

From one crisis to another

An interview with Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard

Helen Arnold, Daniel Blanchard, Fabien Delmotte

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Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard introduced Murray Bookchin's thinking to France in 1976. In 2019 they participated in the publication of a collection of that author's texts, "*Pouvoir de détruire, pouvoir de créer*", along with Renaud Garcia and Vincent Gerber. The work of this libertarian thinker has attracted increasing attention in France recently.

However, I did not want to limit the interview with these friends to that subject, but to exchange on their trajectory in general, with their commitments over the years. Social criticism and the desire for emancipation have remained central concerns in their lives. In the 1950s and 60s, they were members of the group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and in 2007, along with other former members, they produced an anthology of the writings from the journal.

Although we will also discuss current affairs, such as the Yellow Vests movement and the management of the Covid crisis, I felt it worthwhile to explore their significant personal and collective experiences. Not only out of curiosity for the past, but also in the hope that, given the high stakes involved, this will elicit relevant questions about our present crisis.

Further, we must remember that Daniel Blanchard is a prolific writer, whose literary work includes poetry and narrative fiction, as well as explicitly social and political thought. It includes essays such as *Crise de mots* and *Debord dans le bruit de la cataracte du temps*, as well as texts on Castoriadis and May 68. The tone of these writings is characteristically personal, associating general ideas with his own contingent, subjective experience, in which his doubts and anxieties are never hidden, which helps to put the reader on an equal footing with the author.

Although I was well aware that this vast panorama would not allow us to delve deeply into each of the subjects discussed, I wished to have Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard reflect on their trajectory in connection with their thinking on the present situation. In the hopes that this will encourage each of us to think about our future – and, you never know – maybe even contribute to our determination to take repossession of it collectively.

Fabien Delmotte

THE BEGINNINGS

To begin, perhaps we could talk about how you first took interest in politics, with the perspective, or perhaps, the “sensitivity” that has continued until today.

Daniel Blanchard : I had a childhood experience that was particularly important in that respect. During the summer of 1944, when I was ten, my father taught at the Barcelonnette junior high school, in the Alps, and he was in the Resistance. He was also secretary of the Communist Party cell for the Ubaye valley. In the spring of 1944, the Germans came to suppress the Resistance, which controlled some parts of the valley. My father had taken to the Maquis. My mother took me, my younger brother, another young boy and a Jewish woman who was hiding in our house, and went into the mountains. After two or three days of wandering about, we finally met my father high up in the mountains. It was an extremely intense experience for a child. We arrived in a hamlet where the inhabitants told us : “You are recommended by so-and-so, there is a house for you, we don’t ask any questions”. They were “Neolithic” peasants (*laughter*), intelligent, ingenious and generous, who cultivated a piece of land in the midst of steep wilderness. For me it has always represented an elementary paradise. We kept in contact with them. Later, my family left for Paris.

Helen Arnold : I am from the United States. I had a very important first experience too, when I was thirteen. My parents didn’t know what to do with me during the summer, I think, so they sent me to an unusual summer camp organized by a couple of teachers, in northern NY State. The idea was to rehabilitate a hamlet where some Shakers had lived. It’s a little-known sect, that ceased to exist because they banned all sexual relations, so they had no children. They adopted some, and when they stopped doing so, that was the end ! On the other hand, men and women shared a rich intellectual and social life : they danced, sang, philosophized and worked together. Their motto was “beautiful simplicity”. But the teachers who ran the camp had other ideas in mind : self-management. So we were a group of young people aged thirteen to about sixteen who rebuilt the village, and the work was organized very collectively. We gathered under the “arbre à palabres” [a tree where discussions were held] every evening, and elected a mayor every week... There was useful work in the morning and artistic work in the afternoon, and every week you chose your job for the week. It wasn’t just the democracy that impressed me. Retrospectively, I see that it was also that work was considered important; the way we worked and organized our work and did things collectively.

SOCIALISME OU BARBARIE

How did you join SouB ?

HA : I think we are the only two people who were recruited by a flyer ! That's how both of us discovered the group.

DB : I was a history student. I was very interested in contemporary music, and art. I must say, I met artists in my parents' house. I had a rather good friend with whom I mostly shared an interest in contemporary music. And one day, in the fall of 1956, he said " look at this, its hilarious !" And he handed me a flyer that I pocketed and read later. It denounced both the repression of the Hungarian workers' councils and the Anglo-French attack on the Suez Canal, nationalized by Nasser. For me it was a sort of revelation.

I don't know if people today realize how blocked the world was then. There were two blocks, but it was also thinking that was blocked. If you were on one side you were completely against the other side.

My relations with my father had become terrible. He was violently anti-communist ! (*laughter*). He had discovered the reality of the CP when he moved to Paris. In short, that flyer showed me all of a sudden that there was a way out. It was signed "Socialisme ou Barbarie". I thought : "What is this incredible thing?" I contacted them. I went to a public meeting with Claude Lefort, just back from a trip to Poland, absolutely enthusiastic, very eloquent. Then I met people who thought I had made some interesting remarks during the discussion, (*laughter*) and I met Véga, in particular, who had been a POUMist who had participated in the civil war in Spain, in the Spanish revolution. He had joined the group after having been a bordiguist. Still and all, his views were quite Leninist. He sounded me out to discover what I thought, to suggest books to read. After some time, having read the earlier issues, I joined the group. That was in 1957.

There was a little attention paid to the group because of the Hungarian question. It was no longer Martian to talk about workers' councils. All of a sudden, there were the Hungarian councils, a workers' movement in Poland...There was a little interest, the group was less limited to its own members, it began to have some echo in the outside world.

Incidentally, you were already interested in poetry, at the same time, maybe in surrealism ?

DB: yes, of course. But I didn't identify with the surrealist movement, although I had read the surrealist documents, passionately : in high school, with my comrades, we played at "cadavre exquis" during our French courses (*laughter*). But yes, I was writing poetry already.

And you, Helen, how did you join SouB ?

HA : I arrived in France in 1959 with a group of students. I spent a year in France in a very official study program. Instead of being registered in any one university, you could choose to go to one course here, another there (Sciences Po, the Sorbonne, etc.) and learn about France. There was one guy in that group who was already very political. I didn't have the slightest political idea or culture, but I did have the background I spoke about earlier – and my rebellion. That friend

told me “Look, I saw a very interesting flyer, I’m going to meet those people”. He showed it to me, and I found it brilliant. It was the first time I heard any political reasoning that talked about the modern world, about how things are going now, and not giving some completely abstract vision.

The name of the group and the journal – Socialisme ou Barbarie – are now relatively famous, although it had little following –it was confidential - throughout its existence. And yet, aside from some rather vague notions, its ideas are still relatively little known or taken into consideration, and some should undoubtedly be brought back to our memories. Talking about flyers, you point out that the group aimed at being politically active, and in fact at one point in its existence it considered constituting a new organization. But its main purpose was to produce a journal, an “organ for revolutionary criticism and orientation”, which demanded specific occupations. First, could you tell me how the meetings were organized, in order to accomplish those various tasks ? Although obviously things may have changed over the years, with more emphasis on theory, at the end.

DB : there were meetings every week. The ritual of the meetings was very ordinary.

HA : for those times...

DB: there were items on the agenda : information, tasks... and generally, a big discussion around some texts for the journal. I must say, the level of the discussions was remarkable. When I joined, there was Castoriadis, Lefort was still there, not Lyotard at that time. They were people who had a serious political culture. There was a guy I liked a lot, Philippe Guillaume, who was also a former Trotskyite, enormously cultivated in science and technology as well as in politics.

HA ; but there were also practical problems to deal with. Xeroxing flyers, etc.

DB : When we began to put out a Xeroxed newspaper – *Pouvoir Ouvrier* – that took a lot of work. The group was composed of a few dozen militants. The question of becoming an organization mostly arose in 1958. Lyotard had been part of the group before that, but he came to the Paris area at that time. There was a rush of Lyotard’s students who wanted to join... Also, De Gaulle’s *coup d’état* had just taken place, with the change in the regime, which gave us an opportunity to become more public. I remember that at the time, with Sébastien Diesbach, we were constantly at the Sorbonne, discussing with Clastres, with people from the UEC (Communist Students’ Union) who said “We agree with you completely, on the theoretical level, but we can’t leave the party of the working class.” We were a bit more visible in the outside world at the time. Castoriadis and Vega then raised the idea that we no longer be simply the editorial committee of a journal, but consider being the embryo of a revolutionary organization, with regulated functioning. So Henri Simon – another important member, with his own contribution and his experience as employee in a large insurance company – and Lefort thought that was the beginning of bureaucratization, a return to Trotskyism, and they left the group.

When looking at the history of the group, one is tempted to judge the hiatus between the political organization (or, really, the embryo of one) and its ideas on a number of

issues. **That the organization existed was a good thing, but it did not live up to its ambitions.**

HA : no.

DB : very true.

On the other hand, it seems that a number of the group's ideas, and its very specific approach, which are really inseparable from the need for action, are still very worthwhile. In the preface you wrote, Daniel, to the anthology of texts from the journal, you immediately stress the "passionate intellectual adventure" elicited by the group's constant endeavors to see and comprehend the real situation, its ceaselessly renewed efforts. To quote you : "Although it was anchored in the tradition of political groups, its adventurous spirit differentiates it from so many extreme or ultra-left groups who tenaciously attempt to fructify a small capital, generally inherited, of unchanged, if not to say fixed ideas, to carve a place for themselves on a miniature, and in fact fictitious, political scene". You emphasize the group's determination to practice critical analysis, constant reappraisal.

DB : And the passionate exploration of modernity. I must say there was tremendous curiosity, especially for what was happening the United States. I say that in the preface as well. We saw ourselves somewhat like Marx and Engels looking at England to discover what was going to occur throughout the world. For us it was the United States. Chaulieu (Castoriadis), Guillaume and some others read a lot of American literature on industrial sociology. And we had relations with a group in Detroit, *Correspondence*. It was a very small group, but at least one of them worked in the automobile industry in Detroit, which was an important point. They had first-hand experience of the reality of American factories and of the history of the grassroots workers' movement there. For us that was extremely valuable.

There as also Daniel Mothé in your group, who wrote about the nature and organization of factory work based on his own experience as a worker.

DB : He was one of the very important members of the group. He worked at the Renault plant. He was a toolmaker there. He wasn't on the production line, or even an OS [*specialized – actually meaning unspecialized – worker*]. I knew him very well. I spent a great deal of time with him over a rather long period. He talked about work in the factory, it was very interesting.

HA : There were also other first-hand accounts of the working class condition : "*L'ouvrier américain*" (by a comrade from *Correspondence*) , and "*La vie en usine*" de Georges Vivier, that covered several issues, starting from issue 11.

But why, given the orientation of the group, was there so much interest in what went on in factories ?

DB : The idea was to give flesh to the idea that the working class is able to manage production. The idea of workers' management, of self-management, was basic to the group's program. That

program had to be grounded in a real comprehension of the lives of workers and of their collective managerial abilities.

HA : Basically, it is the conception that workers are intelligent people, capable of taking care of their own affairs and of society as a whole.

DB : We were interested in the initiatives and social – not just individual – creativity found in revolutionary episodes, like in Hungary in 1956, but also in everyday life. There was also the notion that over and beyond the Marxian scheme of exploitation, with the extortion of surplus value, you had to pay attention to workers' real-life situations. It was the North Americans who showed us how workers are constantly obliged to take charge of everything that is not planned for by the formal organization of production. In the most concrete tasks, in work, there is a combat against the hierarchy and the imposed norms, which elicits embryonic, conflicting forms of working class management of the productive process. We placed emphasis on the questioning of concrete working conditions and the equalitarian nature of demands, which contradict the formal organization of the factory.

That is connected with a specific way of conceiving the “crisis” of capitalism. You stressed the “contradictory nature” of the system : it attempts to reduce people to pure order-takers, but it actually cannot function if it succeeds in doing so. So it must rely to some extent on participation, actually even try to elicit it, as if those in charge wanted both participation and the exclusion of the population. However the group counted more on the unpredictable consequences of working class struggle rather than on crises resulting from the objective mechanisms of capitalism.

DB : There was a passionate search for the critical dimension of reality, of the crisis with which it is pregnant. But without any objective, external, heteronomous determinism, which could impose a revolution and autonomy. We did not count on an inevitable economic crisis, as so many Marxists do. It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a free society to come into existence. The crisis in capitalism, its fundamental crisis, so to speak, resides in the fact that it refuses people's autonomous activity, and at the same time requires it, because it cannot survive without it. It is the struggle for autonomy that is the critical analyzer of this society, not some so-called science whose objectivizing rationality submits us to the realm of necessity. Autonomy is what underlies the prospect of revolution, not as a fatality, but as a possibility. Capitalism reigns as an objective, blind mechanism, or portrays itself as such. Yet class war is not only the motor of the evolution of modern societies : it is their very concrete crisis, the analyzer, the matrix in which the project of a revolutionary – which is to say autonomous – society takes shape. We didn't think of revolution as the end of history in some definitive form, but as the idea of freedom, of the creation of a future created collectively. Criticism of society was developed by the understanding and systematization of what constitutes the crisis of that society, which is to say the criticism formulated by its members, not only during the large collective movements but also on an everyday basis, through their practices, first of all at work, but also in every situation in which people are subjected to hierarchical subordination and arbitrary bureaucracy.

In that sense, the importance of “Socialisme ou Barbarie” was not limited to its criticism of the “communist block”, to which its ideas are often reduced, inasmuch as they

are linked to anti-totalitarian currents of various sorts. One cannot understand its positions without referring to its analyses of “bureaucratic capitalism”, which contribute to the redefinition of class war.

DB : That was essential. The basis of the class analysis of the so-called “socialist” or “communist” countries was to demonstrate that in the last analysis the domination of capital over labor is not necessarily grounded in the private property of the means of production, but that it can be exerted collectively by an organization such as the Communist Party. In 1946, the “Chaulieu-Montal tendency” (Castoriadis-Lefort) within the internationalist communist party (PCI) opposed the Trotskyist thesis of a degenerated workers’ State. It was not a fundamentally socialist society in which power had been confiscated by a parasitic bureaucracy because of a temporary defeat of the world revolution. Lefort and Castoriadis asserted that it was a new form, a new type of class society and of exploitation. It was the idea that the bureaucracy is a class and not merely an epiphenomenon. Property is a legal form; what is essential is the effective, exclusive control of the means of production, including the work force. This led us to relegate the objective mechanisms resulting from the intrinsic necessities of capital and of the imposition of the merchandise-form for all exchanges to the background. The main motor of history is class war, which is not only the relation between capital and abstract labor as analyzed by Marx. It no longer is analyzed as opposing the rich and the proletarians, but order-givers and order-takers, There is therefore class struggle in bureaucratic regimes. The parties and trade unions, which are vassals of the CP, are not tools for the emancipation of the workers and the people as a whole, but they are the germs of a future bureaucratic class and instruments serving its interests.

That criticism was not at all confined to the Soviet Union or similar regimes ; it was equally important to criticize western capitalist societies, whose bureaucratic dimension was stressed as well. Obviously, we are talking about a period of capitalism that was very different, in many respects, from what was later called “neoliberalism”. At the same time, “Socialisme ou Barbarie”, but also on a much larger scale, May 68, remind us that it was far from “ideal”. And the two periods share many problems. What were the main themes of your criticism of capitalism at the time, and what are the main differences you would stress with respect to today ?

DB : The time when the group existed was a period that ended in the 1980s, what has been called the “Fordist compromise”. It had already succeeded in overcoming the crisis of 1929 and the ‘30s, then reconstruction after World War II. For western capitalism, it took the form of a compromise : capital retained complete control of society, but the workers’ income rose grossly at the same pace as the productivity of labor. In addition, some institutions in the fields of education and health enabled people at large to have access to some essential services such as basic education, health care, retirement, etc. Everything that neoliberalism is presently trying to eliminate. Obviously this was seen as an improvement: the working classes no longer lived in absolute poverty, but it was not liberation. The group analyzed that period as a rationalization of “modern” capitalism, as a requisite for it to survive, not as a threat to its survival. Domination and alienation continued to prevail.

The definition of the conflict between classes as an opposition between order-givers and order-takers relegated the strictly economic Marxist vision to the background. In a certain sense, but

not explicitly; we converged with the essence of anarchist thinking based on the struggle against domination. The criticism of relations within production remained central, but not exclusive. Social life, before 68, seemed very standardized, doomed to the unlimited expansion of the production of material goods, and therefore of capitalism and its domination. Everything had to be subjected to the rules of instrumentality and functionality and submitted to that absurd goal, external to the lives of “ordinary people”. Bureaucratic hierarchies were developed, divisive and rewarding servility, leading to absurdities and opacity: work without initiative or freedom to express oneself. Bureaucracy was becoming the main means of exerting domination. We wanted to produce radical criticism of “everyday life”, which enlarged the field of our concerns to the concrete organization of time and space, of relations between men and women, young people and adults, the forms and contents of teaching and culture... Leisure activities, consumption can also be alienating.

In the early 60s, there was the Free Speech Movement in some universities in the US, and youth movements everywhere – including Japan and South Korea. Those young people were protesting against their oppression by the family, work, studies, boredom and the absurdity of the existence to which they were doomed... Since then the system has recuperated some “counter-culture” oppositional movements, and big business has regained control of States and affairs. Mass unemployment, job insecurity, “exclusion”, the constant threat of social and human deterioration... Domination proceeds differently now. Capitalism cannot function without bureaucracy, but it has tackled the “irrationalities” of its functioning in production. The financierization of capitalism has prevailed over the managerial “technostructure”.

HA: The distinction between those in command and those who obey is less manifest now. The idea is to turn everyone into a small businessperson convinced that he or she is in command, and has to take all responsibility for managing to survive. Hierarchical relations persist, but they are disguised, and take the form of pseudo-liberation.

DB: You can see it within workplaces, with the analyses of how management attempts to solicit and enroll the creativity of subordinates in their work, and in fact utilizes it against them. Or when control by a hierarchical superior is replaced by a contract for the provision of services, an obligation to “come up with the goods”, the obligation to achieve results, the precise prescription of imposed behavior on a supposedly autonomous, responsible individual.

Work tends to take over all of the time and the very minds of employees. Actually, there is an increasingly totalitarian trend : the destruction of ties to other people, of live social relations, down to the very meaning of life in society. That earlier period was relatively optimistic, whereas the present period is much more desperate, fatalist and cynical. We thought the world was going to change for the better, it had to (the war had ended recently). And radicals thought, too, that they could change society radically.

This need to understand the new problems of “modern” life led to your encounter with Debord and the situationists. Tell us about that encounter.

DB: One day, there was a copy of issue 3 of the *IS* in the group’s mail. We were sorting out the mail, and I said “I’m interested. *International situationniste*, what can that be ?” And when I looked more closely, I realized that it interested me enormously. It was the period when we were talking

about the need to extend the field of criticism of daily life to city planning, leisure activities, etc. And precisely, the situationists' critique of art and culture led directly to a utopia of liberated life. They intended to go beyond art and wanted the liberation of desires, subversion, the negation of repressive, deadly order, to create situations, that is, to disrupt and reinvent everyday life, to experiment poetic practices here and now. When I saw that I decided to write to them.

I wrote, and I made an appointment with Debord in a café. We each carried our journal, so we could recognize each other. After that, we began an ongoing conversation, strolling around Paris; it was endless... After never-ending wandering and conversations with Debord and Michèle Bernstein day and night, all of a sudden I said, "Listen, we should write down the points on which we agree". He concurred, and said "you make a first draft". Afterwards, he added some points, modified others, we discussed it again. Then he said "Be my guest for dinner at a restaurant." (at the time I wasn't poverty-stricken, but almost...) And "we'll call it *Preliminaries for the definition of the unity of the revolutionary program*". It was the union of the cultural vanguard and the proletarian vanguard (*laughter*). He had a great sense for communication. Then he had it printed. I also played an idiotic minor role in one of his films, *Critique de la separation*. My role consisted in drinking a glass of Beaujolais in a café, where some girls were singing. He made ten shots of the scene, so that after a while I was completely drunk... it was bottoms up each time!

Then I left for Africa, for a teaching position. I had passed my CAPES examination in history/geography. They wanted to send me to Algeria to teach the "pieds-noirs" [*French colons*] in the midst of the war, and I had no desire to go there, and be that as it may I had no intention of embarking on a teaching career. I was fascinated by black Africa, I had written articles on it for the journal. So I decided "I'll go there". I went to Guinea [*Conakry*] which had just chosen to become independent, and I spent one school year in Peul country. That too was very important for me. When I returned, I learned that Debord had joined the group then that he had resigned (*laughter*). We met again. I had to leave for my military service, and Debord had just returned from it. He said "I stayed for three weeks, if you stay for less I'll invite you to dinner, if not, you'll pay for dinner". I stayed for five weeks, but when I returned I found him in another state of mind. "no, no, its over" That was the end, all of a sudden, our relationship was over.

CRISE DE MOTS

It is impossible, of course, to review all of the episodes of the life of the SouB group. Both of you sided with Castoriadis, after another split, provoked by his analyses of the new stakes of modern capitalism. Emphasis was placed on people's apathy, their withdrawal from public affairs. Castoriadis called it "privatization", which had some relation to the idea of bureaucratic capitalism that tends to make people irresponsible and to induce a crisis making social life less and less meaningful.

Daniel, in your book *Crise de mots*, published in 2012, there is a text that relates your gradual withdrawal from the group. You express reserves about the period following the split, leading up to its self-dissolution in 1967. You speak of your increased interest in poetic writing, at that time, but you also try to understand what makes discourse truly critical, on the basis of that experience. Can you talk about the content of those thoughts and that time in your evolution?

DB: The text “Crise de mots” (which gives its title to the whole volume) is the result of the end of my experience with the group after the split, when we continued with Castoriadis. He was actually in the course of developing the ideas that he published later in *L’Institution imaginaire de la société* [*The imaginary institution of society*]. At that time there was Mothé, who talked about his factory from time to time, but in fact the group’s main activity boiled down to listening to Castoriadis discussing his new theories – which were very far-reaching and raised some very serious issues, since it was nothing less than a break with Marxism. Most of the time I had nothing to say, but that was not the problem. Above all, I felt that I was losing contact with what was alive in language. We listened to Castoriadis, who spoke on a high level of abstraction and generalization... So I withdrew from the group. I had the impression of being on a highway of thought. You cross all sorts of places without ever being in any one.

I found myself in a state of aphasia, with the impression of having lost a living contact with language. I still wrote papers for the journal, but they were routine ; I applied the theory. At that point I withdrew from the group and after a while I felt the need to recover a true contact with my own language again with its expressive possibilities. I began to write small texts, to be in contact with a living language. After a while, I sent them to Francis Ponge, because he was the father of a childhood friend of mine. I also liked his writing very much. He sent me an extremely warm letter, which encouraged me enormously. He sent my texts to a journal that was just starting, *L’Ephémère*, in which André Du Bouchet, Yves Bonnefoy and several other poets participated. The texts were published, and that did a lot to encourage me to continue writing.

By ’68 I had taken quite some distance from the group. But I hadn’t broken with it, my relations were friendly. I must admit that the company of Castoriadis – we called him Corneille – had been very stimulating, in the past. He had a wonderful theoretical and intellectual imagination. We spent evenings at his home where we joked, playing little slightly perverse games, drinking whisky from the OECD where he worked. It was he who introduced me to jazz. After the end of the group we met much less frequently, but our friendship remained. I think that my “crisis” reflected the crisis in the group’s activity. The Hungarian revolution had validated and given new vitality to SouB, which I thought expressed views capable of receiving and amplifying innumerable, scattered voices.

Speech has a critical efficacy when the movement that gives it impetus enters into resonance with the movement it reveals in the real world, when it surges and is shaped as analogous to the crisis in reality – a crisis that is reality, as opposed to the illusory idea of the state of this world. It supposes being at a risky point – both in front of and in contact with the existing state – from which the state of the world is no longer seen as a state, but as terminated. But we no longer revolutionized anything. Words had lost their critical efficacy, their dynamic power to uncover and be in contact with reality, for ourselves and for others. The mutism we thought we observed in society incited us to create an image in the form of a system in which the actors disappeared. We became incapable of hearing them... Reality became the corroboration of the idea instead of its dynamic foundation. Our discourse became an automat, outside of us, without us. Denouncing the alienation of everyday life to commodification, instrumentality, sham, called for assertions which would be the first act of liberation, charged with an impetus proving that freedom, like movement, is created by moving. Our voice would then have found an accent and our message a style, which is the cutting edge of something new, the strength of a breakthrough which would have made it hearable and receivable. I no longer heard the voice of autonomy. I must say that we were very isolated and all the critical elements of French society seemed to have fallen into a sort

of lethargy. But the group had lost sight of the real, concrete life of society. We didn't perceive the prodromes of '68

Before we talk about '68, let's take a look at the other texts in that remarkable collection, *Crise de mots*. You broach other issues having to do with contemporary society. For instance, you criticize the recent predominance of technical jargon over ordinary language, and the effects of a purely functional relationship to language, in the framework of the new forms of domination.

DB: There is a diffuse process of penetration in our innermost self of a language that is not spontaneously ours : it is the language of techno-scientific mastery, if not to say of the powers that be. Words enable us to find and articulate, verbally, our suffering, anxiety, indignation, revolt, to find oneself in one's own words... Language has a vital character, that represents and gives body to dignity and personal integrity, assignable to an identifiable subject, to individual or shared thought or sensitivity. To my way of thinking, poetry is a way of experimenting, a sort of critical state of the intimate being, a way of proving my freedom within and through language. It is an irrepressible movement of meaning, a perpetual beginning of speech and a call to both our reasoning and sensitive mind. Renouncing poetry is to renounce the desire for freedom: it is the fancy of being a mere juxtaposition of tools and means, both for people and things. Present society reduces language to a frenzied requirement of functionality, of instrumentality and of the obligation of equivalency through the commodification of everything.

There is a domination of technical jargon, of codes, over "natural" language, with its figurative or symbolic power, which speaks of an infinite world that opens up before us, inviting us to adventure endlessly into it. That language is a fertile matrix of social awareness of myself and of the world. The code of technical jargon in no way concerns the person who pronounces it and facilitates the handling of objects constructed by science or technology. It is not anchored in the future or in experience. It is not composed of words that are our own, as subjects : those words are replaced by a discourse given as objective. They turn us into talking machines, they enslave us to a principle of instrumentality. We situate ourselves in society with the words and categories of the social sciences, we speak of our organs in medical terms, of our state of mind in the words of psychologists. In a machine-dominated society, individuals must only accomplish their function. The objective discourse that pretends to be science confiscates at the very source any true social conscience. Social techno-science is part of a modern project of domination, which consists of petrifying, in a totally controllable state, that which is by definition project, conflict, an open future. It supplants the voice of social consciousness, of any possible society of "ordinary people". It makes us shut up. The grandiose revolutionary theories claiming to possess a complete, deep truth of the world in which we live are sterile, with no education in militancy, which is conceived exclusively in terms of knowledge and information, whereas social consciousness requires each person's personal experience.

You also attack the new reign of the "false speech" (in Armand Robin's words), which "exploits" dominated speech.

DB: the problem is not only the manufacturing of consent, as Chomsky put it : propaganda, lies, disinformation, dissimulation by specialized organs connected with the power structure and

injected unilaterally into society. Now there mechanisms that are more devious and toxic, because they are interactive. It is the extension of the representative system. Marketing, opinion surveys, the medias, the social sciences say: this gadget is the expression of your desires, this opinion is yours. It's not an authoritarian Big Brother. There's a "personalized" individual who speaks to us one to one, on the basis of speech developed by an army of investigators, surveyors, etc.; a mimed, fallacious lifeless takeover of those in power over the dominated, to manipulate them. The gadget is shaped after our desires, to make the consumer spend money and yield, politicians borrow our words to oblige us to "consent". It is exploitation of speech: speech is extracted from us in order to perfect, refine and adjust the means of domination to which we are subjected.

In the last analysis, you describe contemporary western society as basically inauthentic: it lies to itself. You quote Debord, who interests you more on that issue than as a theoretician trying to go beyond art: "He who foregoes expending his life should no longer admit his death". In what sense does society lie to itself, why does it refuse to see itself lucidly, what dissuades it?

DB: True, we live in an immensely deceitful society, which lies to itself. It claims to have a monopoly on progress and humanism, but hardly believes in them. The technical, industrial, bureaucratic apparatus galvanized by Auschwitz is the same as what we use today. But our society refuses to recognize itself in the Holocaust, the concentration camp system, the atomic bomb. The end it proclaims and pursues in practice is the reproduction of its own being, enlarged by the subjugation of all of its human resources as well as of nature as a whole to its own blind functionality. That is its sole criterion for rationality: the need for meaning is repressed and denied.

The machinization of language in that sense is a form of censorship which inhibits speech when it attempts to speak of our experience of the real world in which we live. Our contemporaries are practically aphasic when they attempt to understand the substance of their misfortune and the radical inhumanity of this society. The axiom of our society is inequality – which is to say injustice – and its mode of operation is selection. It has an arbitrary, extrinsic goal to the point of being hostile to human beings as well as to the needs of nature. Producing for the sake of production, consuming for the sake of consuming, "growth" and "development: it's meaningless but is proclaimed a necessity. We are supposed to devote our "spontaneity" to that. This meaningless goal and contradictory requirement which want us to spontaneously endorse their necessity exert an inescapable selective pressure on each of us, scrapping those who are reticent, refuse or are incapable of participating in this general mobilization. Their depreciated humanity is turned into a spectacle to stimulate other people's zeal for functioning. It's the same thing for anything innovative: thoughts, desires, gifts, singularities. Each individual is invested with the responsibility of selecting what must or can survive, to the exclusion of everything else. It is as if each of us has a manager inside: not a conscience but a calculator. Everywhere there are therapies offering alleviation of pain.

Our thoughts and desires don't count. It is ridiculous and disgusting to demand that we see ourselves as citizens of this anti-society. The impression of belonging is necessarily illusory. We must abdicate and deny our dignity and buy compensations, consolations, machines that we don't command, but just operate. Overabundance and uselessness are rampant. Consuming is a way of getting around the enterprise of dehumanization pursued by this "global mobilization"

that destroys spontaneous sociability woven by mutual recognition and replaces it by normalized exchanges of services between functional individuals. It is an outlet to get away from one's self, from one's repetitious, boring, inexistent self, which only encounters phantasies of other people, inconsistent and inauthentic. The normal mode of exchange in this society is lying, falsehood, seduction, object for object.

Those who aspire to truth are condemned to interior exile, and solitude, in the face of the present incoherent, endless stream of horror, ridicule or insignificance. An objective future that is going nowhere replaces a future of possibilities, threats and promises. Between an improbable hope and an untenable despair, we must play the petty, cheating game of the present. With a feeling of being strangers to what we are or have been: obsolete and no longer simply mortal.

Words must be found to express the suffering caused by that reality.

MAY '68 AND THE LIBERATION OF SPEECH

In a text written in 2018 on the May '68 "events", you wrote that the reign of the "false speech" can be overthrown, not by denouncing it, but by the "takeover of speech by all", as Michel de Certeau as called it. You consider that one of the remarkable aspects of '68; we'll get back to that. To begin to broach that episode, we can note that several of the themes dealt with by SouB announced May 68: criticism of bureaucracies, hierarchies, politicians, questioning of the meaning and values of the system. Even the critique of the University, which was also a situationnist theme, can be found in the pages of SouB.

DB: As for the University, the movement in the US was also extremely important. The criticism was twofold : social relations within universities, and the fact that those universities trained students to become managers of the system of domination and exploitation. Access to culture was completely monopolized and axed on the utilitarian. The example of the US counted a lot for us. We translated and published texts on it. We were prepared, then, to hear criticism of social relations within the University, as formulated by the 22nd of March movement in particular.

You were in that group, weren't you? What was your personal experience of those events? You were no longer students by then.

HA: Not by a long shot! Since we weren't students at Nanterre, we joined up with the 22nd of March when it came to Paris.

DB: I was working for French TV [ORTF] at the time... It was funny. In late April '68 (SouB no longer existed), Benno Sarel said "we have to get together!" He was an old comrade, a member of the group, who had written about Eastern Germany, worked for Unesco and travelled around the world to investigate agricultural issues. He turned up at meetings from time to time, we were glad to see him, he was an interesting, charming man. So we met at his home in a Paris suburb, a pleasant place, we chatted for a while, enjoying meeting again, seeing each other, having a drink... At the end he said: "We have to meet again! We could talk about agriculture, and all, let's meet in a month" Actually, we met on the barricades in the Latin Quarter.

HA: On that same day, Mothé and Maxie said: “But really, interesting things are going on in Nanterre. There are some young people who read our journal...”

DB: On May 3rd, when there began to be fighting in the Latin Quarter, we happened to be there. When I see people setting up barricades, I can’t resist joining them... [laughter]. We were given a flyer for a meeting at Montsouris, in a Protestant place, signed “22nd of March Movement”. We went, and were won over. We found people – Duteuil, Cohn-Bendit, etc. who had been reading SouB for a long time, because they were in a group, *Noir et Rouge*, which was very close to us. It was one of the rare anarchist groups with which we had good relations.

HA: In the “22 of March” meetings, there were people who had such broad, open views, and such an acuteness in discussing issues as we had rarely encountered.

DB: And a casualness that was very refreshing in the way the conceived activism. We were somewhat laborious, whereas they said: “We think this is what should be done now. We’ll begin to do it. If other people think it’s right, they’ll do it too. But we never consider ourselves the vanguard of the proletariat. We just do what we think is a good thing to do.” And it’s true, that was contagious. Their action had a revealing power, both when they were provocations, or exemplary actions. They awakened, stimulated consciousness. The adversary was unmasked, and betrayed his reactionary nature. They were significant, comprehensible acts that invited others to go further in the same direction.

HA: Sometimes it didn’t work... But other times...

And I imagine there was the shock and the excitement of seeing the strikes everywhere...

HA: Yes, of course. We hardly slept, we spent all our time on the streets.

DB: Paris in May 68 was extraordinary. We slept on the floor, in an occupied lecture hall... and then one day, we were at the Censier [university] building, and we saw two or three vaguely situationist friends who had an American man with them. They didn’t know much English and were looking for a translator: it was Murray Bookchin.

HA: That’s how we met Murray.

And what about the situationists, in fact?

HA: In 68 they were absolutely unbearable... They closed themselves up in the Institut Pédagogique, rue d’Ulm calling themselves the Council for Maintaining Occupations, they were a small group staying there...

DB: We lived in the Les Halles neighborhood then. We participated in a very active Action Committee in the 3rd and 4th arrondissements, and there were occasionally two or three situs who came around, left a few flyers and insulted us all, vaguely, and left... That was their activity, frankly...

HA: They looked down on us.

DB: We were activists... They were fully conscious.

HA: They felt superior, felt they knew everything.

There are some representations of May 68 that are really caricatures. Maybe you would like to correct some? Of course it was not really a revolution, either, but it is often portrayed as a movement of spoiled, irresponsible children... It is true that for today's young people, Cohn-Bendit who is now supporting Macron when he admonished the Yellow Vests doesn't give a good idea of it.

DB: He went overboard. Whereas someone like Duteuil has remained absolutely faithful to his ideas.

HA: It's incredible that he should go that far. But the assertion that it was a movement of spoiled brats is intolerable. Or that the only issue was sexual freedom... or that the movement's only contention was "everything is permissible". In Paris – that was where we were – on the streets, everywhere, people stopped to talk, to discuss what kind of society we wanted. It wasn't students, it was everyone: "we should do this, we should do that".

DB: With a sort of self-criticism: "I realize I have lived a stupid life..." Really!

HA: if it led up to a general strike, it was no accident. It is precisely the example of the students' revolt and head-on opposition to the power structure that revealed to other people the depth of their discontent, and that set the situation afire.

DB: That takeover of speech was not narcissistic talk, like on TV, but an exchange, the exploring of the social world, the discovery of the underlying equality of conditions, the beginning of solidarity. At some workplaces, there was a demand for democratic power, with everyone on equal footing. They called for control of work, freedom of expression, responsibility. There was a rediscovery of the idea of "working class democracy" that came from revolutionary movements: sovereign government by general assembly, and revocable delegates given a well-defined mandate, with a real sense of practical solidarity. It was not a revolt against work as such, but against the stupidity of living just to work. It was against the destruction of the meaning of life in society, against frustration. There was intense brotherhood, a transgression of barriers and roles (youths, manual workers, intellectuals, women). A feeling of wonder that revealed the radical nihilism of capitalism. Transgression, immediate pleasure prefigured authentic social life, without the codes that fossilize and separate, without instrumentation, with the perpetual implementation of the "faculty to begin", to use Hannah Arendt's expression. May 68 represents the beginning of the reconstitution of social consciousness. The public arena began to be invaded by a collective subject with a more or less deep consciousness of social reality, assuming the conduct of matters of public interest, directly, and equally.

VERMONT WITH MURRAY BOOKCHIN

Let's talk about Bookchin now, since you met him then. In 1971 you went to the States, to join him in Vermont.

DB: After 68, we spent our summers in the US, and we saw Bookchin, who lived in NYC at the time. We went to California, and at one point Helen decided to stay on there, but I had to go back to work. I saw Murray again in NY. He was with two or three friends who ran an anarchist journal and were very excited about the idea of moving to Vermont, which was the heart of the counter-culture. They planned to open a coffee house, which would be a meeting place. Back in France, we thought : after all we might join them and participate in the project.

Bookchin was 50 at the time. Can you describe him?

DB: He had a strong temperament, and constantly engaged in both theory and activism. He was born in 1921 among revolutionary Russian Jewish emigrants. He was a factory worker, communist at 10, Trotskyist at 15 [laughter]...

HA: then anarchist!

DB: He had some training as a technician, was a union organizer and took part in the great General Motors strike in 1945-46. He became interested in environmental issues very early, in the 1950s. He was active in the movements to "free" Blacks, women, sexual minorities, the youth movement against the Vietnam war, the ecological and antinuclear movements, the counter-culture in the 1960s and 70s. He has written on a tremendous variety of subjects including city planning, technology, ethnography, the anarchist movement, philosophy...

HA: He was not at all an academic, or a university person, although he did teach for a while, later. He was self-educated, and devoured books and thinking, theories – like many self-educated people – and a fierce debater. He was only interested in ideas: he hardly cared about the concrete world. He talked about nature, healthy life, healthy food, but in his own life he didn't give a damn. He only cared about books, discussions, and projects for political action. And friendship.

DB: We stayed in contact with him to the end. We saw him not too long before he died, in 2006. We went back to Vermont a number of times, to see him and his wife.

HA: He has not really received recognition in the US. He was very polemic, uncompromising and radical. He cut himself off from many spheres. He demanded a combination of radical anti-capitalism and an equally radical social ecology, and he was very bitter about the lack of theoretical and practical pursuit of those ideals.

Before speaking of Bookchin's ideas, could you describe your experience in Vermont in 1971? Was it very different from France?

DB: yes! There was an extraordinary atmosphere in Vermont. There were communes of all sorts (religious, political...). There was also an avant-garde theater troop, the *Living Theater*. There

were huge festivities, the music of the time was rock music, the object of real communion. No jazz. There were no Blacks. It was a white counter-culture. Among the innumerable communities of various types, there was one, the politics, including Bernie Sanders, who was a “socialist”, with Maoists who were mainly interested in the black movement and the Black Panther Party, and who exfiltrated deserters and draft dodgers to Canada. Sanders later became the mayor of Burlington, Vermont’s main city, where we lived, then governor, senator...

It must be said that Vermont is a very unusual State – a “backward” state, so to speak – that voted Republican, but in the spirit of the founders of the Republic, practically. People were extremely open and hospitable. In the old days, in New England, there was a tradition of general meetings in the large square in the middle of the village, to discuss and make decisions. In Vermont there were some remnants of that in many places. Regarding minor issues, but that held the community together.

The coffee house where we worked was in the town center. We met all sorts of people there, office workers and hippies. Often in the evening, upstairs, people played country music, both local people and hippies.

HA: You exaggerate, but it’s true that the coffee house had many interesting principles. The idea was to make it an ideal place where different types of people could meet, whereas in the States at that time it was not like in France, cafés were not places where you could stay as long as you like without renewing your drink.

There was a collective, in which all jobs were shared equally, with equal wages for all. Food was purchased locally, whenever possible, and everything was home-made, which is absolutely not evident in the US. We made twice 30 or 50 liters of soup, one vegetarian, the other “meaty”, and “customers” could cook with us. It was self-service, with lots of deserts, which is important in the States. Anyone who wanted to could make a desert and we bought it. One day someone – we never found out who – put a bowl on the counter, with a sign “If you have money, give some; if you need money, take some”. There was always some money in it. It stayed there to the end.

Daniel returned to France after a year. I stayed a while longer.

DB: I enjoyed Vermont. At first we lived in a more or less collective apartment in Burlington, then we were fed up with it and we went to a small town in the country. It was the old-fashioned society, with personal relations, and very human. One night our car broke down at midnight, in mid-winter, on a country road. It was freezing cold (-20°). We saw a light in a house at some distance, and went there, and knocked on the door, at midnight, mind you. A woman opened the door, in a bathrobe. “Yes, come in, you can use the phone.” Our NY friends didn’t believe their ears.

HA: You don’t leave someone outside at -20° in Vermont.

DB: It’s the same in the Alps.

HA: It’s still a human world. Among the people who came to the coffee house there were patients from the local psychiatric hospital. One man said that the café was the only place where he could talk, and meet people. He took money to buy a desert, saying that he would reimburse it when he got out of the hospital.

DB: Aside from the coffee house, we became friends with a very sympathetic group. A commune of former students who had become carpenters. They built houses made of wood in the New England tradition. We worked with them on a few construction projects. I said to myself: here are people who are intellectuals, like me, who wanted to learn to build with wood, and they did it. I would like to know how to produce a book. When I returned to Paris I made contact with a group of young people who were setting up a print shop – l’Imprimerie Quotidienne in Fontenay-sous-bois. I participated in that adventure for some years, and it was important for me in a number of respects. For the first time in my life I was obliged to learn to use machines: the linotype, for composing in hot metal, and the typographic printing press. They were old-fashioned machines, both very powerful and extremely delicate: the result must be a perfectly legible text. This also gave us the possibility, for both my friend Jean-Pierre Burgart and myself, to compose, set-up and print our own work, and that is a test of its exactitude and legibility.

My participation in the Imprimerie Quotidienne also led me to contribute to the journal *Utopie*, with Hubert Tonka, Isabelle Auricoste and Jean Baudrillard, in particular. And Jean-Pierre Burgart and I published eight issues of a literary and artistic review, *Liasse*. At the same time I made my living doing translations.

HA: When we returned from the US, there was a vague attempt to reconstitute the group. There was a meeting at Corneille [*Castoriadis*]’s home, and we visualized a new departure. But finally, it didn’t materialize. Still and all, there was the feeling that there might be a new surge of social movements.

DB: Yes, but no one was really ready to begin that again. It meant a big effort.

That is a period when you, Helen, were involved in the feminist movement that was developing then?

HA: Yes. I was connected to the movement in the States, and I gave the literature to my women friends, and that was very inspiring for us. I think we were among the first women here to create an all-women group to discuss our situation and our various difficulties. It was an affinity group – therefore a politicized one – with anarchists, friends from the neighborhood Action Committee, various other friends – and we discovered how ignorant we were of our own bodies, conditioned in our behavior and limited in our access to the public sphere, even as militants, with our companions. We participated in the big movements for abortion rights and the right to dispose of our own body. It was a very heady period. But we didn’t succeed in imposing the idea of small grass-roots groups in the movement: neither the MLF (Women’s Liberation Movement) and even less its *Psych et Po* [Psychoanalysis and Politics] fraction could accept that.

There would be a whole lot to say about the differences with respect to the present situation. We did not demand integration in the system – no quotas or anything – we learned to fight, to do things ourselves, we did not claim any “identity” that would freeze us in some posture. It was, after all, composed of white, middle class women who had no qualms about that. It was typically an illustration of the 22nd of March idea: we express our revolt, it’s up to others to do the same.

How were things going for Bookchin during that period?

HA: He wanted to found a theoretical journal that never saw the light. The group around the Coffee House fell apart. Actually, there was one man whose parents had lent us the money to set

the place up. After a year, he began to say that his father wanted to be reimbursed. There were no profits at all, we never had thought about reimbursing him. We functioned on a day-to-day basis. So he gradually took over, in order to pay his father back, and the group fell apart.

At that point Murray was essentially interested in the Institute for Social Ecology, which he had founded. It was a place devoted to ecological agricultural techniques, but it was also a bit interested in theory. I must say I never took much interest in it.

We can talk now about your relationship to his ideas, since it was you who introduced and first commented Bookchin on the French scene. Your latest publication emphasizes the anti-capitalist ecological dimension. How would you define his thinking, as opposed to the dominant ecological currents in France?

DB: Bookchin has done a great deal in developing a political ecological consciousness, defending nature in a perspective critical of capitalism. I have always thought that ecology could justify an undifferentiated moralizing attitude in which, to caricature, capitalists and ordinary consumers are equally guilty, and aimed at replacing social criticism and class warfare. In France, political ecology has a reformist, electoralist dimension. And its not business that will solve the global climate change... There is also those dangerous people who defend a sort of impartial dictatorship. How can that be imposed on the capitalist powers that rule the world? And what kind of life would we lead, dominated and forced to be ecologically virtuous? And therefore irresponsible. Whereas it is at the local level, and in innumerable specific forms that the ecological crisis affects human communities: which is not to say that there are not broader decisions to be made for the planet as a whole. But that implies that we create the conditions for universal, egalitarian responsibility among members of human communities. Representative democracy and bureaucratic dictatorship are incompatible with that requirement.

Like Bookchin, I think that only a society composed of individuals who are equal in real rights and conditions, and therefore equally responsible, can face up to an ecological crisis which is both planetary and infinitely diverse in its manifestations. Without being *the* solution, it is the prerequisite if we are to search for, perhaps find and implement, the infinite number of remedies required by an extremely varied ecological crisis. That demands that we be “gardeners of nature”, as opposed to the totalitarian requirements of capitalist domination of people as well as of nature. It’s not simply the environment, it is we ourselves who are affected when the air, water, our food are poisoned. It is our responsibility, we must take our fate into our hands.

You seem particularly interested in Bookchin’s positions on technique and technology, which are close to those of SouB.

DB: Yes, in fact we were in the States in 1973 when Castoriadis was asked to write the entry on “Technique” for the *Encyclopedia Universalis*. He asked us to send him Bookchin’s book, precisely. Bookchin’s idea was not at all that technology was automatically a promise of liberation for people. He was perfectly aware of the alienating and oppressive aspects of technologies. Modern science provides knowledge that can be transformed into technical inventions. We can choose among these those elements that can free us of toil. Bookchin wanted to conceive a society based on relations that exclude domination among human beings and between humans and nature. You must produce sufficient amounts of the goods required for the maintenance of human life, which

has nothing to do with the proliferation of useless objects in our “society of abundance”. The resources of technology must also be developed so that work is no longer a malediction, but an enriching experience for the mind, the imagination and our senses. It must no longer impair or destroy nature, but preserve the ecosystems and their internal equilibrium.

HA: SouB developed a critique of capitalist technology, but not of all technology as such. The best proof of that is Castoriadis’ text on the content of socialism. He shows how computers, which had just come into existence, could be used to prepare the terrain so that collective decisions could be made on the basis of objective data.

DB: There was criticism of a certain type of Marxism, call it “objectivist”. It is not the evolution of technique and of the objective relations in production that will lead to socialism via the revolution, it is social movements. No technology is socially neutral, it is always a social relationship. The assembly line is a tool to enslave and exploit workers as much as an instrument for production. But in the immense stock of scientific and technical knowledge at our disposal today, nothing prevents us from selecting procedures and devices that are compatible with the aspirations of a liberated society.

HA: All the same, I think that we are now at a point where technology has become independent, and is no longer controllable, with enormous consequences, beyond the world of work and everyday life.

In his book on *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, it’s clear that Bookchin did not drop social issues, and even that he is still interested in the question of social classes, since he combats *middle class* anarchism which is cut off from the discontent of the masses, as opposed to more reactionary currents, which unfortunately are better able to absorb it. He fears that anarchism may become a pose, both chic and harmless, at a time when millions of people are suffering from the backlash of the new economic policies (impoverishment, intensification of exploitation). He was looking for ways of furthering new popular mobilizations and at the same time refused to conceive of freedom for individuals outside of or against society or community.

HA: Absolutely. He certainly did not believe that the working class was necessarily called upon to be revolutionary. He tended to count more on youth and ecology movements. But later, he placed great emphasis on the difference between “social” anarchism and “lifestyle” anarchism. The idea is that being an anarchist is not fundamentally to be an individualist; it is to participate in movements to change society as a whole. In a society where each person is an atom, nothing can change.

He was not content to see that there were initiatives, that people participated in some action, he asked “where is it taking us?” “were the demands sufficiently radical?” What was important for him was to arrive at a result that would mean the end of capitalism.

DB: Bookchin was still in the tradition of the anarchist communes created during the civil war in Spain, and in the tradition of the great anarchist thinkers (Kropotkin, Proudhon, etc.). He wanted a completely egalitarian society, composed of communities which are autonomous for a large part of their resources, whose size was adjusted as closely as possible to their natural

environment and to the requirements of direct democracy. Those communities would federate and cooperate to solve the larger-scale problems.

And what do you think of the ideas – or let's say the strategies – of libertarian municipalism?

HA: Bookchin constantly attempted to maintain the ties between anti-capitalism, ecology, decentralization, and grassroots power. Unfortunately, I have the feeling that people are not interested in that nowadays. Murray ended up very desperate. He didn't see any advances. He tried to be positive at all costs, to find a sort of solution, or let's say a line of action that would enable him to show a way out of the present impasse. So he thought that to arrive at decentralization, etc., you had to develop municipalism, of which he developed several successive definitions. At first the idea was not at all to take foot in city halls. It was to set up counter-powers, via popular assemblies outside of the local government, and to define what that assembly would have done, or wants to do, instead. Then at some point there was the idea of perhaps participating in local elections. But at first that wasn't the point. And after that he went over to the idea of taking over town halls, of participating in local elections. I don't find that clear at all. I don't believe you can participate in the management of the present state of affairs, even at a local level, and clearly advocate the possibility of a completely different society. Not to speak of the fact that you very rapidly have to deal with the central State and the global economy.

DB: It's a long-term strategy, aimed at bringing the population to take power locally, democratically, and to exert it through direct democracy to reground the local economy on ecological bases, by gradually voiding the central State and concentrated capitalistic power of its substance. The outcome of that evolution is clearly the distance Bookchin took from the idea of revolution, the violence of which is incompatible with true social liberation. He was looking for another path to an ecological, decentralized, anarchist society. His ideas received a very negative reception at the time.

HA: I think that it's the desperate state of politics today, in France for instance, that led people to seize the idea of municipalism, distorted to mean entering or taking over local governments. Of course there was also the influence of Rojava, which has absolutely nothing to do with municipalism as it is known here, and which did a lot to make Bookchin well-known. I think that the gradualist idea of entering institutions to achieve change gradually is not an interesting horizon. You always lose, enormously. I am for general assemblies. But I think movements must start from the grass roots. The Yellow Vests for instance... The movement wasn't strong enough, but it is that type of mobilization, that spontaneity, the need to take action directly that can be interesting.

ON YELLOW VESTS AND THE HEALTH CRISIS

How did you react to the Yellow Vests movement, in fact?

DB: we were delighted.

HA: we were not like those leftists who looked down on it because it wasn't "pure", not radical enough.

DB: There was something quite marvelous about it. Total spontaneity. The idea was that it was, let us say, ordinary people, the people: not necessarily the working class, although of course there were some workers, but also housewives, retired people, all sorts of people who felt the need, all of a sudden, to gather because they were fed up... and that is really quite marvelous.

HA: It was a very mixed movement, not necessarily with the right line or going in the right direction. Convictions of all sorts. But they coped with it all, even when they didn't know where it was all going... it was very variable. There are still some people trying to continue it, but really...

DB: Let's say that it unfortunately did not lead on to fertilize something larger, broader.

HA: It's a bit the same as in '68: a limited movement that opened the dikes for all the underlying discontents and revolts, and led people to call everything into question.

We went to the demonstrations, but not the most violent ones, we're too old and not very good at fighting or running. We also participated in the group in Montreuil, after a brief attempt in Fontenay, where there are never any grass roots movements, since everything is controlled by the communist town hall and its leftist and ecologist supports. In Montreuil it was more varied and open, although mainly composed of active militants. The occupation of the Croix de Chavaux Place was quite lively at times. We also had some contact with Commercy, where the participants were very interested in Bookchin, when the first national encounter took place. But nothing came of that.

The attempts at autonomous organization going beyond the local level didn't last, and the only theme that resisted was the popular initiative referendum (RIC), which is really the opposite of any notion of real, direct participation in political life. It must also be said that an enormous number of people preferred to "participate" by proxy, and that the level of police violence was perhaps one reason, but one that doesn't explain everything.

Unfortunately the movement did not go any farther. Since then we've experienced the health crisis and the issue of how it is managed. I noticed that you signed a petition against a third confinement at the beginning of this year. How do you analyze the situation, more generally?

HA: We are into conspiracy theories, apparently... [laughter]

DB: We are perhaps in a transitional period. The situation is very serious – I mean socially and politically, not simply with respect to health. The way States took over, and confiscated practically all social life, is incredible... They even prohibited private practitioners from attempting to treat the disease under the pretext that the pharmaceutical companies had decreed that there were no remedies that worked. There was a sort of conjunction, a takeover by both the pharmaceutical companies and governments, which completely destroyed social life and the very existence of public community. And there was no reaction.

Generally speaking, I think we are in an extremely somber period, with a loss of the principle of reality. The social networks have their part of responsibility: anyone can allege he is whatever

he likes, and can say anything at all. And the principle of reality has also been abandoned by States. The worst of it, if it is true, is that there are suspicions that some scientific facts have been manipulated, that there have been frauds, but that remains to be proved. We may say that capitalism is basically absurd, profoundly irrational in organizing society, in its relation to nature, in the way it transforms what is real into value, in its determination to destroy what is real to turn it into nothing – value – which must then be converted, into valorization of value. But still and all, it needs the principle of reality and rationality. It's no coincidence that science developed at the same time as capitalism. But now, we have the impression that it is escalating into deep-seated irrationality. It is crazy and devastating. If it loses the tie with the principle of reality, it is really very disturbing.

HA: with complete infantilization of everyone, making everyone feel guilty. A demand for blind obedience, a permanent “state of war”.

DB: All of a sudden the State has a hold on subjectivity. It is the State that takes responsibility for my fear of death, and for my feeling of solidarity with my fellow creatures. That evacuates me from myself. At the same time, I am taken over, manipulated. I find there is something devastating in that.

HA: Whereas it is like for ecology, the only solution is for everyone to participate actively. The disease should be taken charge of as such, whereas it was dealt with as something that couldn't be dealt with until people's state was very serious: “Stay at home and take doliprane”. Doctors were prevented from trying to treat people. Some doctors discovered drugs that were effective or potentially effective and which should have been tested seriously, but they were prevented from saying so by the medical mafia in collusion with the pharmaceutical industry. When it should have generated a real scientific debate.

Prevention should be encouraged, and at the same time all health workers should be organized locally to spot and care for patients, as was attempted in a few places. Whereas just the opposite – paranoia – the fear of being contaminated, the injunction not to think and deformed information were encouraged. Not to mention the dictatorship of the pharmaceutical industry.

There has been much talk about the surveillance society that is being set up “thanks to” computerization, but there's not only surveillance, it's also isolation, the destruction of social life, replaced by screens. It's extremely serious and very complex, inasmuch as at the same time, everyone finds some satisfaction in it, more or less.

And as for the rest, materially speaking, it's back to business as usual. They are giving money to the airlines, oil companies, etc.

DB: and they continue to deteriorate social conditions.

What do you think of the health pass that was set up this summer?

HA: the health pass is a real subject of concern. It's the first step toward a society openly using generalized, potentially total surveillance and control – techno-totalitarian (it has almost become a platitude to say that) – and clearly perceived as such, I think. And yet, we've been on that path, cheerfully, for a while now, via smartphones and the internet, without anyone worrying very much about it. The mask of seduction, through “amusing” or “useful” gadgets has

fallen. It is easy to imagine that type of control based on fear and widespread distrust of others, can be extended rapidly with the ecological crisis. There is never any backtracking on that sort of evolution. This is not only a question of abstract, general freedom. Very concrete things are at stake, with respect to work, and its arbitrary regulation by those in power (suspended contracts with no right to compensation in case of non-vaccination), and contempt for those people who were obliged to work under very difficult conditions, sometimes although they were ill, etc. All sorts of people are obliged to police others to check the passes (that will certainly be replaced by electronic and police control, even worse). The decreeing of an absolutely unverified official truth concerning the efficacy of vaccination, depicted as an unquestionably effective weapon, and last but not least, the right of the State to interfere in everyone's health.

DB: Yes, the health pass was only the most visible part of a very extensive enterprise of social control, which did not begin with the covid crisis, but with the direct management of the highly developed societies by the possessors of capital. The destruction of the Keynesian compromise over the last forty years, the intensification of exploitation under the pressure of stockholders, the reconstitution of a stock of unemployed manpower, etc. All that requires a reinforcement of control.

So we are tending toward “barbarism”?

HA: Yes, it definitely looks that way. This crisis has given us a lot to think about, at any rate. But what will come of it?

We can hope that the Yellow Vests and the exasperation caused by the handling of the syndemia will coalesce. I think people are fed up, very generally, and the health pass was the last drop. Authoritarianism, lies and half-truths about the health crisis, Macron's reversals of position, his political incoherence, on the one hand, with his totally scornful treatment of health workers in particular, and the new laws on unemployment benefits, retirement, internal security, all those subjects of discontent that have been accumulating for so long, will come together next fall, I hope. We have never seen demonstrations as massive as the recent ones in mid-August.

Unfortunately the proximity of the presidential elections is already producing unbridled demagoguery on all sides, with an attempt by the extreme right to capture the movement, and the media cater to them. The “left” and extreme left are very cautious, like for the Yellow Vests, whereas to counter that, what we need is a movement that is very strongly oriented toward positive, inclusive values – and not just demonstrations, but also places for discussion and other types of action. I don't know whether that will happen.

DB: Will a sufficiently broad, radical social movement develop, taking all that into account? We don't see any indication of it, so far. We'll wait for the autumn “rentrée”, as we say. What we need is a new radicalism. Who will dare?

Interview by Fabien Delmotte

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