

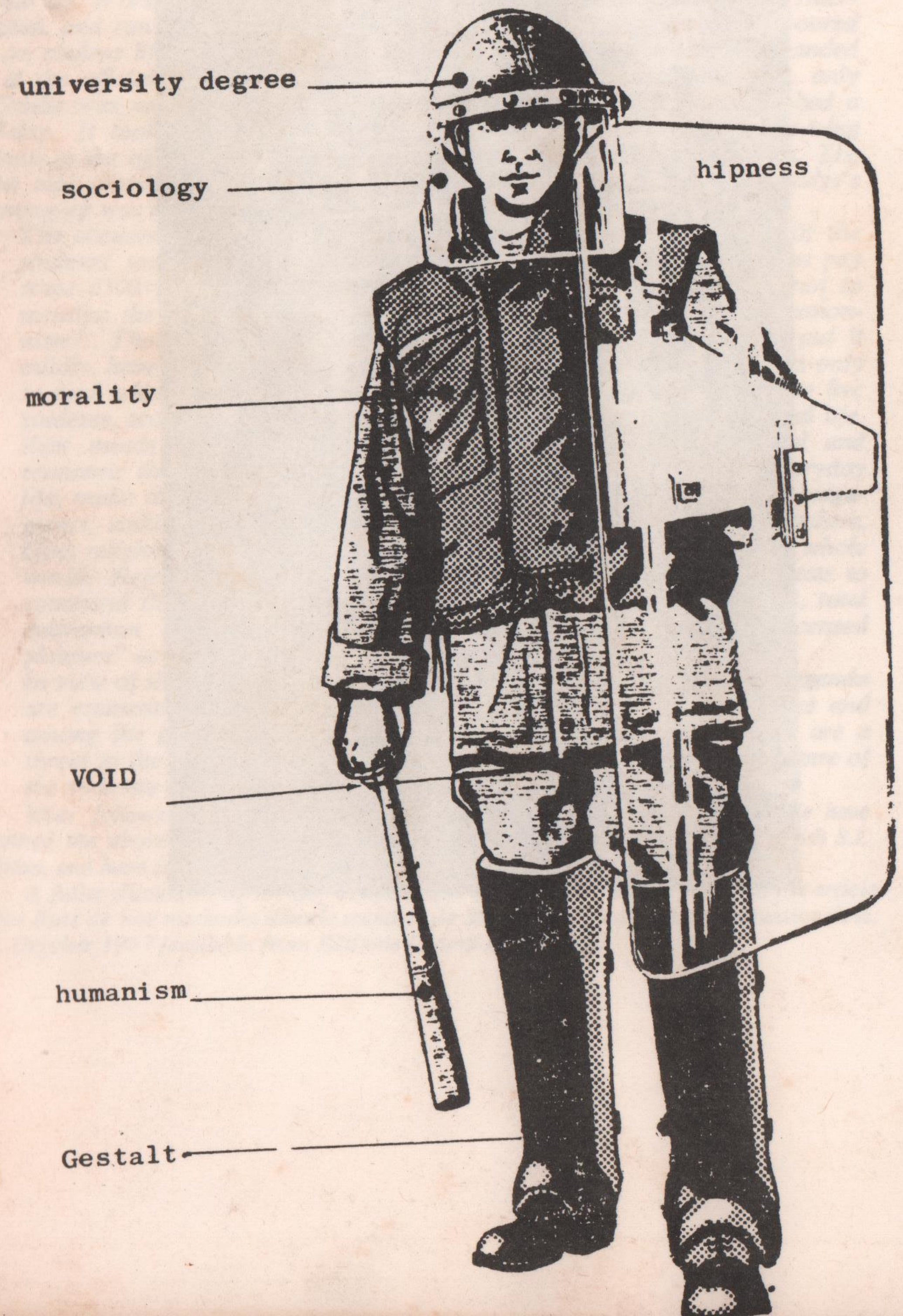
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# OF STUDENT POVERTY







In November 1966, Strasbourg University was the scene of a preliminary skirmish between modern capitalism and the new revolutionary forces which it is beginning to engender.

For the first time, a few students abandoned pseudo-revolt and found their way to a coherent radical activity of a kind which has everywhere been repressed by reformism. This small group got itself elected, amidst the apathy of Strasbourg's 16,000 students, to the committee of the left-wing students' union. Once in this position of power, they began to put union funds to good use. They founded a Society for the Rehabilitation of Karl Marx and Ràvachol. They plastered the walls of the city with a Marxist comic-strip, "The Return of the Durutti Column". They proclaimed their intention to dissolve the union once and for all. Worst of all, they enlisted the aid of the notorious Situationist International, and ran off ten thousand copies of a lengthy pamphlet which poured shit on student life and loves (and a few other things). When this was handed out at the official ceremony marking the beginning of the academic year, only de Gaulle was unaffected. The press—local, national and international—had a field-day. It took three weeks for the local Party of Order—from right-wing students to the official left, via Alsatian mill-owners—to eject these fanatics. The union was closed by a court order on the 14th of December. The judge's summing-up was disarmingly lucid:

The accused have never denied the charge of misusing the funds of the students' union. Indeed, they openly admit to having made the union pay some £500 for the printing and distribution of 10,000 pamphlets, not to mention the cost of other literature inspired by "Internationale Situationniste". These publications express ideas and aspirations which, to put it mildly, have nothing to do with the aims of a student union. One has only to read what the accused have written, for it to be obvious that these five students, scarcely more than adolescents, lacking all experience of real life, their minds confused by ill-digested philosophical, social, political and economic theories, and perplexed by the drab monotony of their everyday life, make the empty, arrogant and pathetic claim to pass definitive judgments, sinking to outright abuse, on their fellow-students, their teachers, God, religion, the clergy, the governments and political systems of the whole world. Rejecting all morality and restraint, these cynics do not hesitate to commend theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion and a world-wide proletarian revolution with "unlicensed pleasure" as its only goal.

In view of their basically anarchist character, these theories and propaganda are eminently noxious. Their wide diffusion in both student circles and among the general public, by the local, national and foreign press, are a threat to the morality, the studies, the reputation and thus the very future of the students of the University of Strasbourg.

What follows is a translation of the infamous pamphlet in question. We have retained the above introduction (but not the afterword) from the original English S.I. edition, and have corrected a few errors of translation.

A fuller discussion of the S.I.'s experiment at Strasbourg can be found in the article "Nos Buts de nos methodes dans le scandale de Strasbourg", *International situationniste*, 11, October 1967 (available from Editions Champ Libre, Paris).



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## OF STUDENT POVERTY

**Considered in its economic, political,  
psychological, sexual and, particularly  
intellectual aspects, and a modest  
proposal for its remedy**



## To make shame more shameful by giving it publicity

We might very well say, and no-one would disagree with us, that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the priest and the policeman. Naturally he is usually attacked from the wrong point of view, with specious reasons derived from the ruling ideology. He may be worth the contempt of a true revolutionary, yet a revolutionary critique of the student situation is currently taboo on the official Left. The licensed and impotent opponents of capitalism repress the obvious—that what is wrong with the students is also what is wrong with them. They convert their unconscious contempt into a blind enthusiasm. The radical intelligentsia (from *Les Temps Modernes* to *L'Express*) prostrates itself before the so-called "rise of the student" and the declining bureaucracies of the Left (from the "Communist" party to the Stalinist National Union of Students) bid noisily for his moral and material support.

There are reasons for this sudden enthusiasm, but they are all provided by the present form of capitalism, in its overdeveloped state. We shall use this pamphlet for denunciation. We shall expose these reasons one by one, on the principle that the end of alienation is only reached by the straight and narrow path of alienation itself.

Up to now, studies of student life have ignored the essential issue. The surveys and analyses have all been psychological or sociological or economic: in other words, academic exercises, content with the false categories of one specialization or another. None of them can achieve what is most needed—a view of modern society as a whole. Fourier denounced their error long ago as the attempt to apply scientific laws to the basic assumptions of the science ("*porter régulièrement sur les questions primordiales*"). Everything is said about our society except what it is, and the nature of its two basic principles—the commodity and the spectacle. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, and the details consign the totality to oblivion.

Modern capitalism and its spectacle allot everyone a specific role in a general passivity. The student is no exception to the rule. He has a provisional part to play, a rehearsal for his final role as an element in market society as conservative as the rest. Being a student is a form of initiation. An initiation which echoes the rites of more primitive societies with bizarre precision. It goes on outside of history, cut off from social reality. The student leads a double life, poised between his present status and his future role. The two are absolutely separate, and the journey from one to the other is a mechanical event "in the future". Meanwhile, he basks in a schizophrenic consciousness, withdrawing into his initiation group to hide from that future. Protected from history, the present is a mystic trance.

At least in consciousness, the student can exist apart from the official truths of "economic life". But for very simple reasons: looked at economically, student life is a hard one. In our "society of abundance", he is still a pauper. 80% of students come from income groups well above the working class, yet 90% have less money than the meanest labourer. Student poverty is an anachronism, a throw-back from an earlier age of capitalism; it does not share in the new poverties of the spectacular societies; it has yet to attain the new poverty of the new proletariat. Nowadays the teenager shuffles off the moral prejudices and authority of the family to become part of the market even before he is adolescent: at fifteen he has all the delights of being directly exploited. In contrast the student covets his protracted infancy as an irresponsible and docile paradise. Adolescence and its crises may bring occasional brushes with his family, but in essence he is not troublesome: he agrees to be treated as a baby by the institutions which provide his education. There is no "student problem". Student passivity is only the most obvious symptom of a general state of affairs, for each sector of social life has been subdued by a similar imperialism.

Our social thinkers have a bad conscience about the student problem, but only because the real problem is the poverty and servitude of all. But we have different reasons to despise the student and all his works. What is unforgivable is not so much his actual misery but his complaisance in the face of the misery of others. For him there is only one real alienation: his own. He is a full-time and happy consumer of that commodity, hoping to arouse at least our pity, since he cannot claim our interest. By the logic of modern capitalism, most students can only become mere *petits cadres* (with the same function in neo-capitalism as the skilled worker had in the nineteenth-century economy). The student really knows how miserable will be that golden future which is supposed to make up for the shameful poverty of the present. In the face of that knowledge, he prefers to dote on the present and invent an imaginary prestige for himself. After all, there will be no magical compensation for present drabness: tomorrow will be like yesterday, lighting these fools the way to dusty death. Not unnaturally he takes refuge in an unreal present.

The student is a stoical slave: the more chains authority heaps upon him, the freer he is in phantasy. He shares with his new family, the University, a belief in a curious kind of autonomy. Real independence, apparently, lies in a direct subservience to the two most powerful systems of social control: the family and the State. He is their well-behaved and grateful child, and like the submissive child he is over-eager to please. He celebrates all the values and mystifications of the system, devouring them with all the anxiety of the infant at the breast. Once, the old illusions had to be imposed on an aristocracy of labour; the *petits cadres*-to-be ingest them willingly under the guise of culture.

There are various forms of compensation for poverty. The total poverty of ancient societies produced the grandiose compensation of religion. The student's poverty by contrast is a marginal phenomenon, and he casts around for compensations among the most down-at-heel images of the ruling class. He is a bore who repairs the old jokes of an alienated culture. Even as an ideologist, he is always out of date. One and all, his latest enthusiasms were ridiculous thirty years ago.

Once upon a time the universities were respected; the student persists in the belief that he is lucky to be there. But he arrived too late. The bygone excellence of bourgeois culture<sup>2</sup> has vanished. A mechanically produced specialist is now the goal of the "educational system". A modern economic system demands mass production of students who are not educated and have been rendered incapable

<sup>2</sup> By this we mean the culture of a Hegel or of the *encyclopédistes*, rather than the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure.



of thinking. Hence the decline of the universities and the automatic nullity of the student once he enters its portals. The university has become a society for the propagation of ignorance; "high culture" has taken on the rhythm of the production line; *without exception*, university teachers are cretins, men who would get the bird from any audience of schoolboys. But all this hardly matters: the important thing is to go on listening respectfully. In time, if critical thinking is repressed with enough conscientiousness, the student will come to partake of the wafer of knowledge, the professor will tell him the final truths of the world. Till then—a menopause of the spirit. As a matter of course the future revolutionary society will condemn the doings of lecture theatre and faculty as mere *noise*—socially undesirable. The student is already a very bad joke.

The student is blind to the obvious—that even his closed world is changing. The "crisis of the university"—that detail of a more general crisis of modern capitalism—is the latest fodder for the deaf-mute dialogue of the specialists. This "crisis" is simple to understand: the difficulties of a specialised sector which is adjusting (too late) to a general change in the relations of production. There was once a vision—if an ideological one—of a liberal bourgeois university. But as its social base disappeared, the vision became banality. In the age of free-trade capitalism, when the "liberal" state left it its marginal freedoms, the university *could* still think of itself as an independent power. Of course it was a pure and narrow product of that society's needs—particularly the need to give the privileged minority an adequate general culture before they rejoined the ruling class (not that going up to university was straying very far from class confines). But the bitterness of the nostalgic don<sup>1</sup> is understandable: better, after all, to be the bloodhound of the *haute bourgeoisie* than sheepdog to the world's white-collars. Better to stand guard on privilege than harry the flock into their allotted factories and bureaux, according to the whims of the "planned economy". The university is becoming, fairly smoothly, the honest broker of technocracy and its spectacle. In the process, the purists of the academic Right become a pitiful sideshow, purveying their "universal" cultural goods to a bewildered audience of specialists.

More serious, and thus more dangerous, are the modernists of the Left and the Students' Union, with their talk of a "reform of University structure" and a "reinsertion of the University into social and economic life", i.e., its adaptation to the needs of modern capitalism. The one-time suppliers of general culture to the ruling classes, though still guarding their old prestige, must be converted into the forcing-house of a new labour aristocracy. Far from contesting the historical process which subordinates one of the last relatively autonomous social groups to the demands of the market, the progressives complain of delays and inefficiency in its completion. They are the standard-bearers of the cybernetic university of the future (which has already reared its ugly head in some unlikely quarters). And they are the enemy: the fight against the market, which is starting again in earnest, means the fight against its latest lackeys.

As for the student, this struggle is fought out entirely over his head, somewhere in the heavenly realm of his masters. The whole of his life is beyond his control, and for all he sees of the world he might as well be on another planet. His acute economic poverty condemns him to a paltry form of *survival*. But, being a complacent creature, he parades his very ordinary indigence as if it were an original life-style: self-indulgently, he affects to be a Bohemian. The Bohemian solution is hardly viable at the best of times, and the notion that it could be achieved without a complete and final break with the university milieu is quite ludicrous. But the student Bohemian (and every student likes to pretend that he is a Bohemian at heart) clings to his false and degraded version of individual revolt. He is so "eccentric" that he continues—thirty years after Reich's excellent

<sup>1</sup> No-one dares any longer to speak in the name of nineteenth century liberalism; so they reminisce about the "free" and "popular" universities of the middle ages—that "democracy of unfreedom".

lessons—to entertain the most traditional forms of erotic behaviour, reproducing at this level the general relations of class society. Where sex is concerned, we have learnt better tricks from elderly provincial ladies. His rent-a-crowd militancy for the latest good cause is an aspect of his real impotence.

The student's old-fashioned poverty, however, does put him at a potential advantage—if only he could see it. He does have marginal freedoms, a small area of liberty which as yet escapes the totalitarian control of the spectacle. His flexible working-hours permit him adventure and experiment. But he is a sucker for punishment, and freedom scares him to death: he feels safer in the straight-jacketed space-time of lecture hall and weekly "essay". He is quite happy with this open prison organised for his "benefit", and, though not constrained, as are most people, to separate work and leisure, he does so of his own accord—hypocritically proclaiming all the while his contempt for assiduity and grey men. He embraces every available contradiction and then mutters darkly about the "difficulties of communication" from the uterine warmth of his religious, artistic or political clique.

Driven by his freely-chosen depression, he submits himself to the subsidiary police force of psychiatrists set up by the avant-garde of repression. The university mental health clinics are run by the student mutual organisation, which sees this institution as a grand victory for student unionism and social progress. Like the Aztecs who ran to greet Cortes's sharpshooters, and then wondered what made the thunder and why men fell down, the students flock to the psycho-police stations with their "problems".

The real poverty of his everyday life finds its immediate, phantastic compensation in the opium of cultural commodities. In the cultural spectacle he is allotted his habitual role of the dutiful disciple. Although he is close to the production-point, access to the Sanctuary of Thought is forbidden, and he is obliged to discover "modern culture" as an *admiring spectator*. Art is dead, but the student is necrophiliac. He peeks at the corpse in cine-clubs and theatres, buys its fish-fingers from the cultural supermarket. Consuming unreservedly, he is in his element: he is the living proof of all the platitudes of American market research: a conspicuous consumer, complete with induced irrational preference for Brand X (Camus, for example), and irrational prejudice against Brand Y (Sartre, perhaps).

Impervious to real passions, he seeks titillation in the battles between his anaemic gods, the stars of a vacuous heaven: Althusser — Garaudy — Barthes — Picard — Lefebvre — Lévi-Strauss — Halliday — de Chardin — Brassens . . . and between their rival theologies, designed like all theologies to mask the real problems by creating false ones: humanism — existentialism — scientism — structuralism — cyberneticism — new criticism — dialectics-of-naturism — metaphilosophism . . .

He thinks he is avant-garde if he has seen the latest Godard or "participated" in the latest happening. He discovers "modernity" as fast as the market can produce its ersatz version of long outmoded (though once important) ideas; for him, every rehash is a cultural revolution. His principal concern is status, and he eagerly snaps up all the paperback editions of important and "difficult" texts with which mass culture has filled the bookstores<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, he cannot read, so he devours them with his gaze, and enjoys them vicariously through the gaze of his friends. He is an other-directed *voyeur*.

<sup>1</sup> If he had an atom of self-respect or lucidity, he would rip them off. But no: conspicuous consumers always pay!



His favorite reading matter is the *kitsch* press, whose task it is to orchestrate the consumption of cultural nothing-boxes. Docile as ever, the student accepts its commercial *ukases* and makes them the only measuring-rod of his tastes. Typically, he is a compulsive reader of weeklies like *le Nouvel Observateur* and *l'Express*. He generally feels that *le Monde*—whose style he finds somewhat difficult—is a truly objective newspaper. And it is with such guides that he hopes to gain an understanding of the modern world and become a political initiate!

In France more than anywhere else, the student is passively content to be politicised. In this sphere too, he readily accepts the same alienated, spectacular participation. Seizing upon all the tattered remnants of a Left which was annihilated *more than forty years ago* by "socialist" reformism and Stalinist counter-revolution, he is once more guilty of an amazing ignorance. The Right is well aware of the defeat of the workers' movement, and so are the workers themselves, though more confusedly. But the students continue blithely to organise demonstrations which mobilise students and students only. This is political false consciousness in its virgin state, a fact which naturally makes the universities a happy hunting ground for the manipulators of the declining bureaucratic organisations. For them, it is child's play to programme the student's political options. Occasionally there are deviationary tendencies and cries of "Independence!" but after a period of token resistance the dissidents are reincorporated into a *status quo* which they have never really radically opposed.<sup>1</sup> The "Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires", whose title is a case of ideological falsification gone mad (they are neither young, nor communist, nor revolutionary), have with much brio and accompanying publicity defied the iron hand of the Party . . . but only to rally cheerily to the pontifical battle-cry, "Peace in Vietnam!"

The student prides himself on his opposition to the "archaic" Gaullist régime. But he justifies his criticism by appealing—without realising it—to older and far worse crimes. His radicalism prolongs the life of the different currents of adulterated Stalinism: Togliatti's, Garaudy's, Krushchov's, Mao's, etc. His youth is synonymous with appalling *naïveté*, and his attitudes are in reality far more archaic than the régime's—the Gaullists do after all understand modern society well enough to administer it.

But the student, sad to say, is not deterred by the odd anachronism. He feels obliged to have general ideas on everything, to unearth a coherent world-view capable of lending meaning to his need for activism and asexual promiscuity. As a result, he falls prey to the last doddering missionary efforts of the churches. He rushes with atavistic ardour to adore the putrescent carcass of God, and cherishes all the stinking detritus of prehistoric religions in the tender belief that they enrich him and his time. Along with their sexual rivals, those elderly provincial ladies, the students form the social category with the highest percentage of admitted adherents to these archaic cults. Everywhere else, the priests have been either beaten off or devoured, but university clerics shamelessly continue to bugger thousands of students in their spiritual shithouses.

We must add in all fairness that there do exist students of a tolerable intellectual level, who without difficulty dominate the controls designed to check the mediocre capacity demanded from the others. They do so for the simple

<sup>1</sup> Recent "schisms" in both christian and communist organisations have shown, if anything, that *all* these students are united on one fundamental principle: unconditional submission to hierarchical superiors.

reason that they have understood the system, and so despise it and know themselves to be its enemies. They are in the system for what they can get out of it—particularly grants. Exploiting the contradiction which, for the moment at least, ensures the maintenance of a small sector—"research"—still governed by a liberal-academic rather than a technocratic rationality, they calmly carry the germs of sedition to the highest level: their open contempt for the organisation is the counterpart of a lucidity which enables them to outdo the system's lackeys, intellectually and otherwise. Such students cannot fail to become theorists of the coming revolutionary movement. For the moment, they make no secret of the fact that what they take so easily from the system shall be used for its overthrow.

The student, if he rebels at all, must first rebel against his studies, though the necessity of this initial move is felt less spontaneously by him than by the worker, who intuitively identifies his work with his total condition. At the same time, since the student is a product of modern society just like Godard or Coca-Cola, his extreme alienation can only be fought through the struggle against this whole society. It is clear that the university can in no circumstances become the battlefield; the student, insofar as he defines himself as such, manufactures a pseudo-value which must become an obstacle to any clear consciousness of the reality of his dispossession. The best criticism of student life is the behaviour of the rest of youth, who have already started to revolt. Their rebellion has become one of the *signs* of a fresh struggle against modern society.



## It is not enough for thought to seek its realisation in practice: practice must seek its theory

After years of slumber and permanent counter-revolution, there are signs of a new period of struggle, with youth as the new carriers of revolutionary infection. But the society of the spectacle paints its own picture of itself and its enemies, imposes its own ideological categories on the world and its history. Fear is the very last response. For everything that happens is reassuringly part of the natural order of things. Real historical changes, which show that this society can be *superseded*, are reduced to the status of novelties, processed for mere consumption. The revolt of youth against an imposed and "given" way of life is the first sign of a total subversion. It is the prelude to a period of revolt—the revolt of those who can no longer *live* in our society. Faced with a danger, ideology and its daily machinery perform the usual inversion of reality. An historical process becomes a pseudo-category of some socio-natural science: the Idea of Youth. Youth is in revolt, but this is only the eternal revolt of youth; every generation espouses "good causes", only to forget them when "the young man begins the serious business of production and is given concrete and real social aims". After the social scientists come the journalists with their verbal inflation. The revolt is contained by over-exposure: we are given it to contemplate so that we shall forget to participate. In the spectacle, a revolution becomes a social aberration—in other words a social safety valve—which has its part to play in the smooth working of the system. It reassures because it remains a marginal phenomenon; in the apartheid of the temporary problems of a healthy pluralism (compare and contrast the "woman question" and the "problem of racialism"). In reality, if there is a problem of youth in modern capitalism it is part of the total crisis of that society. It is just that youth feels the crisis most acutely.<sup>1</sup>

Youth and its mock freedoms are the purest products of modern society. Their modernity consists in the choice they are offered and are already making: total integration to neo-capitalism, or the most radical refusal. What is surprising is not that youth is in revolt but that its elders are so soporific. But the reason is history, not biology—the previous generation lived through the defeats and were sold the lies of the long, shameful disintegration of the revolutionary movement.

In itself Youth is a publicity myth, and as part of the new "social dynamism" it is the potential ally of the capitalist mode of production. The illusory primacy of youth began with the economic recovery after the second world war. Capital was able to strike a new bargain with labour: in return for the mass production of a new class of manipulable consumers, the worker was offered a *role* which gave him full membership of the spectacular society. This at least was the ideal social model, though as usual it bore little relation to socio-economic reality

<sup>1</sup> Not only feels it but tries to give it expression.

(which lagged behind the consumer ideology). The revolt of youth was the first burst of anger at the persistent realities of the new world—the boredom of everyday existence, the *dead life* which is still the essential product of modern capitalism, in spite of all its modernizations. A small section of youth is able to refuse that society and its products, but without any idea that this society can be superseded. They opt for a nihilist present. Yet the destruction of capitalism is once again a real issue, an event in history, a process which has already begun. Dissident youth must achieve the coherence of a critical theory, and the practical organisation of that coherence.

At the most primitive level, the "delinquents" (*blousons noirs*) of the world use violence to express their rejection of society and its sterile options. But their refusal is an abstract one: it gives them no chance of actually escaping the contradictions of the system. They are its products—negative, spontaneous, but none the less exploitable. All the experiments of the new social order produce them: they are the first side-effects of the new urbanism; of the disintegration of all values; of the extension of an increasingly boring consumer leisure; of the growing control of every aspect of everyday life by the psycho-humanist police force; and of the economic survival of a family unit which has lost all significance.

The "young thug" despises work but accepts the goods. He wants what the spectacle offers him—but *now*, with no down payment. This is the essential contradiction of the delinquent's existence. He may try for a real freedom in the use of his time, in an individual assertiveness, even in the construction of a kind of community. But the contradiction remains, and kills. (On the fringe of society, where poverty reigns, the gang develops its own hierarchy, which can only fulfil itself in a war with other gangs, isolating each group and each individual within the group.) In the end the contradiction proves unbearable. Either the lure of the product world proves too strong, and the hooligan decides to do his honest day's work: to this end a whole sector of production is devoted specifically to his recuperation. Clothes, discs, guitars, scooters, transistors, purple hearts beckon him to the land of the consumer. Or else he is forced to attack the laws of the market itself—either in the primary sense, by stealing, or by a move towards a conscious revolutionary critique of commodity society. For the delinquent only two futures are possible: revolutionary consciousness, or blind obedience on the shop floor.

The *Provos*<sup>1</sup> are the first organisation of delinquency—they have given the delinquent experience its first political form. They are an alliance of two distinct elements: a handful of careerists from the degenerate world of "art", and a mass of beatniks looking for a new activity. The artists contributed the idea of the game, though still dressed up in various threadbare ideological garments. The delinquents had nothing to offer but the violence of their rebellion. From the start the two tendencies hardly mixed: the pre-ideological mass found itself under the Bolshevik "guidance" of the artistic ruling class, who justified and maintained their power by an ideology of provo-democracy. At the moment when the sheer violence of the delinquent had become an *idea*—an attempt to destroy art and go beyond it—the violence was channeled into the crassest neo-artistic reformism. The Provos are an aspect of the last reformism produced by modern capitalism: the reformism of everyday life. Like Bernstein, with his vision of socialism built by tinkering with capitalism, the Provo hierarchy think they can change everyday life by a few well-chosen improvements. What they fail to realise is that the banality of everyday life is not incidental, but the *central mechanism and product of modern capitalism*. To destroy it, nothing less is needed than all-out revolution. The Provos choose the fragmentary and end by accepting the totality.

To give themselves a base, the leaders have concocted the paltry ideology of the provotariat (a politico-artistic salad knocked up from the leftovers of a feast they had never known). The new provotariat is supposed to oppose the passive and "bourgeois" proletariat, still worshipped in obscure Leftist shrines.

1. Reference to the youth movement of the '60s based mainly in Holland.



Because they despair of the fight for a *total* change in society, they despair of the only forces which can bring about that change. The proletariat is the motor of capitalist society, and thus its mortal enemy: everything is designed for its suppression (parties; trade union bureaucracies; the police; the colonization of all aspects of everyday life) because it is the only really menacing force. The Provos hardly try to understand any of this; and without a critique of the system of production, they remain its servants. In the end an anti-union workers demonstration sparked off the real conflict. The Provo base went back to direct violence, leaving their bewildered leaders to denounce "excesses" and appeal to pacifist sentiments. The Provos, who had talked of provoking authority to reveal its repressive character, finished by complaining that they had been provoked by the police. So much for their pallid anarchism.

It is true that the Provo base became revolutionary in practice. But to invent a revolutionary consciousness their first task is to destroy their leaders, to rally the objective revolutionary forces of the proletariat, and to drop the Constants and De Vries of this world (one the favourite artist of the Dutch royal family, the other a failed M.P. and admirer of the English police). There is a modern revolution, and one of its bases could be the Provos—but only without their leaders and ideology. If they want to change the world, they must get rid of those who are content to paint it white.

Idle reader, your cry of "What about Berkeley?"<sup>1</sup> escapes us not. True. American society *needs* its students; and by revolting against their studies they have automatically called that society in question. From the start they have seen their revolt against the university hierarchy as a revolt against *the whole hierarchical system*, the dictatorship of the economy and the State. Their refusal to become an integrated part of the commodity economy, to put their specialized studies to their obvious and inevitable use, is a revolutionary gesture. It puts in doubt that whole system of production which alienates activity and its products from their creators. For all its confusion and hesitancy, the American student movement has discovered one truth of the new refusal: that a coherent revolutionary alternative can and must be found *within* the "affluent society". The movement is still fixated on two relatively accidental aspects of the American crisis—the negroes and Vietnam—and the mini-groups of the New Left suffer from the fact. There is an authentic whiff of democracy in their chaotic organisation, but what they lack is a genuine subversive content. Without it they continually fall into dangerous contradictions. They may be hostile to the traditional politics of the old parties; but the hostility is futile, and will be recuperated, so long as it is based on ignorance of the political system and naive illusions about the world situation. *Abstract* opposition to their own society produces facile sympathy with its apparent enemies—the so-called Socialist bureaucracies of China and Cuba. A group like Resurgence Youth Movement can in the same breath condemn the State and praise the "Cultural Revolution"—that pseudo-revolt directed by the most elephantine bureaucracy of modern times.

At the same time, these organisations, with their blend of libertarian, political and religious tendencies, are always liable to the obsession with "group dynamics" which leads to the closed world of the sect. The mass consumption of drugs is the expression of a real poverty and a protest against it; but it remains a false search for "freedom" within a world dedicated to repression, a religious critique of a world that has no need for religion, least of all a new one. The beatniks—that right wing of the youth revolt—are the main purveyors of an ideological "refusal" combined with an acceptance of the most fantastic superstitions (Zen, spiritualism, "New Church" mysticism, and the stale porridge of Ghandi-ism and humanism). Worse still, in their search for a revolutionary programme the American students fall into the same bad faith as the Provos, and proclaim themselves "the most exploited class in our society". They must understand one thing: there are no "special" student interests in revolution. Revolution will be made by *all* the victims of encroaching repression and the tyranny of the market.

1. Referring to the "F.S.M." = Free Speech Movement

As for the East, bureaucratic totalitarianism is beginning to produce its own forces of negation. Nowhere is the revolt of youth more violent and more savagely repressed—the rising tide of press denunciation and the new police measures against "hooliganism" are proof enough. A section of youth, so the right-minded "socialist" functionaries tell us, have no respect for moral and family order (which still flourishes there in its most detestable bourgeois forms). They prefer "debauchery", despise work and even disobey the party police. The USSR has set up a special ministry to fight the new delinquency.

Alongside this diffuse revolt a more specific opposition is emerging. Groups and clandestine reviews rise and fall with the barometer of police repression. So far the most important has been the publication of the "Open letter to the Polish Workers Party" by the young Poles *Kuron* and *Modzelewski*, which affirmed the necessity of "abolishing the present system of production and social relations" and that to do this "revolution is unavoidable". The Eastern intellectuals have one great task—to make conscious the concrete critical action of the workers of East Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest: the proletarian critique of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy. In the East the problem is not to define the aims of revolution, but to learn how to fight for them. In the West struggle may be easy, but the goals are left obscure or ideological; in the Eastern bureaucracies there are no illusions about what is being fought for: hence the bitterness of the struggle. What is difficult is to devise the forms revolution must take in the immediate future.

In Britain, the revolt of youth found its first expression in the peace movement. It was never a whole-hearted struggle, with the misty non-violence of the Committee of 100 as its most daring programme. At its strongest the Committee could call 300,000 demonstrators on to the streets. It had its finest hour in Spring 1963 with the "Spies for Peace" scandal.<sup>1</sup> But it had already entered on a definitive decline: for want of a theory the unilateralists fell among the traditional Left or were recuperated by the Pacifist conscience. What is left is the enduring (quintessentially English) archaisms in the control of everyday life, and the accelerating decomposition of the old secular values. These could still produce a total critique of the new life; but the revolt of youth needs allies. The British working class remains one of the most militant in the world. Its struggles—the shop stewards movement<sup>2</sup> and the growing tempo and bitterness of wildcat strikes—will be a permanent sore on an equally permanent capitalism until it regains its revolutionary perspective, and seeks common cause with the *new* opposition. The *débâcle* of Labourism makes that alliance all the more possible and all the more necessary. If it came about, the explosion could destroy the old society—the Amsterdam riots would be child's play in comparison. Without it, both sides of the revolution can only be stillborn: practical needs will find no genuine revolutionary form, and rebellious discharge will ignore the only forces that drive and can therefore destroy modern capitalism.

Japan is the only industrialised country where this fusion of student youth and working class militants has already taken place.

*Zengakuren*, the organisation of revolutionary students, and the *League of Young Marxist Workers* joined to form the backbone of the *Communist Revolutionary League*<sup>3</sup>. The movement is already setting and solving the new problems of revolutionary organisation. Without illusions, it fights both western

1. Where the partisans of the anti-bomb movement discovered, made public, and then invaded the ultra secret fallout shelters reserved for members of the government.

2. The shop stewards movement has always, for the most part, been petty bureaucratic, and has never challenged the confines of trade unionism. (Spontaneous Combustion note)

3. It should be noted that the C.R.L. was only one among many "Zengakuren" groups or factions. We are not even sure if the C.R.L., at least with its earlier political position to the left of trotskyism, still exists. In any event, its importance was over-estimated by the S.I. (Spontaneous Combustion note)



capitalism and the bureaucracies of the so-called socialist states. Without hierarchies, it groups together several thousand students and workers on a democratic basis, and aims at the participation of every member in all the activities of the organisation.

They are the first to carry the struggle on to the streets, holding fast to a real revolutionary programme, and with a mass participation. Thousands of workers and students have waged a violent struggle with the Japanese police. In many ways the C.R.L. lacks a complete and concrete theory of the two systems it fights with such ferocity. It has not yet defined the precise nature of bureaucratic exploitation, and it has hardly formulated the character of modern capitalism, the critique of everyday life and the critique of the spectacle. The Communist Revolutionary League is still fundamentally an avant-garde political organisation, the heir of the best features of the classic proletarian movement. But it is at present the most important group in the world—and should henceforth be one of the poles of discussion and a rallying point for the new proletarian critique.

## To create at long last a situation which goes beyond the point of no return

"To be avant-garde means to keep abreast of reality" (*Internationale Situationniste* 8). A radical critique of the modern world must have the totality as its object and objective. Its searchlight must reveal the world's real past, its present existence and the prospects for its transformation as an indivisible whole. If we are to reach the whole truth about the modern world—and a fortiori if we are to formulate the project of its total subversion—we must be able to expose its hidden history; in concrete terms this means subjecting the history of the international revolutionary movement, as set in motion over a century ago by the western proletariat, to a demystified and critical scrutiny. "This movement against the total organisation of the old world came to a stop long ago" (*Internationale Situationniste* 7). It failed. Its last historical appearance was in the Spanish social revolution, crushed in the Barcelona "May Days" of 1937. Yet its so-called "victories" and "defeats", if judged in the light of their historical consequences, tend to confirm Liebknecht's remark, the day before his assassination, that "some defeats are really victories, while some victories are more shameful than any defeat". Thus the first great "failure" of workers' power, the Paris Commune, is in fact its first great success, whereby the primitive proletariat proclaimed its historical capacity to organise all aspects of social life freely. And the Bolshevik revolution, hailed as the proletariat's first great triumph, turns out in the last analysis to be its most disastrous defeat.

The installation of the Bolshevik order coincides with the crushing of the Spartakists by the German "Social-Democrats". The joint victory of Bolshevism and reformism constitutes a unity masked by an apparent incompatibility, for the Bolshevik order too, as it transpired, was to be a variation on the old theme. The effects of the Russian counter-revolution were, internally, the institution and development of a new mode of exploitation, bureaucratic state capitalism, and externally, the growth of the "Communist" International, whose spreading branches served the sole purpose of defending and reproducing the rotten trunk. Capitalism, under its bourgeois and bureaucratic guises, won a new lease of life—over the dead bodies of the sailors of Kronstadt, the Ukrainian peasants, and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and Barcelona.

The third International, apparently created by the Bolsheviks to combat the degenerate reformism of its predecessor, and to unite the avant-garde of the proletariat in "revolutionary communist parties", was too closely linked to the interests of its founders ever to serve an authentic socialist revolution. Despite all its polemics, the third International was a chip off the old block. The Russian model was rapidly imposed on the Western workers' organisations, and the evolution of both was thenceforward one and the same thing. The totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucratic class over the Russian proletariat found its echo



in the subjection of the great mass of workers in other countries to castes of trade union and political functionaries, with their own private interests in repression. While the Stalinist monster haunted the working-class consciousness, old-fashioned capitalism was becoming bureaucratized and overdeveloped, resolving its famous internal contradictions and proudly claiming this victory to be decisive. Today, though the unity is obscured by apparent variations and oppositions, a *single social form* is coming to dominate the world—this modern world which it proposes to govern with the principles of a world long dead and gone. The tradition of the dead generations still weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.

Opposition to the world offered from within—and in its own terms—by supposedly revolutionary organisations, can only be spurious. Such opposition, depending on the worst mystifications and calling on more or less reified ideologies, helps consolidate the social order. Trade unions and political parties created by the working class as tools of its emancipation are now no more than the “checks and balances” of the system. Their leaders have made these organisations their private property; their stepping stone to a role within the ruling class. The party programme or the trade union statute may contain vestiges of revolutionary phraseology, but their practice is everywhere reformist—and doubly so now that official capitalist ideology mouths the same reformist slogans. Where the parties have seized power—in countries more backward than Russia in 1917—the Stalinist model of counter-revolutionary totalitarianism has been faithfully reproduced.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, they have become a static complement to the self-regulation of managerial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The official organisations have become the best guarantee of repression—without this “opposition” the humanist-democratic facade of the system would collapse and its essential violence would be laid bare. In the struggle with the militant proletariat, these organisations are the unfailing defenders of the bureaucratic counter-revolution, and the docile creatures of its foreign policy. They are the bearers of the most blatant falsehood in a world of lies, working diligently for the perennial and universal dictatorship of the State and the Economy. As the situationists put it, “a universally dominant social system, tending toward totalitarian self-regulation, is apparently being resisted—but only apparently—by false forms of opposition which remain trapped on the battlefield ordained by the system itself. Such illusory resistance can only serve to reinforce what it pretends to attack. Bureaucratic pseudo-socialism is only the most grandiose of these guises of the old world of hierarchy and alienated labour”.

As for student unionism, it is nothing but the travesty of a travesty, the useless burlesque of a trade unionism itself long totally degenerate.

The principal platitude of all future revolutionary organisation must be the theoretical and practical denunciation of Stalinism in all its forms. In France at least, where economic backwardness has slowed down the consciousness of crisis, the only possible road is over the ruins of Stalinism. It must become the *delenda est Carthago* of the last revolution of prehistory.

Revolution must break with its past, and derive all its poetry from the future. Little groups of “militants” who claim to represent the authentic Bolshevik heritage are voices from beyond the grave. These angels come to avenge the “betrayal” of the October Revolution will always support the defence of the USSR—if only “in the last instance”. The “under-developed” nations are their promised land. They can scarcely sustain their illusions outside this context,

<sup>1</sup> These countries have been industrialised on classic lines: primitive accumulation at the expense of the peasantry, accelerated by bureaucratic terror.

<sup>2</sup> For 45 years the French “Communist” Party has not taken a single step towards the conquest of power. The same situation applies in all advanced nations which have not fallen under the heel of the so-called Red Army.

where their objective role is to buttress theoretical underdevelopment. They struggle for the dead body of “Trotsky”, invent a thousand variations on the same ideological theme, and end up with the same brand of practical and theoretical impotence. Forty years of counter-revolution separate these groups from the Revolution; since this is not 1920 they can only be wrong (and they were already wrong in 1920).

Consider the fate of an ultra-Leftist group like *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, where after the departure of a “traditional Marxist” faction (the impotent *Pouvoir Ouvrier*) a core of revolutionary “modernists” under Cardan disintegrated and disappeared within 18 months. While the old categories are no longer revolutionary, a rejection of Marxism à la Cardan is no substitute for the reinvention of a total critique. The Scylla and Charybdis of present revolutionary action are the museum of revolutionary prehistory and the modernism of the system itself.

As for the various anarchist groups, they possess nothing beyond a pathetic and ideological faith in this label. They justify every kind of self-contradiction in liberal terms: freedom of speech, of opinion, and other such bric-a-brac. Since they tolerate each other, they would tolerate anything.

The predominant social system, which flatters itself on its modernisation and its permanence, must now be confronted with a worthy enemy: the equally modern negative forces which it produces. Let the dead bury their dead. The advance of history has a practical demystifying effect—it helps exorcise the ghosts which haunt the revolutionary consciousness. Thus the revolution of everyday life comes face to face with the enormity of its task. The revolutionary project must be reinvented, as much as the life it announces. If the project is still essentially *the abolition of class society*, it is because the material conditions upon which revolution was based are still with us. But revolution must be conceived with a new coherence and a new radicalism, starting with a clear grasp of the failure of those who first began it. Otherwise its *fragmentary* realisation will bring about only a new division of society.

The fight between the powers-that-be and the new proletariat can only be in terms of the totality. And for this reason the future revolutionary movement must be purged of any tendency to reproduce within itself the alienation produced by the commodity system<sup>1</sup>; it must be *the living critique* of that system and the negation of it, carrying all the elements essential for its supersession.

As Lukacs correctly showed, revolutionary organisation is this necessary mediation between theory and practice, between man and history, between the mass of workers and the proletariat *constituted as a class* (Lukacs’ mistake was to believe that the Bolsheviks fulfilled this role). If they are to be realised in practice “theoretical” tendencies or differences must be translated into organisational problems. It is by its present organisation that a new revolutionary movement will stand or fall. The final criterion of its coherence will be the compatibility of its actual form with its essential project—the *international and absolute power of Workers’ Councils* as foreshadowed by the proletarian revolutions of the last hundred years. There can be no compromise with the foundations of existing society—the system of commodity production; ideology in all its guises; the State; and the imposed division of labour from leisure.

The rock on which the old revolutionary movement foundered was the separation of theory and practice. Only at the supreme moments of struggle did the proletariat supersede this division and attain their truth. As a rule the principle seems to have been *hic Rhodus, hic non salta*. Ideology, however “revolutionary”, always serves the ruling class; false consciousness is the alarm

1. Whose defining characteristic is the dominance of work *qua* commodity. Cf. in English the pamphlet “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacular Commodity-Economy”.



signal revealing the presence of the enemy fifth column. The lie is the essential product of the world of alienation, and the most effective killer of revolutions: once an organisation which claims the *social truth* adopts the lie as a tactic, its revolutionary career is finished.

All the positive aspects of the Workers' Councils must be already there in an organisation which aims at their realisation. All relics of the Leninist theory of organisation must be fought and destroyed. The spontaneous creation of Soviets by the Russian workers in 1905 was in itself a practical critique of that baneful theory,<sup>1</sup> yet the Bolsheviks continued to claim that working-class spontaneity could not go beyond "trade union consciousness" and would be unable to grasp the "totality". This was no less than a decapitation of the proletariat so that the Party could place itself "at the head" of the Revolution. If once you dispute the proletariat's capacity to emancipate itself, as Lenin did so ruthlessly, then you deny its capacity to organise all aspects of a post-revolutionary society. In such a context, the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" meant nothing more than the subjection of the Soviets to the Party, and the installation of the Party State in place of the temporary "State" of the armed masses.

"All Power to the Soviets" is *still* the slogan, but this time without the Bolshevik afterthoughts. The proletariat can only play the *game* of revolution if the stakes are the whole world, for the only possible form of workers' power—generalized and complete autogestion<sup>2</sup>—can be shared with nobody. Autogestion is the abolition of all authority: it can abide no limitation, geographical or otherwise: any compromise amounts to surrender. "Autogestion must be the means and the end of the struggle: it is at once the goal of that struggle and its adequate form".<sup>3</sup>

A *total* critique of the world is the guarantee of the realism and reality of a revolutionary organisation. To tolerate the existence of an oppressive social system in one place or another, simply because it is packaged and sold as revolutionary, is to condone universal oppression. To accept alienation as inevitable in any one domain of social life is to resign oneself to reification in all its forms. It is not enough to favour Workers' Councils in the abstract; in concrete terms they mean the abolition of commodities and therefore of the proletariat. Despite their superficial disparities, all existing societies are governed by the logic of commodities—and the commodity is the basis of their dreams of self-regulation. This famous fetishism is still the *essential* obstacle to a total emancipation, to the free construction of social life. In the world of commodities, external and invisible forces direct men's actions; autonomous action directed towards clearly perceived goals is impossible. The strength of economic laws lies in their ability to take on the appearance of natural ones, but it is also their weakness, for their effectiveness thus depends *only* on "the lack of consciousness of those who help create them".

The market has one central principle—the loss of self in the aimless and unconscious creation of a world beyond the control of its creators. The revolutionary core of autogestion is the attack on this principle. Autogestion is conscious direction by all of their whole existence. It is not some vision of a workers' control of the market, which is merely to choose one's own alienation, to programme one's own survival (squaring the capitalist circle). The task of the Workers' Councils will not be the autogestion of the world which exists, but its continual qualitative transformation. The commodity and its laws (that vast detour in the history of man's production of himself) will be superseded by a new social form.

<sup>1</sup> Compare the theoretical critique of Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>2</sup> Self-management.

<sup>3</sup> "Les Luites de Classes en Algérie", in *Internationale Situationniste* 10.

With autogestion ends one of the fundamental splits in modern society—between a labour which becomes increasingly reified and a "leisure" consumed in passivity. The death of the commodity naturally means the suppression of *work* and its replacement by a new type of free activity. Without this firm intention, socialist groups like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* or *Pouvoir Ouvrier* fell back on a reformism of labour couched in demands for its "humanization". But it is work itself which must be called in question. Far from being an "Utopia", its suppression is the first condition for a break with the market. The everyday division between "free time" and "working hours", those complementary sectors of alienated life is an *expression* of the internal contradiction between the use-value and exchange-value of the commodity. It has become the strongest point of the commodity ideology, the one contradiction which intensifies with the rise of the consumer. To destroy it, no strategy short of the abolition of work will do. It is only beyond the contradiction of use-value and exchange-value that history begins, that men make their activity an object of their will and their consciousness, and see themselves in the world they have created. The democracy of Workers' Councils is the resolution of all previous contradictions. It makes "everything which exists apart from individuals impossible".

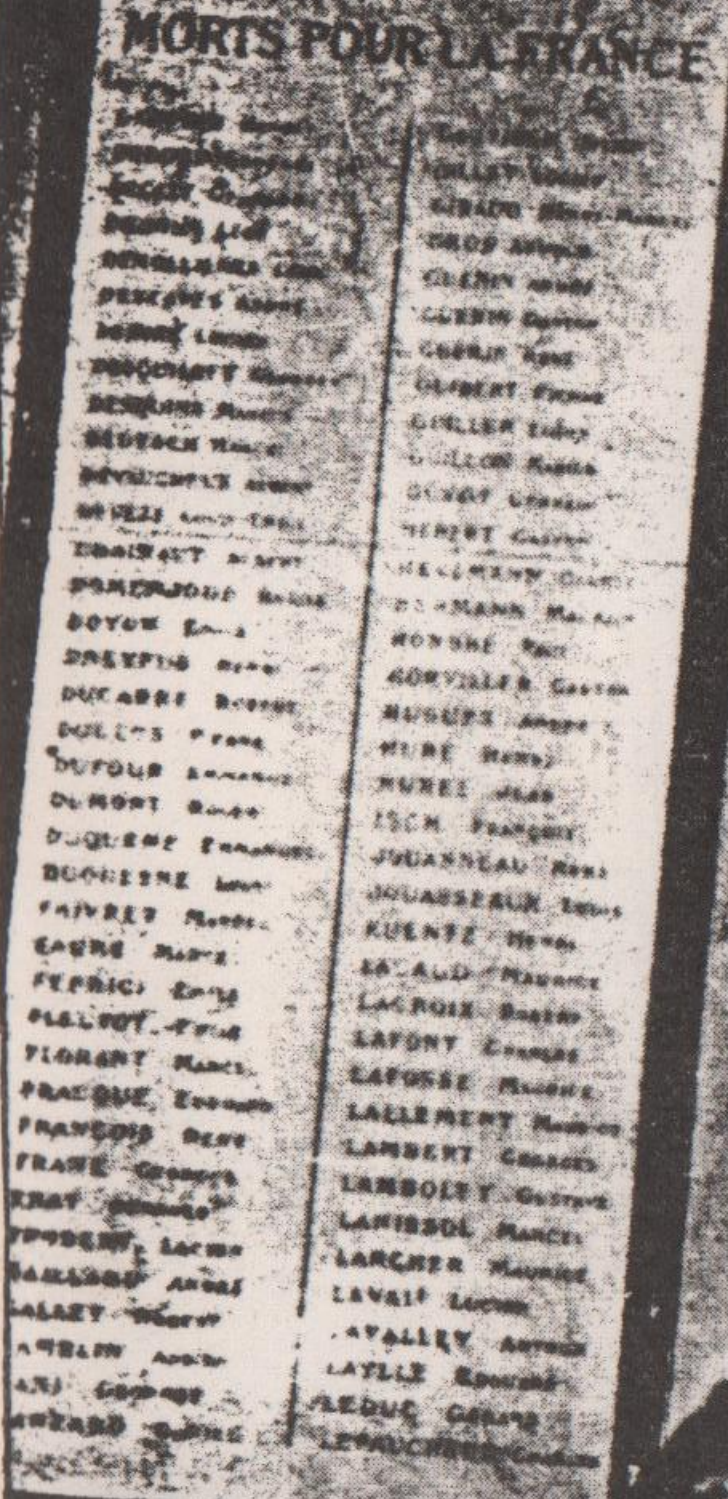
What is the revolutionary project? The conscious domination of history by the men who make it. Modern history, like all past history, is the product of social praxis, the unconscious result of human action. In the epoch of totalitarian control, capitalism has produced its own religion: *the spectacle*. In the spectacle, ideology becomes flesh of our flesh, is realised here on earth. The world itself walks upside down. And like the "critique of religion" in Marx's day, the critique of the spectacle is now the essential precondition of any critique.

The problem of revolution is once again a concrete issue. On one side the grandiose structures of technology and material production; on the other a dissatisfaction which can only grow more profound. The bourgeoisie and its Eastern heirs, the bureaucracy, cannot devise the means to *use* their own over-development, which will be the basis of the *poetry* of the future, simply because they both depend on the *preservation of the old order*. At most they harness over-development to invent new repressions. For they know only one trick, the accumulation of *Capital* and hence of the *proletariat*—a proletarian being a man with no power over the use of his life, and who knows it. The new proletariat inherits the riches of the bourgeois world and this gives it its historical chance. Its task is to transform and destroy these riches, to constitute them as part of a human project: the total appropriation of nature and of human nature by man.

A realised human nature can only mean the infinite multiplication of *real* desires and their gratification. These real desires are the underlife of present society, crammed by the spectacle into the darkest corners of the revolutionary unconscious, realised by the spectacle only in the dreamlike delirium of its own publicity. We must destroy the spectacle itself, the whole apparatus of commodity society, if we are to realise human *needs*. We must abolish those pseudo-needs and false desires which the system manufactures daily in order to preserve its power.

The liberation of modern history, and the free use of its hoarded acquisitions, can come only from the forces it represses. In the nineteenth century the proletariat was already the inheritor of philosophy; now it inherits modern art and the first conscious critique of everyday life. With the self-destruction of the working class art and philosophy shall be realised. To transform the world and to change the structure of life are one and the same thing for the proletariat—they are the passwords to its destruction as a class, its dissolution of the present reign of necessity, and its accession to the realm of liberty. As its maximum programme it has the radical critique and free reconstruction of all the values





STUDENTS MAKE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE  
BURNING OF THE FRENCH STOCK EXCHANGE, MAY 1968.