The Last Twenty Years of Social Liquidation

**Concerning the Degeneration of Revolutionary Ideals
after the End of the Working Class in the West**

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*"The present period is one of those when everything that
seems normally to constitute a reason for living dwindles
away, when one must, on pain of sinking into confusion
or apathy, call everything into question again."*[1]

On July 19, 1936 the Spanish proletariat responded to Franco's
coup d'état by unleashing a social revolution. On February 23, 1981
another coup d'état took place, one that met with the most absolute
indifference of the proletarians, who hardly bothered to change the
station on their radios or TVs. This contrast of attitudes reflects the
fact that the proletariat was in 1936 the principal social factor in
politics, while in 1981 it was not even an auxiliary factor for the
interests of others. If the coup of 1936 was directed against the
proletariat, the coup of 1981 was a settling of accounts between

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[1] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, tr. Arthur Wills and John Petrie,
Routledge, London and New York, 1958 (reprint, 2006), p. 36. [Translator's note]

different factions of power. Not even in the most alarmist analyses was the workers' predilection for struggle taken into consideration for the simple reason that it was minimal. The perpetrators of the coup d'état ignored the proletariat because it was no more than a secondary figure of political rhetoric, one that was historically finished.

During the years of the "economic transition" to the new conditions of world capitalism—the 1980s—the working class was breaking into fragments and resisting, on a local scale, its "reconversion" into a subaltern class, until the highly publicized strike of December 14, 1988, which marked its liquidation as a class. From then on it would never again express its interests independently or autonomously. The anti-nuclear and local movements had reached their peaks five years earlier. During this period the rupture between the adult workers, securely situated in the factories, and the young workers, with no prospects of secure employment, was consummated, which led to the first assemblies of the unemployed. This fracture led to the radical critique of wage labor, which was on its last legs, or, which amounts to the same thing, to the rejection of work as a human activity. This was an authentic rupture, since up until that time the conduct of the workers was based on a certain kind of work ethic. More or less by this time a youth milieu had developed outside the world of work, a milieu that whose concerns revolved around squatting, repression, counter-information, ecology, anti-militarism, feminism, etc., which received a powerful impulse from the youth movements of 1986–1987. After the definitive subordination of the workers to the new economic and political conditions of capital, the social center of gravity shifted from the factories to the spaces where young people associated with one another. In this environment and amidst the definite decline of workerist ideologies the social question lost its unitary character and dissolved, and its fragments were addressed as separate problems. The young rebels did not have a tradition of social struggles behind them, nor could they embrace a concrete Marxist or anarchist ideol-

of concern to their supporters. The solution will in part consist in a critical reappraisal of their activity that must have no other goal than that of upholding a high level of social consciousness in conditions that we know are extremely unfavorable. They will have to distill the best from historical experience, rehabilitating the traditions of the oppressed and being inspired by them. Not by making concessions to fashions, not by submitting to stereotypes, not by falling into the rut of good vibes; in short, to go straight to the root of things. However, only those can proceed along a straight line towards the root who know how to recognize this root and the knowledge that is not attached to any particular stage of life. Just as certainly as there are young people who are more repulsive than the elderly and old people who are ageless.

tion and radicalization of struggles, both of which are necessary for the appearance of significant revolutionary projects. Informality, however, does not confer immunity from bureaucracy; bureaucracy is quite capable of operating informally. Nor is it a remedy against infiltration; provocateurs know how to behave in informal environments as well as in the other kinds. It is another kind of factor that really matters: experience, human quality, intelligence…. Of course, one thing cannot be managed informally, and that is going on the offensive; unfortunately, however, we are far from being able to allow ourselves anything of that kind.

Over the course of the last twenty years, the youth milieu has not been capable of compensating for the disappearance of the workers milieu, and has in turn deteriorated due to the spectacle. This is why the *ateneos* and social centers have not even been capable of being as useful to the exploited as the trade union centers were in times past. Despite all their efforts, they have not managed to become centers for training and the dissemination of ideas, which gives rise to an air of frustration among their regular volunteers and supporters that cannot be dissimulated. What usually happens is that they learn Linux or vegan cooking in these social centers, instead of studying social history or practices of resistance against capitalism. They are not loved by the established order, but if we recall how often the trade unions were shut down in the past, it is scandalous to see just how much these social centers are tolerated, that is, just how inoffensive they are. There are very honorable exceptions with a high degree of social commitment, but even they have had to make concessions to youth culture and have had to make accommodations with their tee shirts, teenage punk rock, "performances" or computer technology. Like the old sports clubs or neighborhood associations, they have been absorbed by the dynamic of survival in a hostile environment. The logistics of knowing how to live and the pedagogy of revolt are functions that have eluded them; from a subversive point of view, no one comes out of them worse than when they went in, and this should be a matter

ogy, and beyond a vague anti-authoritarianism they did not know what to do with the set of experiences that the working class had bequeathed to them; they were the unwilling heirs of historical tasks that they could not assume given the shallowness of their critique, the instability of their supporters and the parochial nature of their environment. All their efforts to coordinate their activities, stimulate discussions and create links with urban struggles came up against the same problems: dispersion, the absence of thought, minimal levels of engagement, the lack of reference points, self-imposed isolation…. Because these problems were not resolved, the real struggles unraveled and the youth milieu stagnated and throughout its expanse a lack of definition, poseurs, street fights and alternative lifestyles became predominant. It was revealed as a transitional medium for an integrated adult life, like the university or the occupational training center. The word revolution ceased to have any precise meaning. The attempts that were made between 1989 and 1998 to overcome this theoretical impasse were purely organizational and formal, based on media campaigns and meetings, which is why over the long run they resulted in failure. Thus ended what was known as "a space of autonomy".

To reconstitute a unitary critical view of the world and to bestow content on the revolutionary project it is necessary to engage in profound reflection on the achievements and the failures of past struggles, not to mention the surprising changes undergone by capitalism, but even before analyzing all these things, we have to carry out a pitiless critique of the whole environment of the struggles themselves, its inconsistencies, its frivolity and its lack of intellectual courage, in order to purify it of both its sentimental bourgeois traits as well as its militant clichés and practices. This was not done, or it was not done effectively, and the milieu deteriorated, merging with the postmodern left and third world nationalism, and with those who tried to reconstruct as quickly as possible a new "civil" social space, the terrain of civic platforms and neighborhood associations, abandoned by the parties and trade

unions which became embedded in the apparatus of domination. The demonstrations against the Gulf War and against NATO, the campaigns for the 0.7%, for the guaranteed minimum income and for the Zapatistas, were the first tricks of this project of integration into institutional politics that crystallized in 1997 in the "civil society movement". New "platforms" were created, "spaces" were liberated, "collectives" and "networks" were formed which convened "forums" that rediscovered the charms of minority trade unionism, nationalism, NGOs, and state subsidies and institutions. The new technologies provided the minimum structure to uphold the outward appearances of a movement, which, without any transitional stage, passed from the local to the international scale. The youth ghetto was rapidly inundated by the ludic pathology of concerts, raves, marches, summer festivals, etc., only to go to die in the movements against the summits and against the war, veritable general states of confusion and recuperation which, after Genoa, became the fifth wheel of the electoral bandwagon of social democracy. The internet had created among the masses of the youth the illusion of a world community possessed of a project for social change, while anti-globalization tourism produced the chimera of an anti-capitalist movement. But what telecommunications facilitated was a virtual, and consequently unreal, space, the receptacle for the frustration and spiritual poverty of thousands of persons, so that the abundant social base upon which a cause could be erected remained trapped in the networks of non-existence. And while the spectacle of a movement was generalized, the still-existing lines of communication were irremediably damaged, as is demonstrated by the disappearance of magazines, the closing of social centers, bookstores and publishers, the decline of assemblies, the degeneration of language, the evaporation of social commitment, etc.

Technology as a global system, as a means that embraces all social activity, has had its greatest impact on the youth, the sector of the population that is most susceptible to the appeal of new gadgets. The youth, since 1995, have been more the offspring of the new

memory of revolutionary events of the recent past; thus, the young anti-authoritarians started from zero and their errors were the fruit of the cowardice and betrayal of others. Just as we have criticized the weak points of their conduct, we shall also acknowledge their generosity and bravery, and their willingness to take risks, which like a breath of fresh air cleared the social scene of ideological complacency. Finally, along the hard road that they have chosen to travel, many of them have found the ideas they needed. They deserve our respect, especially those who were victimized by repression. Their prisoners are our prisoners.

Among the activist milieus, the false opposition between theory and practice is expressed by the juxtaposition of mass organization and informal group. Previously, organization had always meant power; informal contacts were not rejected but acknowledged as complementary to the organization: class sociability, the networks of mutual aid and solidarity, friendship, devotion ... all contributed to the strength of the organization at the same time that they prevented it from degenerating into a bureaucracy. Today it is obvious that informal structures are the only possible form of organization because the informal basis that constitutes the foundations of more coordinated forms has been destroyed by the enemy, and above all because the radicalize youth milieu is tremendously informal, that is, very inconsistent. The enormous difficulty faced by those individuals who initiate transparent relations and commit themselves to the cause of freedom obliges them to be very flexible with regard to organizational questions, but this is not an achievement, but rather a condition imposed by the deterioration of people and struggles. It is a tactic that emerges from the lack of lasting commitment and the low levels of responsibility. The levels of organization are subordinated to the development of class consciousness and this depends on social struggles. Informal structures prevail when there is no clearly distinguished class in action, when forces are weak and dispersed and the degree of self-discipline is minimal. Organization is therefore a process that responds to the generaliza-

ing and tranquilizing convictions, a flight backwards that found its expression in two equally senseless alternatives: the "pluralistic" postmodernity and technophilia of the new ideology, and the contemplative fossilization of the old ideology.

Faced with such paralyzing or conformist ideologies, sincere rebels reacted by making a leap forward into activism. They declared their support for immediate confrontation with the system and generally disregarded the contradictions that obscured and prevented the reformulation of the social question, proclaiming the superiority of practical action over reflection and reducing the latter to a secondary activity. Disconnected from the radical aspirations of the past, they did not know what they wanted, but were very clear about what they did not want. They did not want capitalism and mistrusted the ideologies that served the bureaucrats. Without intending to do so, as a result of their nihilism they reduced the social question to a matter of propaganda, which was simplified in the form of analyses, formulas, and slogans of the "insurrectionalist theses" variety. They fell into a pragmatism of another kind that entailed an impoverishment of critique and thus of action itself. Disdain for thought is also disdain for strategy. Action had a tendency to privilege one of its moments, confrontation, and forgot about the others. It appeared as an immediate response that was independent of time, place and circumstances; isolated, minoritarian and violent. In this way action became an end in itself, one that was more in need of technique than of ideals. And it did not attempt to create arenas for the conquest of a terrain where the oppressed could exercise freedom, but instead attempted to be an exemplary act that could inspire admiration and emulation. The extent of destruction achieved was the measure of its quality, since the fetishism of action brought about the mystification of violence and identified the latter with radicalism, often confusing domination with repression and overestimating the role of the police. This state of activist excitement was born after a profound generational rupture that prevented the communication of the

technologies than of their parents. These technologies constitute their second nature in which they feel most comfortable, and which they see not as the cause of their moral poverty but as the basis of their freedom. They think the same way they live; since their way of life is imposed upon them, however, their way of thought is not free: it is capitalism that puts the computer on the table and which parks the car in front of the house. As brand-new consumers they have become the vanguard of the spectacle. For the first time ever, and thanks to the communication technologies, the youth erupt as masses, contributing to the spectacle of action the psychological traits of adolescence, that is, the cult of the present, the rejection of effort and experience, narcissism, the quest for immediate satisfaction, the confusion between private experience and public life, between the serious and the playful, etc. Far from feeling sympathetic to the struggle against technologically equipped social oppression, what they really feel is an immense need for entertainment. Profoundly depoliticized, they pour in their masses into the streets to have some fun while wearing their Palestinian scarves, parading their false concern for others and proclaiming their ephemeral commitment. In the society of the spectacle protest is a form of leisure and the tragic pathos of the class struggle must recede before hilarity, relaxation and festival, genuine forms of the neo-contestatory spirit which has found in pot and pan-banging, whistles, and costume parades its most suitable means of expression and in software, blogs and cell-phones its best weapons.

Technology is not neutral; it is inseparable from oppression, it has no other purpose. All technological progress under capitalism is progress in oppression, but no one seems to have understood this. To the contrary, the computer screens are filled with apologetic thinkers and retail merchants of the new technological capitalism ready to follow well-worn paths, whose thoughts run in the innocuous channels of false consciousness. Ideologies of submission to the imperatives of the new leaders of the world economy like Negrism, Castoriadism, ecologism, or the trademark products

of IPES and ATTAC, circulate in order to undermine basic intellectual conquests, to throw overboard all the theoretical baggage of struggle, and in general, to extirpate historical memory. As an ideological alibi, a replacement for the proletariat has been sought in the defenseless and amorphous beings defined as the multitude, social movements, the citizenry, civil society or simply "the people". The new historical subject is pure fiction since the real one was liquidated by capitalism, but its fictitious image is necessary because the spectacle of social conflict requires a phantom; its legitimacy cannot be based on a real class but only on an invented one. An imaginary class was posted on the terrain of the spectacle, since it is neither a class, nor is its struggle really a struggle.

By opting for a false protest manufactured out of thin air, the new ideologies actually put their faith in PRISA and social democracy (and they know this is true). They do not want to confront anything; they do not aspire to change the world but to participate in its management. For them, another capitalist management was possible. The social forums and the anti-summit demonstrations were the bridges of their dialogue with power. Their language merges into a panegyric to order: with the right verbal formulas the lead of triviality—voting, sending letters to political representatives, surfing the web, crowding together like cattle—was transmuted into the gold of historical lucidity and heroism. This ludicrous discourse merely served to camouflage an indecent attitude of collaboration, which is why, insofar as they defined a politics that was "from the bottom to the left", it was the same old politics as always. In reality, what they told us was that a kinder and gentler way to totalitarianism was possible, and this other way to totalitarianism required a different kind of bureaucracy, one that would act as mediator between the ruling class and the masses. However, sitting on the masses is like sitting on your finger. They are not, nor can they ever be, a political subject ready to follow the first Pied Piper of Hamelin that comes along. The masses do not want to participate in politics, they want to be the object of politics; they do

not want to change society, all they want is someone to take care of them. This is why they are masses and obey power without the need for any specialized guides.

The effects of capitalist globalization—the transformation of the classes into masses, the invasion of everyday life by electronic appliances and the juvenilization of protest—have transformed the real world into something unintelligible. Not only the resigned, but the rebels, too, were thrust into unexplored and strange mental spaces, where the ideas of the past do not apply. The collapse of the old ideologies provoked disturbing sensations of uncertainty and powerlessness, inspiring hostility and refusal. The eternity of the class struggle was an untouchable taboo for the orthodoxy of continuity; the existence of a class that was the bearer of emancipatory ideals was beyond all doubt, for if the concept were to be dispensed with the theoretical edifice sustained by it would collapse. But since facts were stubborn, the working class as a class capable of apprehending the totality of social phenomena, and thus capable of organizing society in accordance with its desires, would vanish and exist only in the shared realm of workerist verborrhea, in a dogma of consolation. Social agitation that remained within these positions became disconnected from reality, deteriorated and marginal, giving rise to innocent social gatherings or fundamentalist sects. The alternative to the faith, in view of the absence of a critique of postmodern recuperation, and without the reestablishment of a historical perspective of social struggles, had to be another faith. Thus the new remedies for sectarianism will necessarily have to be sectarian. There were truly comical attempts to restore the Leninist ideology, voluntarists dropping anchor in anarchosyndicalism and suspicious stand-ins for situationism and naturism, now called primitivism. By way of a ruse of domination, the memory of the distant past is used to obscure the recent past and mystify the present. For both the orthodox as well as the innovators, the only task was to introduce bits of reality into their ideological kennels, in such a way as to render possible comfort-