can be taken over by the working class and run in its interest. Thus, the revolution cannot be a matter of finding new ways to mediate relations among workers, or between human beings and nature, the state and the economy, men and women, etc.

Instead, the revolution can only be a set of acts that abolish the very distinctions on which such mediations are based. Capitalism is a set of separations, or ontological cleavages — between human beings and their innermost capacities — that are subsequently mediated by value and the state. To undo these mediations is to destroy the entities that underlie them: on the one hand to reconnect everyone to their capacities, in such a way that they can never be forcibly separated, and on the other hand, to empower each singular individual to take on or divest from any particular capacity, without thereby losing access to all the others.

The actual means of reconnecting individuals to their capacities, outside the market and the state, are impossible to foresee. But that does not mean that human existence will take on an ineffable quality, a sheer flux. New mediations will inevitably be erected out of the wreckage of the old. Thus, communism will not mean the end of mediation. It will mean the end of those mediations that fix us in our social roles: gender, race, class, nation, species. Just as the end of abstract domination will not mean the end of abstraction, so too, the overcoming of these mediations will leave plenty of others intact: language, music, games, etc.

However, that is not to say these mediations won't be fundamentally transformed by the end of asocial socialisation. Take language for example, as the primordial mediation: language

[14] See 'Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect' in this issue.

has been transformed by global commerce, which has led to a massive reduction in the number of languages, and to the corresponding dominance of a few: Spanish, English, Mandarin. We do not know whether the overcoming of this world will continue to maximise communication between social groupings around the world. Perhaps, instead, it will issue in a proliferation of languages. Universal comprehension may be sacrificed to make words more adequate to mutually unintelligible forms of life.

## 3 Rupture

During periods of quiescence, revolt takes place. But it remains disarticulated. The clash between classes breaks out, here and there, but then subsides. Periods of quiescence last for decades, but eventually, they come to an end. The re-emergence of class struggle announces itself in a torrent of activities. A new sequence of struggles begins. Waves of proletarian activity ebb and flow, over a period of years, as new content and new forms of struggle develop. The intensity of the fight rises, although never in a linear way, as proletarians link up, extending their disruptive activities. The articulation of those activities begins to reveal the outlines of that which is to be overcome. In this way, there is a tension towards the rupture, which throws off sparks in all directions. A rupture is, by definition, a break — a break that is qualitative in nature — but a break with or within what? Where do we locate the rupture that is synonymous with the advent of a revolutionary period?

It is all too easy to speak of spontaneous *disruption* as if it were itself a rupture, that is, with the everyday. Revolution would then be understood as an accumulation of ruptures. There is some truth in this perspective. After all, struggles never extend themselves along a linear path of rising intensity. On the contrary, the clash moves by means of discontinuities. Its dynamism gives rise to periodic shifts in the very terms of the struggle: in one moment, it may be workers versus bosses, but in the next, it becomes tenants versus landlords, youth versus the police, or a confrontation among self-organised sectors (all of these fights can occur simultaneously as well). This instability — in the very basis on which individuals are called to confront one another — is what makes it possible to call everything into question, both generally and in every specificity.

Yet these terms must be kept separate: on the one hand, spontaneous disruption, and on the other hand, the rupture, which splits open spontaneous disruption itself. The rupture forces every individual, who is engaged in struggle, to take sides: to decide whether they align themselves on the side of the communist movement — as the movement for the practical destruction of this world — or else, on the side of continuing to revolt, on the basis of what is. In that sense, the rupture is a moment of partisanship, of taking sides.[15] It is a question of joining the party and of convincing others to do the same (it is by no means a matter of leading "the people"). Just as we separate spontaneity from rupture, we must also draw a distinction between organisation, which is proper to spontaneity, and the party, which is always the party of rupture.[16]

[15] In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx writes of a polarisation of social forces into a 'Party of Order' and a 'Party of Anarchy'. Here, it is not a matter of pre-existing social groups, but rather, of emergent ones, finding their organisational forms in the struggle itself: the bourgeoisie and its supporters coalesce around a force that offers the best chance of restoring order, while the proletariat gathers around a force that is trying to create a situation 'which makes all turning back impossible'.

[16] The concept of the party merely registers this fact: like spontaneous revolt itself, the rupture will not proceed automatically, out of a deep or even 'final crisis' of the capital-labour relation. The proletariat will not suddenly find

The party cleaves its way through proletarian organisations, since it calls for the destitution of the social order (and so also, the undoing of the distinctions on which proletarian organisations are founded). The difference between organisations and the party is, therefore, the difference between, on the one hand, committees of the unemployed, neighbourhood assemblies and rank-and-file unions — which organise the disruption of capitalist social relations — and on the other hand, groups of partisans — who reconfigure networks of transportation and communication and organise the creation and free distribution of goods and services. Communist tactics destroy the very distinctions (e.g. between employed and unemployed) on which proletarian organisations are based.[17] In so doing, they initiate the unification of humanity.

And so, while revolts disrupt the old world, the rupture is its over-turning (thus, the standard term for the rupture: revolution). This overturning has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, which distinguish it from revolt. For example, the scale of revolt is typically restricted; whereas the revolution today can only mean seven billion people trying to find ways to reproduce themselves, in non-capitalist ways. Of these billions, even an active minority would have to number in the hundreds of millions (that is to say, if individuals are able to determine the course of events, that in itself suggests that we are still far from a revolutionary moment). The revolution will require that billions of individuals draw diverse aspects of their lives into an open struggle, which ends in those individuals calling the totality of their lives into question. The rupture calls life itself into question, but in a way that allows us to carry on living.

According to *Théorie Communiste*, the revolutionaries of an earlier era did not have a concept of rupture. They supposedly saw revolution as a matter of struggles "growing over", that is, of struggles extending themselves across society and intensifying towards a tipping point, when they would spill over into a revolution. In the course of the twentieth century, many theories of this kind were proposed (the term itself apparently comes from Trotsky, but the idea is more common among autonomists). However, those sorts of theories were not very common.[18] Most revolutionaries, including Trotsky, drew their own distinction between revolt and rupture.

So, for example, in Italy, in the course of the *bienno rosso* (1919–20), when revolution seemed like a real possibility, Amadeo Bordiga, future leader of the Italian Communist Party, announced the following:

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itself holding the levers to power, after which point it is only a matter of figuring out what to do with it. Instead, the revolution will be the project of a fraction of society, i.e. the party, which solves the coordination problem in the only possible way – by abolishing class society.

[17] This is a difficult point to make rigorously. It is clear that, insofar as spontaneously self-organising struggles build their own foundations, they often connect individuals to one another in ways that belie their unity-in-separation for capital. For example, individuals may occupy a government building, even though they have no everyday connection to it. In so occupying, they may organise themselves according to a shared trait that has no meaning, for capital. The key point here is that spontaneously organising struggles disrupt the unity-in-separation of capital, but they do not overcome it, in a permanent way. Thus, the tendency of distinctions of gender, race, nationality, etc., to reappear in the square occupations of 2011, that is, precisely where those distinctions were supposed to have been rendered inoperable.

[18] The insurrectionists may be the true inheritors of the 'growing-over' theory of revolution. For them, the intensification of existing struggles is already the rupture. The concept of revolution is thereby abandoned as overly 'holistic' – a false universalisation in time and space. In fact, struggles universalise themselves – not by merging together, so that everyone can march behind the one true banner – but rather, by posing universal questions about the overcoming of this world. In that way, struggles themselves construct the universal, not as an abstract object of an idealised revolution, but as the concrete object of an actual revolution.

> We would not like the working masses to get hold of the idea that all they need do to take over the factories and get rid of the capitalists is set up councils. This would indeed be a dangerous illusion. The factory will be conquered by the working class — and not only by the workforce employed in it, which would be too weak and non-communist — only after the working class as a whole has seized political power. Unless it has done so, the Royal Guards, military police, etc. — in other words, the mechanism of force and oppression that the bourgeoisie has at its disposal, its political power apparatus — will see to it that all illusions are dispelled.[19]

In essence, Bordiga (like many communists in the twentieth century) argued as follows: by taking over the factories and demonstrating in the street, it is sometimes possible to bring society to a halt, but not to produce a rupture. The rupture will only take place when proletarians risk civil war, in an attempt to permanently transfer power to themselves. It followed that the primary task of the party was, at the critical moment, to distribute arms among the workers and to call for a transfer of power to these armed bodies. Indeed, "arming the workers" might be thought of as the key "programmatist tactic" (other such tactics included establishing political bodies of recallable delegates).[20] The link between this concept and Bologna's, quoted earlier, should be apparent.

Thus, it is clear that the revolutionaries of an earlier era did have a concept of rupture (the revolutionary was the one who, in every opening, pronounced De Sade's famous slogan: "one more effort, comrades…"). Nevertheless, it is true that, for us, such a concept is inadequate. A revolution today cannot take place by means of armed bodies taking state power — or even over-turning it, according to the anarchist conception — with the goal of setting up a society of associated workers. Even if that sort of revolution remains appealing to some, it is predicated on the will and the capacity of workers to organise around their identity as workers, instead of around other identities (i.e. nationality, religion, race, gender, etc). Workers only share a common interest to the extent that they can project a universal solution to their coordination problem ("an injury to one is an injury to all" is not universally true).

Facing up to the pressures of competitive labour markets, workers did construct their common interest, in the course of the twentieth century, by building workers' organisations, which were linked together through the workers' movement. That movement forged — from among a multitude of specific workers' experiences — an actually general interest. But the actuality of this general interest was predicated on two things. First, it was predicated on winning real gains, both within capitalist societies and against an old regime, which sought to exclude workers from the polity. Second, it was predicated on a lived experience of many proletarians: they identified with their work, as the defining trait of who they were (and they imagined that, with the extension of the factory system to the entire world, this identity would become a common human condition). Workers felt that they shared a common destiny as the vital force of modern society, which was growing all the time.

[19] Amadeo Bordiga, 'Seize Power or Seize the Factory?' (1920).

[20] Certain communists have taken a different tack. They take it as their primary task to identify and infiltrate what they perceive to be the 'key' economic sector(s), the part that represents the whole. Militants within that sector will supposedly be able, at the right moment, to intervene decisively, to produce the revolution, or else to prevent the betrayal of the revolution (which was supposed to come from elsewhere). See, for example, Monsieur Dupont's *Nihilist Communism*, on the question of the 'essential proletariat' (Ardent Press 2002). These are false solutions to real problems, but again, for that reason, they will find their actual solutions in time.

All that is now in the past. A massive accumulation of capital has made the productive process ever more efficient, rendering workers ever more superfluous to it. Under these conditions, capitalist economies have grown slowly, due to chronic overproduction; at the same time, most workers find it hard to win any real gains, in a context of high levels of unemployment. Moreover, this superfluity of workers has found its correlate in a changed experience of work itself. Insofar as they are employed, most proletarians do not identify with their work as the defining trait of who they are. Either they are peripheral to a more or less automated production process — and thus, cannot see themselves as the vital force of modern society — or else they are excluded from production altogether, and toil away in dead-end service sector jobs. This is not to say that there aren't still proletarians who dream of doing similar jobs in a better world, where they could organise their work democratically. It is just that this minority can no longer claim to represent the future of the class as a whole — especially when so many proletarians are un- or underemployed, or else are lost in the informal sector, where seventy percent of workers are self-employed, because they cannot find jobs.

As a result of these transformations, the revolutionary horizon of struggle is itself transformed. It must be something other than what it was. We can neither remain who we are, nor take over things as they are. That is all the more true, insofar as the apparatuses of modern society (factories, networks of roads and airports, etc.) — which proletarians helped to build — have turned out not to presage a new world of human freedom. On the contrary, those apparatuses are destroying the very conditions of human life on earth. It is difficult to say, therefore, what would constitute a communising tactic, replacing the programmatist tactic par excellence, namely the "arming of the workers" or "generalising the armed struggle". We know what those tactics will have to do: they will have to destroy private property and the state, abolish the distinction between the domestic sphere and the economy, etc. But that tells us nothing about the tactics themselves. Which will be the ones that break through?

In the end, communising tactics will turn out to be whichever tactics finally destroy the link between finding work and surviving. They will reconnect human beings and their capacities, in such a way as to make it impossible to sever that connection ever again. In the course of struggle, a process may unfold, somewhere in the world, which seems to go all the way, to bring an end, once and for all, to capitalist social relations. Just as today, proletarians adopt and adapt whatever tactics resonate with them, so too, some proletarians will adopt these communising tactics. However, these tactics will not extend the struggle. On the contrary, they will split that struggle open, turning it back against itself.

If there are such breakthroughs, anywhere in the world, it is possible to imagine that, as a feature of partisanship, communist parties will form (or will align themselves with the new tactics). They may not call themselves parties, and they may not refer to their tactics as communising tactics. Nevertheless, there will be a separation out of those who, within struggle, advocate and apply revolutionary tactics, whatever they may be. There is no need to decide in advance what the party will look like, what should be its form of organisation, if it should be formalised at all, or whether it is just an orientation shared among many individuals. Communism is not an idea or a slogan. It is the real movement of history, the movement which — in the rupture — gropes its way out of history.

## Conclusions

The concept of communisation marks out an orientation: an orientation towards the conditions of possibility of communism. The concept enjoins us to focus on the present, to discover the new world through the critique of everything that presently exists. What would have to be overturned or undone, in order for communism to become a real force in the world? There is both a deductive and inductive way of approaching this question: (1) what is capitalism, and therefore, what would a communist movement have to abolish, in order for capitalism to no longer exist? (2) What, in the struggles and experiences of proletarians, points towards or poses the question of communism? In fact, our answers to this first question are shaped by our answers to the second. Proletarians are always fighting capital in new and unexpected ways, forcing us to ask, again, "What is capital, such that people are trying to destroy it, like that?" The theory of communisation sets itself up, in relation to these questions, as a set of propositions, regarding the minimal conditions of abolishing capitalism. These propositions can be enumerated, briefly, as follows:

(1) The unfolding crises of capitalism cause proletarian struggles both to proliferate and to transform in character. (2) These struggles tend to generalise across society, without it becoming possible to unify concurrent struggles under a single banner. (3) In order for fundamentally fragmented struggles to pass over into a revolution, communising measures will have to be taken, as the only possible way of carrying those struggles forward. (4) It will thus become necessary to abolish class divisions — as well as the state, distinctions of gender and race, etc.— in the very process of revolution (and as the revolution). Finally, (5) a revolution will therefore establish, not a transitional economy or state, but rather, a world of individuals, defined in their singularity, who relate to one another in a multitude of ways. This last point will hold true, even if those individuals inherit a brutal world, ravaged by war and climate catastrophe — and not a paradise of automated factories and easy living.

We must recognise that this set of propositions is rather weak: a starting point rather than a conclusion. It should also go without saying: these propositions tell us nothing about whether a communist revolution will actually happen. Having gone through a conceptual topology of revolutionary strategy, the question remains: does any of this affect what we do? Do these reflections have any strategic consequences?

Today, those who are interested in revolutionary theory find themselves caught between the terms of a false choice: activism or *attentisme*. It seems that we can only act without thinking critically, or think critically without acting. Revolutionary theory has as one of its tasks to dissolve this performative contradiction. How is it possible to act while understanding the limits of that action? In every struggle, there is a tension towards unity, which is given in the drive to coordinate disruptive activity, as the only hope of achieving anything at all. But, in the absence of a workers' movement — which was able to subsume difference into a fundamental sameness — this tension towards unity is frustrated. There is no way to solve the coordination problem on the basis of what we are. To be a partisan of the rupture is to recognise that there is no collective worker — no revolutionary subject — which is somehow hidden but already present in every struggle.

On the contrary, the intensification of struggles reveals, not a pre-existing unity, but rather, a conflictual proliferation of difference. This difference is not only suffered; it is often willed by participants in struggle. Under these conditions, the weak unities of this or that anti-government front — which are imposed on so many differences — merely offer yet another confirmation that,

within struggle, we remain disunited. In that sense, we might even say that, today, all struggles lead away from revolution — except that it is only through activation, intensification, and failed attempts at generalisation that unification may one day become possible, in and through a revolutionary rupture with struggle itself.

This observation raises a paradox. There is nothing for us to do but support the extension and intensification of struggles. Like everyone else engaged in struggle, we may seek to introduce a new content into our struggles. We may try out new tactics and forms of organisation (or else, we might adopt tactics and forms of organisation from elsewhere, when they occur in a way that resonates with us). We may put forward what we believe to be the watchwords of the moment. In any case, we understand that the limits of our own power are the limits of everyone else's participation: the extent of their coordination, the degree of their mutual trust, and the intensity of their disruption.

But we also recognise that, as we participate in struggles — as we organise ourselves — we are pushed towards or fixed into identities from which we are fundamentally alienated. Either we can no longer affirm those identities, or else do not want to, or else we recognise that they are sectional and for that reason impossible to adopt among the broad mass of humanity. Struggles pit us against one another — but often not for reasons that we experience as absolutely necessary. On the contrary, sometimes, we come to see our differences as inessential — the result of a fractious differentiation of status or identity, within capitalism.

In facing these limits of struggle, we are completely powerless to overcome them. The trouble for activists is that an awareness of limits appears as loss and defeat. Their solution is to desperately force a resolution. We recognise, by contrast, that the fight will not be won directly, by leaping over the limits. Instead, we will have to come up against those limits, again and again, until they can be formalised. The impossibility of solving the coordination problem — while remaining what we are, in this society — must be theorised within struggle, as a practical problem. Proletarians must come to see that capital is not merely an external enemy. Alongside the state, it is our only mode of coordination. We relate to one another though capital; it is our unity-in-separation. Only on the basis of such a consciousness—not of class, but of capital—will revolution become possible, as the overturning of this society.

In the meantime, what we seek is not premature answers or forced resolutions, but rather a therapy against despair: it is only in wrestling with the limit that proletarians will formalise the question, to which revolution is the answer. As it stands, ours is thus a meagre offering, based more on speculative argument than hard evidence. Except among a tiny minority of participants, a concept of communisation (or a concept bearing its essential characteristics) has not yet arisen within struggles. We are still speaking of a new cycle of struggle in the worn-out language of the old. We can refine that language as best we can, but we have to recognise that it is nearly, if not completely exhausted.

Endnotes
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