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# DOUBLE-REFLECTION

Preface  
to a Phenomenology of the Subjective Aspect of  
Practical-Critical Activity

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### Preface to a Phenomenology of the Subjective Aspect of Practical-Critical Activity

*When the thought has found its suitable expression . . . which is realized by means of a first reflection, there follows a second reflection, concerned with the relation between the communication and the author of it.*

—Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

## Overture

*Sooner or later the S.I. must define itself as a therapeutic.*

—*Internationale Situationniste* #8 (1963)

Each time an individual *rediscovers* revolt he *remembers* his previous experiences of it, which all come back to him like a sudden memory of childhood.

We know that "whether the subject sinks into madness, practices theory or participates in an uprising . . . the two poles of daily life—contact with a narrow and separate reality on one hand and spectacular contact with the totality on the other—are simultaneously abolished, opening the way for the unity of individual life" (Voyer).

Now, madness has its drawbacks\* and an uprising is not available every day; but the practice of theory is constantly possible. Why, then, is theory so little practiced?

Of course, a few ill-informed people here and there don't know about it yet. But what about those who do? What about those who have found practical-critical activity, all its undeniable difficulties notwithstanding, to be so often fun, absorbing, meaningful, exhilarating, funny—something after all not so easy to come by—: How does it happen that they *forget*, that they come to imperceptibly drift away from the revolutionary project, going up to the point of utter repression of the moments of realization they had found there?

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\*The insane person makes this break-through at the cost of non-intervention. The individual places himself outside of history, beyond the possibility of collaboration. There must be method in our madness.



The inexperienced will wonder why we engage in this strange activity in the first place. But to those who know why, what is strange is that we do it so little and so erratically. The moments of real excitement and consequence come to us almost exclusively by accident. We lack the consciousness of why we haven't done what we haven't. Why is it that we don't revolt *more*?

Marx understands practical-critical activity as "sensuous human activity," but he doesn't examine it *as such*, as *subjective* activity.

The situationists understood the subjective aspect of practice as a *tactical* matter. ("Boredom is counter-revolutionary.") They posed the right question.

It's about time we looked into this activity itself. What does it consist of? What does it do to us who do it? Whereas the sociologists study man as he is "normally"—that is, reduced to survival, a sum of roles, a sum of banalities—we are going to study him when he acts to suppress all that: *Homo negans*. "By acting on external nature to change it, he at the same time changes his own nature" (*Capital*).

The workers are becoming theoretical and the practice of theory is becoming a mass phenomenon. Why take up this investigation now? *Why, comrades, has it not been taken up till now?*

### The Theorist as Subject and as Role

HOLMES: "My mind rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world. . . . I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward. But you yourself had some experience of my methods of work . . ."

WATSON: "Yes, indeed. I was never so struck by anything in my life. I even embodied it in a small brochure . . ."

—Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*

The alienation of the proletarian consists in this: his work has substance but no freedom; his leisure has freedom but no substance. What he does of consequence is not his, and what he does that is his has no consequences; nothing is at stake in his play. (Hence the appeal of all those "dangerous games"—gambling, mountain climbing, the foreign legion, etc.)

It is this social schizophrenia, this desperately felt need to see their own action, to do something that is *really theirs*, which causes masses of people to take up crafts or vandalism; and still others to try and suppress the split by attacking the separation in a unified way, by taking up *coherent vandalism*: the *craft of the negative*.

What does it feel like? You already know, reader—or at least you once did. It's like when you share a secret or pull off a beautiful prank. Only this feeling is shoved to the margin of life so that its image can take center stage. It ends up being forgotten.

Well, we don't want to forget. A revolution is the most practical joke on a society that's a bad joke.

For the purposes of my investigation I artificially distinguish aspects of revolutionary activity which are inseparable. For simplicity of expression I speak of "the theorist"—the practitioner of theory—in order to examine a genre of activity whose modalities are in some respects quite different from that of a crowd of people who riot on one day without having given the subject much thought the day before. While certain phenomena examined here are common to all moments of radical negating activity, others are obviously superseded at the moment of a mass uprising. This Preface is principally concerned with the situation of the revolutionary in a non-revolutionary situation.

The practice of theory has its own peculiar satisfactions, but also its own peculiar pitfalls, arising from its own unevenness of development, the unevenness of its relation to the revolutionary movement as a whole, and from the fact that the theorist is a repressed individual like everyone else. The movement of history is an awe-ful force to be linked up with: you become drunk with clarity, or just as quickly drunk with delusion.

Thus, our\* *Phenomenology* will at the same time be a *Pathology*.

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The *negative rush* is concentrated sequential critical activity engendering a more or less continuous orgasmic rupture of the spectacle effect. In the negative rush ("rush" being understood in the drug sense, as an almost unstoppable exhilaration) a sort of "domino effect" of ideological unblocking occurs; the destruction of one illusion leads one to examine others more closely; the undertaking of a practical project suggests others which correct, reinforce or expand it; idea follows idea in such rapid succession that the theorist is taken over, possessed, like a *medium* transmitting the historical movement's own oracle back to itself; the complexity of the world becomes *tangible*, transparent; he sees the

\*our: The "Phenomenology" is not a forthcoming book by me. Its development is one of the global proletarian tasks of the coming decade. Right now we are, so to speak, at the stage of trying to figure out the table of contents. Its next installments (in-depth studies, case studies, other prefaces, critiques of this one) are going to come from . . . who?



points of historical choice. As he breaks out of the ordinary passivity and begins to move theoretically at the dizzying pace of events, he is swept off his feet like the masses are at the insurrectional moment. (An insurrection is a *public* negative rush.) But if those masses are unprepared for the explosion which violently threatens the old reality and the "sanity" which goes with it, they have *company* in their crisis, which they can thus see is general and not merely personal. The radical theorist, on the other hand, must be prepared for the personal crises which the radical comprehension and elucidation of the general crises in the society may entail. Alienations against which we have evolved partial, religio-characterial defenses are *discovered afresh* on terrains where the theorist is as yet defenseless. The commodity *form* reappears at each new level; the theory of value is seen as a *valuable theory*, and the theorist as its prophet. A revolutionary concept becomes his muse. He is love-struck. He is the opposite of the militant for he serves his goddess rapturously. The situation is ambiguous. The theory may correct its mystified excesses; or the theorist, in his infatuation, may simply flip out and sink into a theoretical narcissism.

There are also collective negative rushes. The meeting of congruent, parallelly developed projects cuts away the respective petrifications, hesitations and dead ends, putting each person's efforts into a broader and more precise perspective. A single decisive encounter can touch off a veritable fireworks of exciting subversive activity for days at a time, a person or a text acting as a catalyst for a whole little milieu. Historical relations become personal relations. ("If you are profoundly occupied you are beyond all embarrassment.") The disparate survival tastes recede into the background; everyone discovers a common sense of humor (for where there is contradiction, there the comical is also present). The whirl is often very contagious, infecting the ordinarily non-participating with a desire to go beyond a mere contact high.

It doesn't last. Leaving aside the innumerable objective impediments that weigh on this sort of effort, we may note that what engenders the chain reaction is less a "critical mass" than a mass of critiques, a clash of challenges. The sparks come from independent poles striking against each other. When the poles come together, the charges are neutralized in a community of mutual congratulation, contradiction is put on a pedestal and forgotten, and the grouping stagnates; all they have in common are illusions of collective participation and memories of the time when it wasn't illusory.

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In contrast to the pure revolutionary pretension, the *revolutionary role* is *well-founded illusion*. It is not just a stupidity which can be neatly avoided by being sincere or humble, but a constantly-engendered objective product of revolutionary activity, the shadow which accompanies the radical accomplishment, the *reactionary* possibility, the internal or external backlash of the positive.

The positive is the inertia of the negative. Thus, we see an incisive negating action devolve into militantism (imitation of the negative, the practice of repetition); or a demystified judgment of one's possibilities lead to a successful action which leads to a re-mystification of one's capacities (revolutionary megalomania). The spectacle, shaken up by the negative, reacts by seeking a new equilibrium point, incorporating the negative as a moment of the positive. The revolutionary role is the form taken by this restored equilibrium in the individual. The character of the revolutionary is objectively reinforced by the spectacle of his opposition to the spectacle. The rupture of the veils of false-consciousness (ideology, the spectacle effect) places the negating subject in open contradiction with the very organization of unconsciousness (character, capital) and its strong-arm defense (character-armor, the State). The organization of unconsciousness defends itself like a puncture-proof tire: it uses the very negating activity to plug up and seal the puncture. Just as a ruling class in a tight position will offer some revolutionaries a place in the government, character gives the subject a "better position" where he acquires a vested psychological interest in the maintenance of the spectacular-revolutionary status quo. Dissatisfaction striking transforms itself into self-satisfaction at having struck so well. What was an effort at personal liberation returns as a feather in the cap of one's "personality." Politics builds character.

(But no excuses for fakery. There will be nothing more vulgar than future "theorists" lamenting, in a self-indulgent neo-dostoyevskian manner, the role-traps their difficult position as theorist sets for them. It is simply a matter of grasping the objective bases that engender the role or support the pretension—the better to catch the role and the quicker to eject the pretender.)

It is sometimes difficult to chart a path between the use of the revolutionary role to resolve one's individual problems and the use of the role of being non-revolutionary as a defense against dialectics in one's everyday life. A worker understandably wants to leave his work as separate as possible from his efforts at life. But the quandary of the revolutionary is brought out every time someone asks him "What do you do?" Precisely to the extent that he is not a militant, his "business" is not something he can neatly hang up in the hall before getting down to his pleasure. Every time he suppresses his revolutionariness something goes out of him. He's suppressed part of himself. It's a lie, a self-abasement, a betrayal. But if he identifies himself as "a revolutionary" a whole new series of problems emerges, even leaving aside the crude miscomprehensions this gives rise to in a stranger (immediate pigeon-holing as a militant). Hence the *particular* miseries in the love relations in the situationist milieu (in addition to about all the ones shared with everyone else): pathetic attempts to crudely engender love out of comradeship or comradeship out of love; spectacular isolation as a special, weird type of person (e.g. the groupie phenomenon); the *pygmalion effect* (the revolutionary finds he has a lover who is the very image—and only the



image—of his practice; whose automatic affirmation of all his actions is the very epitome of all the weakness and self-abasement he detests); etc. In fact, in their efforts to unite substance and passion they are living out in miniature the clash between the crises of the old order and the signs of the new, signs which will of necessity remain almost exclusively inscribed in negative for a long time still. The old marginal forms of separate, isolated play—art, bohemian experimentation, storybook love—are more and more squeezed out in the global planification, simplifying the problem as it creates new complications on another level: Dialogue finds itself up against the fact that it must concern itself with the *suppression of the conditions which everywhere suppress dialogue*. Dialogue is revolutionary or it doesn't last, and begins to know it.

### Behindism, or Theory Colonization

*Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. . . . Tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.*

—Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

In certain kinds of races (e.g. bicycling), if you can get close enough behind the front racer you can get a free ride—the person in front breaks the wind and creates a vacuum that sucks you along behind. The *behindist* is a person who has such a relation to revolutionary theory or theorists: no matter how much he "advances" he is always following in the wake of others.

The behindist relation acquires sense only in the context of creativity, of qualitative content. (In this regard, the linearity of the "race" analogy may be misleading.) Thus, the phenomenon is known among writers who try to break out of the overpowering influence of a master and find "their own voice"; and it is also involved in the rapid turnover in music groups, where each member goes off to form his own group whose members in turn go off a few years later to form *their* own groups. And thus there is no behindism in the leftist milieu, where the qualitative is absent and the leader-follower relation, far from being considered a problem, is rather aimed at; or if it is vaguely felt as a problem, is easy for those on the bottom to break out of. (It doesn't take much self-respect to resent patent manipulation, much initiative to reject it, or much imagination to bypass a milieu of artificially enforced scarcity of intelligence.) Behindism is the "progress disease" of the most advanced sector of the revolutionary movement. The more objectively correct the theory, the stronger its imperialist grip on the behindist.

Consciousness of human practice is itself a type of human production, in which masses of people participate in various ways and with varying degrees of consciousness. *Expressed* theory is only a moment in this process, a *refined* product of practical struggles, consciousness momentarily *crystallized* in a form on the way to becoming broken down again into raw material for other struggles. Only in the upside-down world of the revolutionary spectacle does this *visible moment* of theory seem to be *theory itself*, and its *immediate* articulator its *creator*.

The alienation of the behindist to the profit of the myth of revolution (which is the result of his own semi-conscious activity) expresses itself in the following way: the more he appropriates, the less autonomous he becomes; the more he participates partially, the less he comprehends his own possibilities to participate totally. The behindist stands in an alien relation to the products of his activity because he alienates himself *in* the act of production (the activity is not passionate but imposed, it is not the satisfaction of a desire to revolt but only a means for satisfying other desires, e.g. recognition by his peers) or *from* the act of production (his participation tends heavily toward the *distributive* aspect\* of the process).

Fundamentally, coherence is less the development of one's theory or one's practice than the development of their *relation with each other*. Thus, we see the behindist as suffering from a theoretico-practical *imbalance*, taking in theory all out of proportion to his use of it, or engaging in a practice which has always been *initiated* by others. His is the appropriation that always comes too late. He is protected from risks. He doesn't *discover*, he is *informed*—which books are essential, which rebellions were the most radical, which people are ideologues, what the proper reasons for a break are. . . . Everywhere he turns, someone's been there before him. The general theory is his *personal spectacle*. Yet so much is he in the thrall of the theory that the more he is incapacitated by it, the more he feels the need to pursue it further, always supposing that that magical insight which will finally let him "understand" what to do and how to do it is just around the corner. So much is he on this treadmill that when he comes upon a terrain where he has not been preceded he supposes that it can only have been because it wasn't "important enough"—as if there weren't millions of subversive projects worth doing, most of which haven't even been conceived of yet. The radiance of past subversion engenders a narrow *de facto* orthodoxy as to what constitutes "coherent practice."

Behindism is a permanent organizational problem of our epoch. One who is locally autonomous may very well be behindist in relation to the global movement as a whole, or to its most comprehensive theorists. (In

\*"Before distribution becomes distribution of products, it is (1) distribution of the means of production, and (2) (which is another aspect of the same situation) distribution of the members of society among the various types of production (the subsuming of the individuals under definite relations of production). It is evident that the distribution of products is merely the result of this distribution, which is comprised in the production process and determines the structure of production."  
(Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.)



the final analysis, the proletariat is collectively behindist as it struggles for the *self-management of its own theory*.) Generally speaking, the *practical* reading of a radical text is characterized by a critical, seemingly almost callous attitude, which constantly has an eye out for what can be ripped off from it, and which cares little for the intrinsic merit of what can't. Whereas the feeling "This is absolutely fantastic! There's so much I don't know! I'm going to have to read a lot more of this!" announces the nascent theory colonization.

Each revolutionary has to make his own mistakes, but it is pointless to repeat ones that have already been made and overcome by others. The problem is to continually discover a balance between appropriation of certainties and exploration of new terrains. It seems to me that *conception* is the aspect which can least be dispensed with, as the behindist attempts to break out of his vicious circle. Once a project is chosen and begun, the consultation of a text or a person is less mystifying because the point of contact is narrower and more precise.

It is important to distinguish the behindist, who is in a difficult position because of his relation to other revolutionaries, from that vast mass of hangers-on who merely find it passionate to associate with revolutionaries, or at least to let other people know that they do. The hanger-on imagines that he is more advanced than the masses because his more or less accidental proximity to revolutionaries lets him know which way the wind is turning. He wants to appreciate the radical acts of others *aesthetically*, as *better spectacles* than are ordinarily available. Thus, even as a spectator of revolution he doesn't see its entire uneven and contradictory process, but solely its latest *visible results*. In this sense, he is not even the spectator of the revolution, but only of its *recuperation*. He can see a thousand people in the streets, but he can't hear the subjects of a million conversations: if the revolution doesn't proceed in a neat, cumulative, linear fashion, he announces that it's no longer there\* (and the worst of the hangers-on in this regard are the retired revolutionaries). He seeks not to subvert this world but to arrive at *an accommodation with its subverters*. If his *complacency* is disturbed he *complains* about the revolutionary movement in exactly the same way he would complain about a defective commodity or a politician who sold him out, and supposes that he is demonstrating his autonomy when he threatens to withdraw his priceless *vote of confidence*. The serious behindist will not hesitate to separate himself from his best comrades if he sees no better way to develop his autonomy; whereas it suffices for the hanger-on to find himself in a milieu where revolutionary pretensions are not fashionable to drop his without a second thought.

\*"Indeed, how ridiculous! And yet how rich with such ridiculous things is history! They repeat themselves in all critical periods. And no wonder! For, with regard to the past, all is looked on favorably, and the necessity of the changes and revolutions that occurred is acknowledged; its application, however, to the present situation is opposed with every means available. The present is made the exception to the rule because of shortsightedness and complacency."  
(Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.)

## How To Win Friends and Influence History

"How?" you ask. Rather a large order, I admit. And in attempting to harvest the material to fill it, we must tread our way down devious and dubious paths, for so much depends upon you, upon your audience, your subject, your material, your occasion, and so on. However, we hope that the tentative suggestions discussed and illustrated in the remainder of this chapter will yield something useful and of value.

—Dale Carnegie, *How To Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People by Public Speaking*

A hero in a renaissance fantasy discovers (on the moon, I believe) the abode of all the *lost things* of history, all the things which were lost and never again found. Imagine if we were to see gathered in one enormous pile all the *lost situationist schemes*! However, we too would probably have to ascend to the moon to find them, for, as Swift observes, "the whining Passions and little starved Conceits are gently wafted up by their own extreme Levity . . . and . . . Bombast and Buffoonery, by Nature lofty and light, soar highest of all."

How often have we seen a promising project start out with enthusiasm, become boring and then get dropped? How often have we seen a project expand itself (and a good project almost always tends to expand itself) to the point where it dominates its initiator, to the point where he gets so bogged down in the immensity of his self-imposed tasks that he ends up repressing the whole experience like a wiped-out C.P. militant after the thirties? How many will never return? Alas!

Of course, it's true that in most of these cases we're probably not missing much: how could a theorist elucidate the organizational tasks of the masses if he can't organize his own ongoing tasks? Do we suppose someone will be able to criticize economy if he hasn't worked out the *economy of his critique*?

We need to elaborate the morphology of the *single project*. For example: [conception — commencement — expansion — reorientation — paring-down — final attack — realization — after effects], or even perhaps: [foreplay — orgasm — relaxation]. And we certainly need to cultivate the *art of the interrelation of projects*. In spite of occasional lip service to Fourier, how often do we see a revolutionary consciously varying his activities, selecting two or three different types of projects among which he can skip according to mood? Or choosing a project for its educative value so that, like certain musicians, he discovers as he communicates? Or carefully seeking the optimal collaboration/rivalry ratio with his comrades?

We can't intervene among the workers if we don't know how to intervene in our own work. The agitators must be agitated. "Prepare new successes, however small, but daily."



(Yes, we can foresee a *competentism* which will arise out of the popularization of critical techniques (e.g. the widespread ability to turn out a crudely "correct" leaflet for any occasion). But this proliferated misuse, by undermining the flimsy basis of a tiny minority's monopolization of a situationist image, will in turn dialectically force its own qualitative supercession.)

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*It is hard to decide whether irresolution makes men more wretched or more contemptible; and whether it is always worse to take the wrong decision than to take none.*

—La Bruyère, *Characters*

The alpha and omega of revolutionary tactics is *decision*. Decision is the great clarifier: it brings everything back into focus. Like a ray of sunshine finally breaking through an overcast sky, the concrete proposal disperses the clouds, dissolves away the fog of speculation. The simplest method of *bullshit-detecting* consists in noting whether an individual's decisions lead to acts and his activity to decisions: "Oh, I see, you think *x*: then that means that you are going to do *y*?" *Panic!* "Er . . . no . . . ah, I was just saying . . ."

Consider the exhilaration of *conversion* to a religion or a fad: it is the brief moment of conscious choice among the various modes of submission to the given. One makes the big step and *decides* to serve Christ or to join a fan club or a political group. The rush, however, is attributed to the content of the choice.

Commodity society contains this contradiction: it must arouse these eagerly entertained enthusiasms, both to keep the ideological market going and to maintain the psychological survival of its consumers; and yet in so doing it is playing with fire: one decision may lead to another. Most consequential revolutionaries can trace their development back to a decisive moment when they determined upon—or, more often, *stumbled* upon—a small but concrete act. Often enough they hesitated, doubted themselves, thought that what they were doing was maybe stupid and in any case insignificant. But in retrospect it can often be seen that that conversation, letter, leaflet, or whatever, marked a starting point—nothing was quite the same afterwards. In fact the embarrassment, the awkwardness, is almost the mark of this type of moment: the blush of the revolutionary virgin ceasing to be one. In subversion, one can start anywhere. But the subjective power of the act is proportional to the degree to which the person subverts not only a situation but also himself as a part of it. Long experience has shown that to critique the branch you are sitting on is the most exciting and often even the essential beginning. The practice of theory begins at home.

• • •

*When in doubt have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.*

—Raymond Chandler

Decision is intervention, disruption, drawing the line. It has an arbitrary character, aristocratic, dominating. It is necessary mediation, the subject imposing himself by imposing on himself. Decision is *aggressive limitation*: an act is made possible by the elimination of other possible acts. It is the interposing of an arbitrary *limiting element*. (The words "decide" and "concise" both trace back to a Latin root to *cut*.)

The limiting element may even be random. It is only necessary that the element of randomness be calculated. The experiments of the surrealists were generally marked by an avowed surrender to the irrational or the unpredictable—which is tantamount to worshipping one's own helplessness. Of itself, the action of chance is naturally conservative and tends to reduce everything to an alternation between a limited number of variants, or to habit. We invoke randomness not for its own sake but as a counter-conditioning agent. The systematic use of chance is the "reasoned disordering" of behavior, on the principle that the end of conditioning is reached by the straight and narrow path of conditioning itself. In general, a dominated conditioning exposes the hidden dominating conditioning.

Existing in a haze so omnipresent we can scarcely discern it—like a fish trying to comprehend "water"—we introduce *one more* routine, arbitrary enough that we can see it and therefore alter it, just as a person trying to quit smoking will temporarily shift to gnawing candy. Discovering a fetish, we turn it against itself. To burn or detourn commodities would mean nothing to people who were not dominated by them. But since we *really are entranced* by the commodity-spectacle, we can turn the charm into a countercharm, the fetish into a talisman. The anti-manipulative anti-aesthetics of detournement has no other basis: The less magic possessed by an image, the less *authority* is there to manipulate the observer (in the limiting case, the communication draws its power *exclusively* from its own truth); the more magic it possesses, the more the *already existing* authority is drawn on to denounce the conditions that could make such a manipulation possible. It only remains to add that detournement is not only for demystifying others.

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*Nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person.*

—Sherlock Holmes

"To judge that which has contents and workmanship is the easiest thing; to grasp it is more difficult; and what is most difficult is to combine both by producing an account of it," as George Hegel said a while back, in another preface to another Phenomenology. It is commonly known how



merely writing down a question and trying to answer it can often cut through a welter of confusions. (For example: "What are my current obstacles in this project?" "Where do I stand in relation to this theory? to that person?" "What is the role of such and such an ideology in the society as a whole?" "What are the present options?") The secret resides partly in the intrinsic clarification arising from a forced centering on one issue,\* and partly in a subjective demystification which comes from the objectivization of the problem: by "expressing" (objectifying) the data, you achieve a "distanciation" which allows you to better come to grips with the problem (assuming it is something that can be come to grips with at all). This process of objectification is the essential element in the real subjective efficacy of all the religions, therapies and "self-improvement" programs (confessing to a priest or a psychoanalyst, for example).

The practice of theory is less concerned with victories—victories take care of themselves—than with problems. It is less a matter of finding solutions than of discovering the right questions and posing them in the right way. It looks for the nexes, the crossroads, the choices that "make a difference." Subversion does not aim to confuse, but to make things *clear*—which is precisely what throws the ruling spectacle into such a confusion. Subversion only seems to come out of nowhere because this world is nowhere. In contrast to advertising, the "art that conceals art," detournement is the art that reveals its own art; it explains how it got here and why it can't stay.

By defining the real issues, we force the most radical polarizations and thus push the dialogue to a higher level. That's what makes for our "disproportionate influence" that drives our enemies wild. Our strategy is a sort of "revolutionary defeatism"—we incite rigor and publicity even if they are applied first of all against us. Our method is to expose our own methods; our force comes from knowing how to make our mistakes count.

If the theorist possesses an influence, he wields it precisely to set in motion the withering away of this state of affairs. In this sense, he detours himself, his own *de facto* position. He *democratizes* whatever really separates him from other proletarians (methods, specialized knowledge) and *demystifies* the apparent separations (his accomplishments are proof not of his amazing capacities, but of the amazing capacities of the revolutionary movement of his era). He would like his theories to grip the masses, to become part of the masses' own theory. But even more importantly, he tries to make it so that even the defeat of his theories is nevertheless conducive to the advance of the movement which has tried them and found them wanting. Even if his theory of social practice falls

\*"The discussion of these perspectives leads to the posing of the question: To what extent is the S.I. a political movement? . . . The debate attains a certain confusion. Debord proposes, in order to bring out the opinion of the Conference distinctly, that each person respond in writing to a questionnaire asking if he considers that there are 'forces in the society which the S.I. can count on? What forces? In what conditions?' . . ."  
(Report on the Fourth Conference of the S.I. (September 1960), in *I.S.* #5.)

short, he wants the *way* he practices theory socially to be both exemplary in itself and instructive in the way it lays open to the light of day the stages on that theory's way.

To supersede is sweet; but sweeter still to incite one's own supercession!

The practice of theory being the *practice of clarity*, anyone who claims to be a revolutionary should be able to define what his activity consists of: what he has done, what he is doing, what he proposes to do. This is an absolute minimum base, without which all discussion of theory, tactics, etc., is just so much idle running at the mouth. Anything less is an insult—we should never have to *guess* whether someone is bullshitting, what the odds are that they'll accomplish what they vaguely suggest that they will.

Theory is the proletariat's continuous "true confession" to itself, the incantation that exorcises the false problems in order to pose the real ones. Only, the proletariat can only "express itself" through the struggle for the means of expression. Whatever the subjective diversity of a million distinct and contradictory miseries, the solution is unitary and objective because the diversity of misery is maintained by unitary and objective means. For the proletariat, "producing an account" of its own conditions is inseparable from *settling its account* with whatever and whoever maintains them.

#### Affective Detournement: Alternative to Sublimation

*I played sly tricks on madness.*

—Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*

The chief defect of all psychoanalysis—Reich's included—is that it considers neurosis or character as a separate phenomenon, and thus by implication has the notion (even if only as an unrealizable ideal) of a possible "healthy individual" within the present society. But to attack character in isolation is doomed to defeat because it doesn't function in isolation. For the most part, character formations, if broken up, will simply reform in a slightly different way; the only alternative is madness or death. Character is the miserable defense of the world against its own misery. The call to break up character defenses is a call to break up the conditions against which we require defenses. There is no revolutionary psychoanalysis, but only a revolutionary use of it.

It has for a long time been commonly recognized that political activity is often merely a poor compensation for personal failure. But it is equally true that as a whole our "personal" activity is merely a poor compensation for revolutionary failure. One repression reinforces another. Characterological fixation tends to reproduce itself as ideological fixation, and vice-versa. A personal block reinforces a theoretical block. Ideology is a defense against subjectivity, and character is a defense against the practice of theory.

A person attempting to criticize someone or something he previously respected, for example, will often feel the classical oedipal resistances, as if



he were about to kill his father: self-doubt, guilt, hesitation, chickening out at the last minute. Note how often someone who has made a perfectly good critique feels obliged to tack on an apologetic coda: "I'm sorry, I only did this because I had to; now I'll try to make up for it with a positive contribution."

**affective detournement:** *Subjectively double-reflected critical activity, i.e. conscious interplay between critical activity and affective behavior; orientation of a feeling, passion, etc., toward its proper object, toward its optimal realizable expression.*

The notion of affective detournement is indissolubly linked to the recognition of the subjective effects of the work of the negative and to the affirmation of a playful-destructive behavior; which places it in complete opposition to the classic positions of psychoanalysis or mysticism.

At its simplest, affective behavior and critical activity can be played off against each other, the one manipulated in support of the other, without there being any particular, direct connection between them (or at least not a conscious one). Because of the interconnectedness of repressions, when the subject breaks a constraint, a fixation or a fetish, the two poles of political mystification—empiricism and utopianism—are simultaneously weakened, opening the way for a practical grasp of events. The spectacle effect is broken, dissolving the appearance of necessary impotence, or, what amounts to the same thing, the haze of a myriad of "possible" projects which will never be realized.

Reich noted that when his analysis was getting to a sensitive point, the patient might come up with a flood of hitherto repressed material as a decoy, a superficial distraction, a sort of "bribe" to the analyst. I have found that one can arrange one's "self-analysis" so that the "bribe" is paid to oneself in the form of temporarily increased energy and historical lucidity. Character will win out; but you can blackmail it, make it *pay* by making it squirm.

Inversely, certain types of brief subversive interventions can be undertaken somewhat arbitrarily or voluntaristically with the simple aim of jostling oneself out of a rut.

More directly, and thus more complexly, the content of an affect may be related to the content of critical activity, the "overlapping" being transformed from an unconscious hindrance to a conscious alliance.

Affective detournement does not claim to realize passions, to definitively destroy frustrations. Whereas sublimation substitutes a realization on one plane in exchange for a non-realization on another, a substitution characterized by the repression of the original desire, affective detournement openly proclaims its origin as frustrated desire. Although it aims to strike back at the origin of the frustration, it is distinguished, on the other hand, from the whole revenge syndrome (fixation on the hated object, which thus also pushes the original desire out of the picture) by the fact that the subject dominates: the particular object of aggression (if there is one) is treated as a mere means.

That lost love, the dream that ended too soon—every missed possibility is another fact that demands to be *corrected historically*. In the words of a definition of poetic cubism, affective detournement is a "conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements," the *juxtaposition* of an affect and the revolutionary project, going up to the point of the supercession of one or both of the original elements. The supercession may be simple negation—an exorcism of the defeatist aspects of the affect or the project—or it may be a more positive matter of mutual augmentation. It is only through a spectacular perversion that desire is seen as something that simply "happens" to a person, the unilateral presentation of a fixed object to a person who need only "have" a desire for it. The expression "to conceive a desire" retains the comprehension that one participates in the development of one's desires. Every realized possibility demands to be realized more. Affective detournement fathers a new desire on the old one by introducing it into *historical company*.

Nothing is more predictable than the recuperation of our techniques, in the form, for example, of encounter or happening type sessions devoted to "anti-character" therapy in a "radical perspective." (This would be a purer form of the ideology which is now being sought in the more diffuse forms of "radical therapy" or "alternate culture," and which accounts for the enormous currency of Reich, whose works are seen more or less consciously as providing a missing link in the search for a viable psycho-social reformism.) Suffice it to say that it is not by changing ourselves that we will change the world—a fantasy which meets its truth in the stalinist "construction of socialism" by the construction of "socialist man" (on the procrustean model). Anyone who announces his being able to function better as a revolutionary victory is just advertising the system. Affective detournement breaks with the notion of permanent cure. Either repression returns—as modified exploitation or symptom—or it never left: to claim any *fundamental* liberation within commodity society is to proclaim one's own *fundamental* compatibility with reification. Illusion of permanence or permanent illusion.

All techniques are allowed, and not only psychoanalysis: they need only begin with a demystified comprehension of the totality and contain their own critique. Affective detournement is an ongoing and disabused skirmishing in the conditions of continuous *double power in the individual*.

### Sleepers Awake

The forces which want to suppress us must first understand us—and that is their downfall. The unconsciousness of the spectacle already puts it at our disposal to a certain extent: as if we suddenly had the cities all to ourselves, like a child running through the silent ruins in a Chirico painting. When you detourn a film, an ad, a building, a subway, you demystify its apparent impregnability; just for a moment, *you* dominated it; it is just an object, just technology. Or is it? Didn't you notice how you felt a little bit *at home* with it?

The image of class struggle that separates us from the spectacle cedes too much to the enemy without a fight because it separates us from our es-



sence. The spectacle is not just the image of our alienation, it is also the alienated form of our real aspirations. Hence its grip on us. The compensatory fantasies draw their power from our real fantasies. Therefore, no puritanism towards the spectacle. It is not "just" a fetish; it is also a *real fetish*, i.e. it really is *magical*, it really is a "dream factory," it really does expropriate human adventure. The maldororean passion perfectly captures the ambivalent attitude appropriate toward the spectacle: to tenderly and sincerely embrace it, as, with a loving and delicate caress, we slit its throat.

We are still experimenting in the dark. The most powerful weapon the society possesses is its ability to prevent us from discovering the weapons we already have—how to use them. We have to practice a global "resistance analysis" on the society itself, interpreting not primarily its content but its resistances to the "interpretation." Each subversive action is experimental like a move in the children's game: "You're getting warmer." It is by making history that you learn to comprehend it; by playing against the system that you discover its weaknesses, where it lashes back. In the final analysis that's really what the "dérives" were all about: Is it entirely coincidental that the modern critique of urbanism and the spectacle issued from the "psychogeographical" researches of the fifties? One learns most precisely how the system operates by observing how it operates on its most precise enemies.

The revolutionary movement is its own laboratory and provides its own data. All the alienations reappear there in concentrated form. Its own failures are the lodes which contain the richest ore. Its first task is always to expose its own poverties, which will be continually present, whether in the form of simple lapses into the dominant poverties of the world it combats or the new poverties which its very successes create for itself. This will always be the "precondition of all critique." When dialogue has armed itself, we can try our luck on the terrain of the positive. But till then, the success of a revolutionary group is either trivial or dangerous. Taking our cue from commodity production, we have to learn how to manufacture organizations with their own "built-in obsolescence." In revolution we lose every battle but the last one. What we must aim at is to *fail clearly*, each time, over and over. Everything fragmentary has its resting place, its place in the spectacle. But the critique that wants to end the Big Sleep can have "nowhere to lay its head."

Be cruel with your past and those who would keep you there.