

On the Forever Prolonged Poverty of Student Life

A Consideration of Its Many Aspects and a Few Ways to Cure this Disease

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How to use this text: Read it, then use university infrastructure to propagate it. Use their office printers, post on public bulletins, post it on their websites, read it aloud at club meetings. The decomposition of the student is necessary for any future revolutionary project

1. To make shame even more shameful by making it public

IT IS PRETTY SAFE TO SAY that the student is the most universally despised creature in American society, apart from the policeman. But the reasons for which they are despised are often the wrong reasons which reflect the dominant ideology, whereas the reasons for which they are justifiably despised from a revolutionary standpoint remain unexpressed. The critics of students are aware of these faults — faults which they themselves share — but they invert their actual contempt into a patronizing admiration. Every two months, we read another article from the NY Times or the Washington Post about the gulags of the “politically correct” students, which have yet to materialize. That or griping jealousy from political party surrogates that students are insufficiently useful for their most recent elections. Instead, we intend to show the real reasons for our concern with the student and how they are rooted in the dominant reality of overdeveloped capitalism. We are going to use this pamphlet to denounce them one by one.

Up till now, all the analyses and studies of student life have ignored the essential. While focused on the student as a transient state (“it is from poverty they came, and to success they will go!”), any questions outside of that transiency have mainly been ignored, namely what is the student in their present form to the rest of society? It is in ignoring this question that the investigation of the student remains fundamentally erroneous. Fourier long ago exposed this “methodical myopia” of treating fundamental questions without relating them to modern society as a whole. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, the mass of details obscures the totality. Everything is said about this society except what it really is: a society dominated by commodities and spectacles.

Modern capitalism’s spectacularization of reification allots everyone a specific role within a general passivity. The student is no exception to this rule. Their purpose is a provisional role, a rehearsal for their ultimate role as a conservative element in the functioning of the commodity system. Being a student is a form of initiation: if you answer all of the questions correctly, politely navigate the academy’s hostile bureaucracy, and sublimate your needs and desires in pursuance of professionalization, you too may climb from the gutter to the top of the ivory tower and its market of ideas.

This initiation magically recapitulates all the characteristics of mythical initiation. It remains totally cut off from historical, individual, and social reality. The student leads a double life, poised between their present status and the utterly separate future status into which they will one day be abruptly thrust. Meanwhile, their dissociated consciousness enables them to withdraw into their “initiation group,” forget about their future, and bask in the mystical trance of a present sheltered from history. It is not surprising that they avoid facing their situation, particularly its economic aspects: in our “affluent society,” they are still a pauper. The vast majority of students come from families with income security, yet even more of them have less money than the lowest worker. Student poverty is an anachronism in the society of the spectacle: it has yet to attain the new poverty of the new proletariat. In a period when more and more young people are breaking free from moral prejudices and family authority as they are subjected to blunt, undisguised

exploitation at the earliest age, the student clings to their tame and irresponsible “protracted infancy.” Belated adolescent crises may provoke occasional arguments with their family, but they uncomplainingly accept being treated as a baby by the various institutions that govern their daily life. (If they ever stop shitting in their face, it’s only to come around and bugger them.)

The American student’s poverty takes a truly unique form. From the open faucet of student debt, the student occupies both the position of someone who has less than nothing and someone who has infinite means without having to perform waged labor. The debt, which guarantees their future status as some form of waged worker (if not paid off), puts them in a state of dual performances, one of the serf, whose indebtedness in perpetuity ties them and their future generations to paying their lord, and two of a capitalist who is freed from waged labor. It is for this reason that the student sees themselves in no class: when they must be rich, they are rich, when they must be poor, they are poor. The dominant ideology about the student through the media and the state has presented a similar ambiguity, but has resolved this difference by using the university system as the universal connotation of the rite of passage into the so-called “middle class.” This is an equally confusing position as the student now is much more likely to end up in categories traditionally excluded from this farcical subcategory of class (the intergenerationally indebted, service workers, the underemployed, etc.) The Left has widely accepted this position, as they are former students themselves, now permanently entered into the indebted servitude that was once promised to them, and looking back at their former selves in contempt, on the basis of “class” alone (despite this “class” being artificially created from debt.)

In the past few decades, the university system has reverse-engineered its growth through the mythology of the student, not through the transient class-position that the student seems to occupy, but for the future position and rite of passage into the “middle class” promised. The university system has positioned itself in the greater mythology of “the American dream” as a now necessary path leading up to the gate of the white picket fences. The student is told through this mythology one of two lies, “do something you love, and it will work out” (based on an archaic conception of graduate prospects,) or “pick something practical, and it will be fine.” The illusion of choice ignores the fact that the student ultimately resigns themselves to waged labor in either circumstance, now with the added pressure that a lifetime of student debt affords and all its coercive instruments attached to it.

The faucet of student debt being opened in recent decades is the source that allows the above circumstance to unfold. While the university promises, through its mythology, the reinvention of the student into a more secure economic position, there is no mythologizing involved in the meticulous methodology of the financial number-crunching that the university has used to reinvent itself and the world it occupies. As the vast majority of debts are not loans owed to the university itself (but are instead owed to the federal government or high-interest private lenders) the university has maximized its position as safe from widespread defaulting on loans, and done the only rational thing to do after doing such: expand exponentially. This is imbecilically framed within the dominant ideology as “the universalizing of higher education” and as another great leap forward in the progress of history. Of course, this ignores the many bodies left in the university’s wake, including the student, being one of such.

In its methodical number-crunching, the university knows that the collection of skyrocketing fees is only one means of increasing its wealth and expansion. Thus, the university has used the shakedown and reinvention of entire cities in its path of destruction. In the past few decades, it has been universities that have made the most extensive purchases of property and land in city

centers, often becoming the biggest holders of such. Using their guaranteed supply of money from the faucet of student debt, they poured finances into such investments and, in doing so, have increased urban property prices to an astronomical degree. But the university's destruction doesn't stop there, as the university expands, so has its student populace expanded through importation into the city, in need of housing and places to eat and shop with their student debt. Through this process, not only have university property owners prospered but every conceivable property owner and capitalist in the cities where this process has unfolded. The systematically violent expropriation of Black communities and communities of color through gentrification and the mass displacement of said communities has been one result of this process (including the mass importation of militarized police forces to terrorize these communities.) When the university's expansion is obstructed, it reverts to its primordial modus operandi: expropriation through eminent domain. The university then touts its "urban renewal" campaign with a ribbon-cutting ceremony atop the graves of those that the university has crushed. The student finds that when their journey is complete, that their prospects are so poor, and the university has so thoroughly ravaged the city it occupies, that even they, the supposed beacon of the "middle class," cannot afford the prices of housing and basic necessities that the university scheme has caused to skyrocket. With increasingly high rents and cost of living, the former student finds themselves replicating traditional notions of family structure from the 20th century, being forced to partner and marry early in order to conserve finances and survive. It is no coincidence that the critiques of family structure, gentrification, and political brutality have come out of the universities and bolstered the careers of those who have produced such critiques, as the university itself plays a central role in the expansion of such oppressive forms. The university has mastered the art of directly economically benefitting from systems of oppression while simultaneously indirectly economically benefitting from systems of oppression through the social capital garnered by its faculty for critiques of said systems of oppression.

In the same way that the university has reinvented definitions of class, the student, and the city, so also has the university reinvented the division of labor. The promise of the 19th and 20th centuries was that technology and automation would reach a point in which labor would nearly become irrelevant, and the amount of labor hours required to keep society running would be minimal. But far from liberating humankind from labor, the development of technology and automation have only freed up labor time to create new types of labor time (those far less productive or profitable.) The workforce in the 20th century has transformed into a sea of bull shit jobs, middle managers of robots, and paper stamping functionaries. Now the average office worker knows how to and could automate their daily work to finish it all in a tenth of the time that they are forced to be at the office place, but are required to stay for the purely social function of "working." This has resulted in a sector of overpaid babies, who are hired as desirable faces, task allocators, and self-obsessed personalities involved with little more than reading and writing technocratic gibberish and going to meetings. The state has helped facilitate this growth in part by bureaucratic regulations which have been outsourced to the private sector (as opposed to hiring bureaucratic regulators,) now companies are responsible for handling several layers of policy upon policy related to legal regulations, professional board standards, internal policy memos, etc. etc. Companies hire "x" administrator/bureaucrat when the state passes "x" regulation so they can say they made a reasonable effort to comply with said regulation, and in the worst-case scenario blame their noncompliance on the individual worker occupying the role, as opposed to the company as a whole, to remain non-labile. The university system has demonstrated its role in

expanding this sector of labor through its hiring practices. This is the so-called “administrative bloat” crisis that universities are currently facing. The growth of administrator positions within the university in the past few decades has at times grown ten times the rate of tenured faculty positions, the former often making as much as six times that of the latter in income per year. As the university system has no material obligation to ensure the employment of their former students, and thus allows them to specialize in whichever field (regardless of employment outcomes) while providing sparse alumni employment support, it comes as no surprise that the various psychology, political science, history majors end up back at the university itself (or elsewhere) in some irrelevant role. This is the story, anyway, of the “successful student” who can count their blessings. If the student wasn’t made so imbecilic by their university experience, they might realize their ongoing sense of alienation after graduation is related to wasting years on studying a topic that they were passionate about but which ultimately become irrelevant through their eventual employment as some marketing agent, HR employee, or office manager.

But our contempt for the student is not just based on their material role within the university in capitalist society, for which they are each just a single cog in a relentless machine. Instead, the student is contemptible for their complacency regarding every kind of poverty outside of themselves, their unhealthy propensity to wallow in their own alienation in the hope, amid the general lack of interest, of arousing interest in their particular lacks. The requirements of modern capitalism determine that the most successful students will become mere low-level functionaries, paper-pushers, do-nothings, managers, and bull-shit job workers. Faced with the prospect of such a dismal and mediocre “reward” for their shameful current poverty, the student prefers to take refuge in an unreal lived present, which they decorate with an illusory glamor.

The student is a stoical slave: the more chains authority binds them with, the freer they think they are. With their new family, the university, they see themselves as the most “independent” social being, whereas they are, in fact, directly subjected to the two most powerful systems of social authority: the family and the state. As their well-behaved, grateful and submissive child, they share and embody all the system’s values and mystifications. The illusions that formerly had to be imposed on white-collar workers are now willingly internalized and transmitted by the mass of future petty functionaries.

The student now spends most of their education taught how to rhetorically maneuver around the material critique of society (and of their own circumstance within the university.) The abundance of supposedly “radical” thought now in common parlance in the university system is representative of this (a condition bemoaned as cultural Marxism by the right-wing, while being celebrated as a symptom of revolutionary theory’s conquest of the university by the Left, both idiotic suggestions.) This language is a hodgepodge of recuperated and water-downed revolutionary theory made to defang its threat to a society of commodity and to reify archaic notions of propriety. But by and large, this new language has been accepted by capitalist media and officials as a cutting-edge of “progress.” The real project of this language is this: to create a new generation of waged-workers who can talk the talk of revolution when need be, but who have been utterly rendered incapable of doing anything else to contribute to such a cause. In developing this new language for waged-workers, the university has ensured that any genuine threat to capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, or the state will be carefully talked over through the proper channels of a corporate HR office, a capitalist newspaper’s editorial section, or a brokered meeting between university administrators and organizing students. The university, in particular, has become especially skilled at using this language to take legitimate critiques of specific

systems of oppression and to weaponize them into dismantling any type of student militancy against the university's administration. The first warning sign that new languages would be weaponized to preserve this society is the hegemonic popularization of said language within the society. Those who have no control over a conversation cannot hope for that conversation to liberate them.

Meanwhile, the student remains the most docile and complacent creature in all of the United States. In the George Floyd uprisings, while their peers not in university, high school students, and the older revolted, only the student remained indoors, only eventually coming out to drink unmasked with peers. Where were the ones who employ their new "radical" language? Those who send right-wing pundits into a fury over their supposed hyper-tolerance? Those who flock out in droves to social democrats in the name of "socialism"?

Surely those who see themselves as inheriting this world, who now have a vast capacity for leisure-time, who claim to see themselves as a part of "progress" would want to be on the front lines of the revolt with the most revolutionary potential in contemporaneous American society?

Instead, the student promises that they never had any such intention, that they know their purpose in ideology is the professionalization of recuperation, and that if they obediently don't threaten anyone's authority for a few years, that they will be granted the position of a mid-level manager sheepdog at some paper-pushing factory.

That is why the student never arrives at the "progress" they seem to yearn for. Instead, as an ideological being, the American student always arrives too late. All the values and enthusiasms that are the pride of their closed little world have long ago been condemned by history as laughable and untenable illusions.

In spite of their more or less loose use of time within the margin of individual liberty allowed by the totalitarian spectacle, the student avoids adventure and experiment, preferring the security of the straitjacketed daily space-time organized for their benefit by the guardians of the system. Though not constrained to separate their work and leisure, they do so of their own accord, all the while hypocritically proclaiming their contempt for "good students" and "study fiends." they accept every type of atomization and then bemoans the "lack of communication" in their religious, sports, political or union club. They are so stupid and so miserable that they voluntarily submit themselves to the University Psychological Aid Centers, those agencies of psycho-police control established by the vanguard of modern oppression and naturally hailed as a great victory for student mental health advocacy groups.

But the real poverty of the student's everyday life finds its immediate, fantastic compensation in the opium of cultural commodities. In the cultural spectacle, the student finds their natural place as a respectful disciple. Although they are close to the production point, access to the real Sanctuary of Culture is denied him; so, they discover "modern culture" as an admiring spectator. In an era when art is dead, they remain the most loyal patron of the theaters and film clubs and the most avid consumer of the packaged fragments of its preserved corpse displayed in the cultural supermarkets. Consuming unreservedly and uncritically, they are in their element. If the "Culture Centers" didn't exist, the student would have invented them. They are a perfect example of all the platitudes of American market research: a conspicuous consumer, conditioned by advertising into fervently divergent attitudes toward products that are identical in their nullity.

And when the "gods" who produce and organize their cultural spectacle take human form on the stage, they are their main audience, their perfect spectator. Students turn out en masse to their most obscene exhibitions. When the priests of different churches present their lame,

consequenceless dialogues (seminars of “Marxist” thought, conferences of Catholic intellectuals) or when the literary debris come together to bear witness to their impotence (five thousand students attending a forum on “What are the possibilities of literature?”), who but students fill the halls?

Incapable of real passions, the student seeks titillation in the passionless polemics between the celebrities of Unintelligence: Chomsky — Diangelo — Davis — Zizek — Althusser — Garaudy — Sartre — Barthes — Picard — Lefebvre — Lévi-Strauss — Hallyday — Châtelet — Antoine; and between their rival ideologies, whose function is to mask real problems by debating false ones: Humanism — Existentialism — Structuralism — Scientism — New Criticism — Dialectico-naturalism — Cyberneticism — Planète-ism — Metaphilosophism.

They discover the latest trips as fast as the market can produce its ersatz version of long outmoded (though once important) ventures; in their ignorance, they take every rehash for a cultural revolution. Their overriding concern is always to maintain their cultural status. Like everyone else, they take pride in buying the paperback reprints of important and difficult texts that “mass culture” is disseminating at an accelerating pace. Since they don’t know how to read, they content themselves with fondly gazing at them.

Their favorite reading matter is the press that specializes in promoting the frenzied consumption of cultural novelties; they unquestioningly accept its pronouncements as guidelines for their tastes. They revel in Jacobin or the New Yorker, or perhaps they prefer N+1. With such guides they hope to gain an understanding of the modern world and become politically conscious!

For in America, the student is content to be politicized. But their political participation is mediated by the same spectacle. Thus, they seize upon all the pitiful tattered remnants of a Left that was annihilated more than fifty years ago by neoliberal reformism, Marxist-Leninist counterrevolution, and now democratic socialist social democrats. The rulers are well aware of this defeat of the workers movement, and so are the workers themselves, though more confusedly. But the student remains oblivious of it and continues to participate blithely in the most laughable demonstrations that never draw anybody but students. Occasionally there are deviationary tendencies and slight impulses toward “independence,” but after a period of token resistance, the dissidents are invariably reincorporated into an order they have never fundamentally questioned.

But this is not the student’s only archaism. They feel obliged to have general ideas on everything, to form a coherent world-view capable of giving meaning to their need for nervous activity. As a result, they fall prey to the last doddering missionary efforts of religion. With atavistic ardor they rush to adore the putrescent carcass of gods and to cherish the decomposing remains of astrology, new age religion, tarot, and prehistoric superstitions in the belief that they enrich them and their time. If we include these as religions, then along with elderly middle American ladies, students form the social category with the highest percentage of newly admitted religious adherents.

We cannot blame the student alone for their ultimately counter-revolutionary behaviors, as they are surrounded by an ecosystem of others professionalized in such. The increasingly tedious path to tenure has ensured that anyone on the road to it (adjunct, graduate student workers, etc.) and those who have already gotten tenure are in a position of total subservience to the university system. The smartest among them feel this inadequacy palpably and deal with it through increasing “radical” studies (in the form of peer-reviewed papers and theses.) The end game of this pattern of recuperative behavior is the professor’s lesson plan. While a critique of nearly every aspect of this society has been written and rewritten now a thousand times, the call to

action remains entirely silent. While the professor thinks of themselves as implying such a call to action, by their own behaviors they imply the exact opposite: that the most obedient and diligent student can one day use their exposure to the radical critiques in their lesson plan to become a professor themselves, continuing the endless cycle of mastering the professionalization of recuperation. When insurrection does occur within or outside of the university system, who are the first to condemn it and call for a return to voting besides Left academics? In one instance that comes to mind, a self-identified Black and queer professor specialized in Gramsci was appointed to a role within the university for “cooling-down” political student conflicts and running a so-called “social justice” extracurricular group. When one student rose the topic that campus security replicated the symbols of surveillance and control of police to Black students and students of color, as well as the surrounding community, this professor suggested a solution that the security guards put on t-shirts with the university’s name to solve the problem (quite literally illustrating the professorial role in new advanced forms of recuperative thought.)

2. It is not enough for theory to seek its realization in practice; practice must seek its theory

AFTER A LONG PERIOD of slumber and permanent counterrevolution, the last few years have seen the first gestures of a new period of contestation, most visibly among young people. But the society of the spectacle, in its representation of itself and its enemies, imposes its own ideological categories on the world and its history. It reassuringly presents everything that happens as if it were part of the natural order of things and reduces truly new developments that herald its supersession to the level of superficial consumer novelties. In reality, the revolt of young people against the way of life imposed on them is simply a harbinger, a preliminary expression of a far more widespread subversion that will embrace all those who are feeling the increasing impossibility of living in this society, a prelude to the next revolutionary era. With their usual methods of inverting reality, the dominant ideology and its daily mouthpieces reduce this real historical movement to a socio-natural category: the Idea of Youth. Any new youth revolt is presented as merely the eternal revolt of youth that recurs with each generation, only to fade away “when young people become engaged in the serious business of production and are given real, concrete aims.” The “youth revolt” has been subjected to veritable journalistic inflation (people are presented with the spectacle of a revolt to distract them from the possibility of participating in one). It is presented as an aberrant but necessary social safety valve that has its part to play in the smooth functioning of the system. This revolt against the society reassures the society because it supposedly remains partial, pigeonholed in the apartheid of “adolescent problems” (analogous to “racial issues” or “women’s concerns”), and is soon outgrown. In reality, if there is a “youth problem” in modern society, it simply consists in the fact that young people feel the profound crisis of this society most acutely — and try to express it. The young generation is a product par excellence of modern society, whether it chooses integration into it or the most radical rejection of it. What is surprising is not that youth is in revolt, but that “adults” are so resigned. But the reason for this is historical, not biological: the previous generation lived through all the defeats and swallowed all the lies of the long, shameful disintegration of the revolutionary movement.

In itself, “Youth” is a publicity myth linked to the capitalist mode of production, as an expression of its dynamic preeminence of youth became possible with the economic recovery after.

This illusory World War II, following the mass entry into the market of a whole new category of more pliable consumers whose consumer enabled them to identify with the society of the spectacle. But the role official ideology is once again finding itself in contradiction with socioeconomic reality (lagging behind it youth who have first asserted an irresistible rage to live and who are), and it is precisely the spontaneously revolting against the daily boredom and dead time that the old world continues to produce in spite of all its modernizations. The most rebellious among them are expressing a pure, nihilistic rejection of this society without any awareness of the possibility of superseding it. But such a perspective is being sought and developed everywhere in the world. It must attain the coherence of theoretical critique and the practical organization of this coherence.

By revolting against their studies, some American students have directly called in question a society that needs such studies. Some of the most interesting of such revolts have been the waves of university occupations starting in the late 00's and continuing a decade after. Some of these revolts expanded beyond myopic demands, to materially threatening the university, and even calling into question the existence of the university system. Graduate students in several cities have organized around their lack of recognition as workers and, in some circumstances, have united in solidarity with non-faculty staff on strike, conducting wildcat strikes of their own. Some students have rejected the incubated role in their struggles and have united in the use of direct actions in conjunction with antiracist and antifascist movements of the past decade, notably in North Carolina. Anti-student debt movements have refused student loan debt as illegitimate, as education should not be bought and sold as a commodity, while also refusing to collaborate in the production of knowledge that produces debt itself. In all of these successful models we can see the student rejecting various forms of their existence, whether it be their current or future existence as workers, the university system, or their very position as a student. To the north, in Montreal, the student struggle in 2012 expanded beyond all of these dimensions and nearly forced a rupture in society itself, a feat in recent history that American students can learn lessons from. Similar ruptures that have broken the student mold in the form of occupations, strikes, and riots have occurred in recent years in Chile, Puerto Rico, and Greece.

3. To create at last a situation that goes beyond the point of no return

THE RADICAL CRITIQUE of the modern world must now have the totality as its object and as its objective. This critique must be brought to bear on the world's actual past, on its present reality, and on the prospects for transforming it. We cannot grasp the whole truth of the present world, much less formulate the project of its total subversion unless we are capable of revealing its hidden history, unless we subject the entire history of the international revolutionary movement, initiated over a century ago by the Western proletariat, to a demystified critical scrutiny. "This movement against the whole organization of the old world came to an end long ago" (Internationale Situationniste #7). It failed. Its last historical manifestation was the Spanish proletarian revolution, defeated in Barcelona in May 1937. But its official "failures" and "victories" must be judged in the light of their eventual consequences, and their essential truths must be brought back to light. In this regard, we can agree with Karl Liebknecht's remark, on the eve of their assassination, that "some defeats are really victories, while some victories are more shameful

than any defeat.” Thus, the first great “defeat” of proletarian power, the Paris Commune, was in reality its first great victory, in that for the first time the early proletariat demonstrated its historical capacity to organize all aspects of social life freely. Whereas its first great “victory,” the Bolshevik revolution, ultimately turned out to be its most disastrous defeat.

The triumph of the Bolshevik order coincided with the international counter-revolutionary movement that began with the crushing of the Spartakists by German “Social Democracy.” The commonality of the jointly victorious Bolshevism and reformism went deeper than their apparent antagonism, for the Bolshevik order also turned out to be merely a new variation on the old theme, a new guise of the old order. The results of the Russian counterrevolution were, internally, the establishment and development of a new mode of exploitation, bureaucratic state capitalism, and externally, the spread of a “Communist” International whose branches served the sole purpose of defending and reproducing their Russian model. Capitalism, in its bureaucratic and bourgeois variants, won a new lease on life, over the dead bodies of the sailors of Kronstadt, the peasants of Ukraine, and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and finally Barcelona.

The Third International, ostensibly created by the Bolsheviks to counteract the degenerate social-democratic reformism of the Second International and to unite the vanguard of the proletariat in “revolutionary communist parties,” was too closely linked to the interests of its founders to bring about a genuine socialist revolution anywhere. In reality, the Third International was essentially a continuation of the Second. The Russian model was rapidly imposed on the Western workers’ organizations, and their evolutions were thenceforth one and the same. The totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy, the new ruling class, over the Russian proletariat found its echo in the subjection of the great mass of workers in other countries to a stratum of political and labor-union bureaucrats whose interests had become clearly contradictory to those of their rank-and-file constituents. While the Stalinist monster haunted working-class consciousness, capitalism was becoming bureaucratized and overdeveloped, resolving its internal crises and proudly proclaiming this new victory to be permanent. In spite of apparent variations and oppositions, a single social form dominates the world. The principles of the old world continue to govern our modern world; the tradition of dead generations still weighs on the minds of the living.

Opposition to this world offered from within it, on its own terrain, by supposedly revolutionary organizations is only an apparent opposition. Such pseudo-opposition, propagating the worst mystifications and invoking more or less rigid ideologies, ultimately helps consolidate the dominant order. The labor unions and political parties forged by the working class as tools for its own emancipation have become mere safety valves, regulating mechanisms of the system, the private property of leaders seeking their own particular emancipation by using them as stepping stones to roles within the ruling class of a society they never dream of calling into question. The party program or union statute may contain vestiges of “revolutionary” phraseology, but their practice is everywhere reformist. (Their reformism, moreover, has become virtually meaningless since capitalism itself has become officially reformist.) Wherever the parties have been able to seize power — in countries more backward than 1917 Russia — they have only reproduced the Stalinist model of totalitarian counterrevolution. Elsewhere, they have become the static and necessary complement to the self-regulation of bureaucratized capitalism, the token opposition indispensable for maintaining its police-humanism. *Vis-à-vis* the worker masses, they remain the unflinching and unconditional defenders of the bureaucratic counterrevolution and the obedient agents of its foreign policy. Constantly working to perpetuate the universal dictatorship of

the economy and the state, they are the bearers of the biggest lie in a world of lies. As the situationists put it, “A universally dominant social system, tending toward totalitarian self-regulation, is only apparently being combated by false forms of opposition that remain on the system’s own terrain and actually serve to reinforce it. Bureaucratic pseudosocialism is only the most grandiose of these guises of the old world of hierarchy and alienated labor.”

The dominant social system, which flatters itself on its constant modernization, must now be confronted with a worthy opponent: the equally modernized negation that it is itself producing. Let the dead bury the dead. The practical demystifications of the historical movement are exorcizing the phantoms that haunted revolutionary consciousness; the revolution of everyday life is being confronted with the immensity of its tasks. Both revolution and the life it announces must be reinvented. If the revolutionary project remains fundamentally the same — the abolition of class society — this is because the conditions giving rise to that project have nowhere been radically transformed. But this project must be taken up again with a new radicality and coherence, learning from the failure of previous revolutionaries, so that its partial realization will not merely bring about a new division of society.

Since the struggle between the system and the new proletariat can only be in terms of the totality, the future revolutionary movement must abolish anything within itself that tends to reproduce the alienation produced by the commodity system — the system dominated by commodified labor. It must be a living critique of that system, a negation embodying all the elements necessary for its supersession. As Lukács correctly showed [in *History and Class Consciousness*], revolutionary organization is this necessary mediation between theory and practice, between humankind and history, between the mass of workers and the proletariat constituted as a class. (Lukács’s mistake was to believe that the Bolshevik Party fulfilled this role.) If they are to be realized in practice, “theoretical” tendencies and differences must immediately be translated into organizational questions. Everything ultimately depends on how the new revolutionary movement resolves the organization question; on whether its organizational forms are consistent with its essential project: the international realization of the absolute power of workers councils as prefigured in the proletarian revolutions of this century. Such an organization must make a radical critique of all the foundations of the society it combats: commodity production; ideology in all its guises; the state; and the separations imposed by the state.

The rock on which the old revolutionary movement foundered was the separation of theory and practice. Only the supreme moments of proletarian struggles overcame this split and discovered their own truth. No organization has yet bridged this gap. Ideology, no matter how “revolutionary” it may be, always serves the rulers; it is the alarm signal revealing the presence of the enemy fifth column. This is why the critique of ideology must, in the final analysis, be the central problem of revolutionary organization. Lies are a product of the alienated world; they cannot appear within an organization claiming to bear the social truth without that organization, thereby becoming one more lie in a world of lies.

All the positive aspects of the power of workers councils must already be embryonically present in any revolutionary organization aiming at their realization. Such an organization must wage a mortal struggle against the Leninist theory of organization. The 1905 revolution and the Russian workers’ spontaneous self-organization into soviets was already a critique in acts of that baneful theory. But the Bolshevik movement persisted in believing that working-class spontaneity could not go beyond “trade-union consciousness” and was thus incapable of grasping “the totality.” This amounted to decapitating the proletariat so that the Party could put itself at the

“head” of the revolution. Contesting the proletariat’s historical capacity to liberate itself, as Lenin did so ruthlessly, means contesting its capacity to run the future society. In such a perspective, the slogan “All power to the soviets” meant nothing more than the conquest of the soviets by the Party and the installation of the party-state in place of the withering-away “state” of the armed proletariat.

“All power to the soviets” must once again be our slogan, but literally this time, without the Bolshevik ulterior motives. The proletariat can play the game of revolution only if the stakes are the whole world; otherwise it is nothing. The sole form of its power, generalized self-management, cannot be shared with any other power. Because it represents the actual dissolution of all powers, it can tolerate no limitation (geographical or otherwise); any compromises it accepts are immediately transformed into concessions, into surrender. “Self-management must be both the means and the end of the present struggle. It is not only what is at stake in the struggle, but also its adequate form. It is itself the material it works on, and its own presupposition” (“The Class Struggles in Algeria”).

A unitary critique of the world is the guarantee of the coherence and truth of a revolutionary organization. To tolerate the existence of an oppressive system in some particular region (because it presents itself as “revolutionary,” for example) amounts to recognizing the legitimacy of oppression. To tolerate alienation in any one domain of social life amounts to admitting an inevitability of all forms of reification. It is not enough to be for the power of workers councils in the abstract; it is necessary to demonstrate what it means concretely: the suppression of commodity production and therefore of the proletariat. Despite their superficial disparities, all existing societies are governed by the logic of the commodity; it is the basis of their totalitarian self-regulation. Commodity reification is the essential obstacle to total emancipation, to the free construction of life. In the world of commodity production, praxis is not pursued in accordance with autonomously determined aims, but in accordance with the directives of external forces. Economic laws take on the appearance of natural laws; but their power depends solely on the “unawareness of those who participate in them.”

The essence of commodity production is the loss of self in the chaotic and unconscious creation of a world totally beyond the control of its creators. In contrast, the radically revolutionary core of generalized self-management is everyone’s conscious control over the whole of life. The self-management of commodity alienation would only make everyone the programmers of their own survival — squaring the capitalist circle. The task of the workers councils will thus be not the self-management of the existing world, but its unceasing qualitative transformation: the concrete supersession of the commodity (that enormous detour in the history of human self-production).

This supersession naturally implies the abolition of work and its replacement by a new type of free activity, thereby eliminating one of the fundamental splits of modern society: that between an increasingly reified labor and a passively consumed leisure. Presently decomposing groups, although adhering to the modern watchword of Workers’ Power, continue to follow the path of the old workers movement in envisioning a reformism of labor through its “humanization.” But work itself must now be attacked. Far from being “utopian,” the abolition of work is the first condition for the effective supersession of commodity society, for the elimination within each person’s life of that separation between “free time” and “work time” — those complementary sectors of alienated life — that is a continual expression of the commodity’s internal contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Only when this opposition is overcome will people be able to make their vital activity subject to their will and consciousness and see themselves in a

world that they themselves have created. The democracy of workers councils is the solution to all the present separations. It makes impossible “everything that exists outside individuals.”

The conscious domination of history by the people who make it — this is the entire revolutionary project. Modern history, like all past history, is the product of social praxis, the (unconscious) result of human activities. In the era of totalitarian domination, capitalism has produced its own new religion: the spectacle. The spectacle is the terrestrial realization of ideology. Never has the world been so inverted. “And like the ‘critique of religion’ in Marx’s day, the critique of the spectacle is today the essential precondition of any critique” (Internationale Situationniste #9).

Humanity is historically confronted with the problem of revolution. The increasingly grandiose material and technological means are equaled only by the increasingly profound dissatisfaction of everyone. The bourgeoisie and its Eastern heir, the bureaucracy, are incapable of putting this overdevelopment (which will be the basis of the poetry of the future) to any good use precisely because they both must strive to maintain an old order. The most they can use it for is to reinforce their police control. They can do nothing but accumulate capital, and therefore proletarians — a proletarian being someone who has no power over their life and who knows it. It is the new proletariat’s historical fortune to be the only consequent heir to the valueless riches of the bourgeois world — riches that it must transform and supersede in such a way as to foster the development of fully realized human beings pursuing the total appropriation of nature and of their own nature. This realization of human nature can only mean the unlimited multiplication and full satisfaction of the real desires which the spectacle represses into the darkest corners of the revolutionary unconscious, and which it can realize only fantastically in the dreamlike delirium of its publicity. The actual fulfillment of genuine desires — which means the abolition of all the pseudoneeds and pseudodesires that the system manufactures daily in order to perpetuate its own power — cannot take place without the suppression and positive supersession of the commodity spectacle.

Modern history can be liberated, and its innumerable achievements can be freely put to use, only by the forces that it represses: the workers without power over the conditions, the meaning and the products of their own activities. In the nineteenth century, the proletariat was already the heir of philosophy; now, it has become the heir of modern art and of the first conscious critique of everyday life. It cannot suppress itself without at the same time realizing art and philosophy. To transform the world and to change life are one and the same thing for the proletariat, the inseparable passwords to its suppression as a class, the dissolution of the present reign of necessity, and the finally possible accession to the reign of freedom. The radical critique and free reconstruction of all the values and patterns of behavior imposed by alienated reality are its maximum program. Free creativity in the construction of all moments and events of life is the only poetry it can acknowledge, the poetry made by all, the beginning of the revolutionary festival. Proletarian revolutions will be festivals or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce. Play is the ultimate principle of this festival, and the only rules it can recognize are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints

4. To inactivate inactivity

WE HAVE ALREADY DEMONSTRATED why the American student makes themselves poor in spirit, complacent, and hypocritical. But is the student beyond redemption? Will the university

system that tricked them into taking out more debt for in-person classes only to risk them with viral death or to pivot to remote learning without a fee reduction be a final straw in the university's exploitation of the student? Will the George Floyd uprisings finally make the student confront the role that the university system has had in turning cities into open-air prisons for Black people, people of color, and the poor? Will the student finally recognize the double-speak of their do-nothing professors and peers, who claim to be radical while ignoring every revolt unfolding before them? The only thing for the student to do now is to seize the infrastructure of the university and employ it purely for revolutionary purposes, to declare war on the reproductive role of the university in capitalist society, to denounce the old world as well as the new one.

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