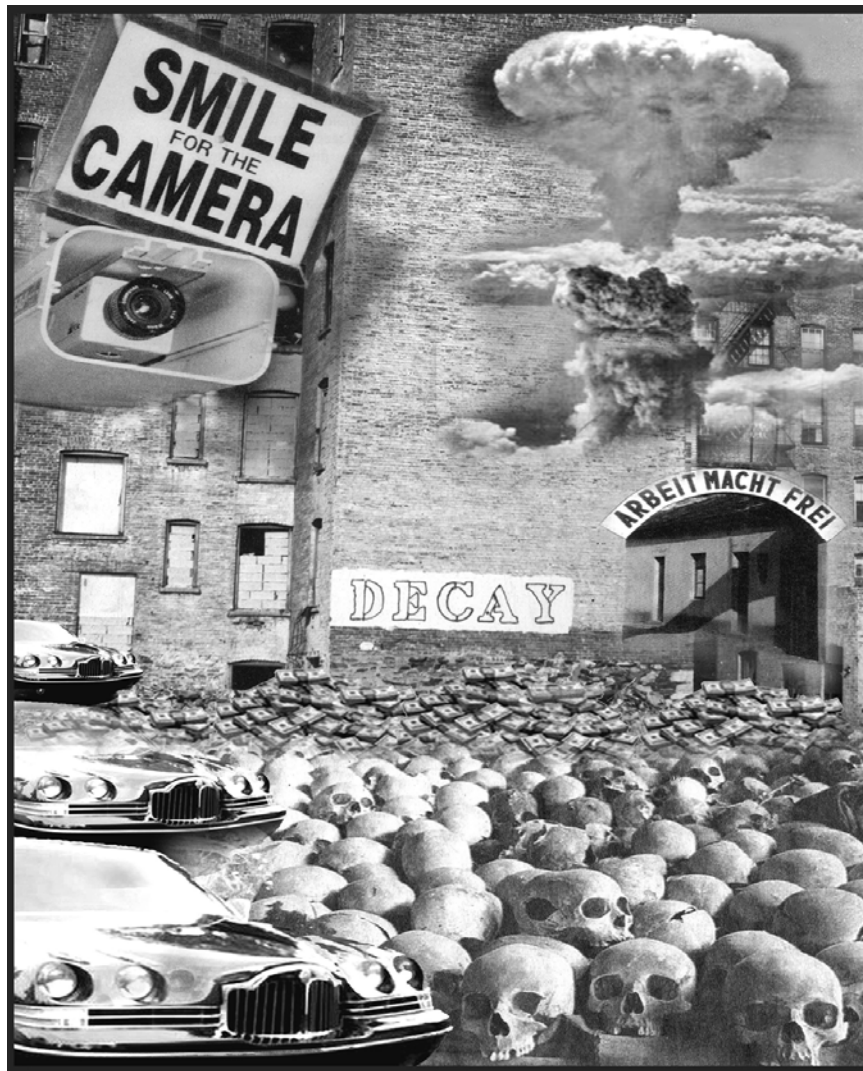


# INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE



- . The Decadence of Capitalism
- . Technology and Revolution

\$ 2.50  
£ 2

n° 44  
*Fall/Winter 2005*

# Contents

## The World Today

The Strengthening Of The State Hurls Us Into Catastrophe.....page 1

## Debate on the Decadence of Capitalism

The Genesis of Capitalist Decadence.....page 3

On Decadence: Elements For A Response To Critiques.....page 5

For A Non-Productivist Understanding Of Decadence.....page 9

The Political Need For A Concept Of Decadence.....page 15

## Debate on Technology and Revolution

New Technologies and the Visibility Of the Revolutionary Project.....page 17

Technology and Consciousness.....page 2

# Subscriptions

*Internationalist Perspective* aims to appear twice a year, in English and in French. A subscription for four issues can be obtained at the following rates:

English Edition: £ 5 / \$ 8.00 : regular mail  
£ 8.00 / \$ 10.00 : air mail

French Edition: 7 euro : regular mail  
10 euro : air mail

Requests for subscriptions in the US (for the English or French edition) should be sent to the address in the US with cheques made payable to CASH. All other other requests for subscriptions should be addressed to the USA for the English Edition and to Brussels for the French edition.

# Public Meetings

From time to time, *Internationalist Perspective* holds public meetings, as part of its work of stimulating a real debate on vital questions confronting revolutionaries and the working class. For information on the next meeting, write to the addresses below.

# Correspondence

We invite our readers to send their comments on the positions and analyses expressed in IP. The development of a proletarian political milieu on the international level depends on the widest possible discussion and confrontation of ideas.

# Contact Addresses

Write only as shown below :

Destryker  
BP 22  
1310 La Hulpe  
BELGIUM

AM  
P.O. Box 40231  
S.I., New York 10304  
U.S.A.

Email us at : [ippi@skynet.be](mailto:ippi@skynet.be)

Our website, <http://users.skynet.be/ippi/> is under reconstruction and should be ready, at a new location, in January 2006.

Editor : F. Destryker, 12b Ave du Beau Site La Hulpe Dépôt Bruxelles X



*Even  
escapist pop  
culture reflects  
a rising  
anxiety about  
the future  
capitalism is  
dragging us  
into.*

# ***The Strengthening Of The State Hurls Us Into Catastrophe***

London, July 11, 2005: an explosion of bombs in the Tube and on a bus. Terrorism seeks out neither the nerve centers of the capitalist state, nor strategic targets. No, it focuses on the “arteries” of the developed world, and it insidiously propagates the idea that the life of each person is in jeopardy, and can be abruptly terminated in a subway, a bus, in Madrid or in London. In the “democracies,” the state demands that each of us collaborate in the struggle to eradicate terrorism. One discovers that one is filmed, that each of us can be tracked thanks to video cameras; in short, that one is caught in the web of the state. The forces of repression, now strengthened, become omnipresent, the cops decked out in fluorescent yellow vests. Money flows from the state into the pipelines of repression, and the police now have the authorization to draw a bead on anyone whose behavior they suspect.

Summer 2005: the blockage of commodities imported from China in European custom-houses. The means of disinformation inundate us with images of piles of shirts, shoes, bras, and jeans “made in China.” The image of disciplined Chinese workers, in uniform, being harangued by their boss when there is poor quality work, ready to give their all to earn their wage, contrasts with the image of European workers out on the street, following the closure of luxury shoe factories in France. We are then urged to support nationalistic protectionism to protect the interests of “our” workers.

August 19, 2005: Hurricane Katrina breaches the levees on Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans is under water, tens of thousands have lost their homes, their jobs, their families, their near and dear. An unforeseeable “natural catastrophe”? No! We learn that the catastrophic scenario had been foreseen with great precision, and that the predictions were fulfilled with an exactitude that would be the envy of any scientist. The American government had decided not to allocate the resources needed to preventatively shore up the dikes. After the most powerful

state in the world showed that it could leave the incredulous victims to fend without food or the bare necessities, President Bush, with his habitual air of the true believer, made an appeal to the feelings of solidarity amongst the population at large.

What underlying logic links these three recent occurrences that have generated the feeling that “nothing will ever be the same again”? And what role does the capitalist state play in all this? Capitalism, which shapes and directs the economy of the whole planet, finds itself in a unique moment of its historical trajectory: a vertiginous development of the productive forces that goes hand in hand with an exacerbated global competition, and with a growing level of destruction (see the articles on the decadence of capitalism in this issue of IP).

We are held hostage by the fear of terrorism, which can only increase in the future (see «The Reality of the «First War of the 21th Century» in IP 39, December 2002). The anti-terrorist campaigns of the state are not aimed at protecting the lives of workers. On the contrary! They seek to make workers accept the stepped-up level of repression: expanding the powers of the police and the militarization of society. The powers of surveillance over the life of each person aims not to protect lives but to control life and to prevent insubordination.

We are held prisoner by the gigantic economic upheavals in the works: the rise in the price of oil, the attacks on the social “safety net,” economic competition with China. The reaction of the European Community in the face of the flood of Chinese commodities onto its market is not aimed at protecting “our” workers, but simply the interests of capital. The economic development of China rests on the fact that it is becoming the workshop of the world, but first and foremost a *hell* for workers. In order to assure its profitability, capital moves European factories to China, but it does the same thing there: labor

in Shanghai is already too costly, and so enterprises are moved towards poorer regions, more backward, further West. Pensions, social benefits, the right to housing, have been overturned in China. Side by side with the development of a middle class having access to consumer goods, the cost of labor-power has been slashed to the bare bones. While there are increases in consumption (parking lots, paid vacations, individual vacations), social dislocation also increases: millions of workers have lost their jobs, tens of millions of peasants have been displaced, and left with nothing. Capitalist production is now global: stopping Chinese commodities at the frontier puts the jobs of Western workers in jeopardy; those whose labor consists in finishing and assembling the components made in Asia. We live on the edge of a volcano, and we do not know when it will erupt. There is no opposition between the interests of Western and Asian workers, but instead a community of interests *against* capital, which enslaves them both.

We are increasingly subject to so-called “natural” disasters. Katrina was not a *natural* disaster, but the inevitable outcome of the operation of the law of value and the degradation of the eco-system that it brings about. The savagery of hurricanes and the destruction of the natural protections against them (barrier islands, wetlands) are directly linked to the trajectory of capital in the course of the twentieth century. It is worth asking why the American government didn’t act in time, when the scenario was clear and the resources to prevent the debacle were available. That failure cannot be explained by a purely utilitarian logic: the cost of rebuilding the Gulf coast will be far greater than the cost of preventing the catastrophe. The only thing that the experts could not predict was exactly *when* the catastrophe would occur. Each president, each political leader, could therefore hope that it wouldn’t occur on his watch, and that he would therefore be freed from having to expend the needed resources that could have been used for other political purposes. Why didn’t Bush devote the resources to protect New Orleans? Who would have thanked him? The poor blacks who make up two-thirds of that city’s population? The pace at which aid was sent, the delay in evacuating those without means of transportation, the disproportion between whites and blacks evacuated, demonstrates the lack of concern of the American government for those strata of the population.

The situation in New Orleans shows how the mission of the capitalist state is not to protect the lives of workers. What counts are the economic interests of capital and the intentions of potential voters. It is not just the politicians, bankers, and entrepreneurs, who are only interested in short-term profits. The capitalist class as a whole is incapable of envisaging solutions for the contradictions engendered by its own system (e.g. climate change, pollution). It turns its back on the future, and fixates its



*This is a collage, but the two pictures were taken around the same time: while Bush was mugging for the cameras, New Orleans was bleeding...*

rapacious eyes on the present, leaving the future to the gods. Its blindness blocks even its own interests, and those of the rest of the world. Increasingly, man is “fateless” (to recall the title of the novel by Imre Kertesz, the Hungarian Jew who has related his experiences in Nazi concentration camps), a being whose life can at any time be shattered by the implacable, in-human, laws of competition, the thirst for profit, or the occurrence of so-called “natural” disasters; a surplus-being, whose labor is super-exploited or who is left to fend for himself, unemployed. He is a being whose future will be even more bleak still, when millions of young workers hit the job market, when the products of Asian factories will encounter still more limits to their markets (just as, in the concentration camps, the fate of man, of the prisoners, depended on the contingent arrival of other prisoners, for whom they had to make way). But, given the technological means created, insofar as the condition of dis-humanity worsens, the development of consciousness on the part of humanity is also possible. One fact merits emphasis: 60% of Americans believe that the money devoted to the war in Iraq should go to the rebuilding of New Orleans. The relation between war and survival is clear here. The intellectual and material resources to protect life against natural disasters exist; these resources are utilized by capital for the purpose of exterminating other populations on the planet, to create other disasters.

The reaction against capital does not proceed through anti-terrorism, or through the defense of “our” economic interests, “our” jobs, against the Chinese. It proceeds through the development of a consciousness of the global character of the problem: no company, no country, can escape the debacle. Nor will any domain of human life be spared: not the economy, ecology, nourishment, education, hospitals or health care. There is no paradise, no protected zone. There is a world to be re-made, and we have the means to do it.

An Nonymus

For the first time in humankind's history, scarcity, a shortage of means of subsistence and consumption and the need for the vast majority to work day in day out to obtain them, is no longer an objective necessity. Despite the fact that never before have so many lived in hunger, a society of abundance, in which humans are freed from economic slavery, is now objectively possible. But possible is not enough. To realize it, to sweep away the society born out of scarcity and conditioned by it, the necessity of such a fundamental break with the past must be made starkly clear by the bankruptcy of the existing social order. Capitalism, like all social systems, is a temporary arrangement corresponding to a certain stage of development and knowledge of the human race, one that masks itself as eternal. It is its global, insoluble crisis that reveals its transient nature. Capitalism's deadly effects make—proletarian revolution a matter of survival for humankind.

*The following text is an excerpt from an upcoming Internationalist Perspective-pamphlet on the Roots of the Capitalist Crisis.*

# **Decadence of Capitalism: The Genesis**

The real domination of capital, technology-driven mass production, became predominant only in the 20th century (and continues its development to this day). But the transition towards it advanced with huge leaps in the 19th century. In the industrializing world, the proportion of the labor force employed in agriculture dropped from 3/4 in 1850 to 1/3 in 1900. By 1870, the most developed countries suffered overcapacity (even though many sectors were still not mechanized and most industrial workers were still craftsmen working in small shops). Crisis and years of deflation followed. In Britain, the leading industrial nation, prices fell 44% between 1873 and 1895. This undercut the incentive for M-C, for investment in domestic industry: from 1873 to 1913, the rate of productivity growth in Britain was zero. Instead, British capital financed the industrialization of other countries, where the average organic composition of capital was lower and the rate of profit therefore higher, which yielded Britain interests that more than compensated for its negative trade balance and low domestic rate of profit. Other countries followed this example and stepped up their foreign lending when their industrialization reached a plateau, thereby fostering the horizontal spread of capitalist development that characterized the 19th century.

The crisis of the 1870's also ended free trade. The scale-enhancement of production and the decreasing cost of transportation had greatly reduced the natural protection local markets enjoyed before. The temptation to blame foreign imports for market saturation was irresistible. Walls of tariffs were erected, behind which, as Engels put it, a war for industrial supremacy was being prepared. Some of the protectionist measures were clearly counter-

productive; with various tariff wars the capitalist class shot itself in the foot. Others however, enabled countries such as Germany and US to develop the strongest industries in the world. Their accumulation was facilitated by the influx of foreign capital and fed by the metabolism between the conditions of formal domination (low organic composition, low productivity but a high rate of profit) and the newly emerging giant industries, which raked in surplus profits thanks to their competitive advantage on their large internal markets.

There were several more crisis moments before the turn of the century but the early part of the 20th century saw a real 'sturm und drang' period in which real domination rapidly spread, aided by a series of technological breakthroughs (the combustion engine, chemistry, electricity, etc). Every period of rapid technological change is characterized by accelerating productivity (and thus increasing material wealth) and huge surplus profits for the strongest, innovating capitals, because new cost-saving technology creates new competitive advantages and the rapid pace in which new products are introduced constantly creates temporary opportunities for monopoly-profits. But then as now, these characteristics were obscuring how the exacerbation of the underlying basic contradictions was dwindling investment-opportunities, how the M-C phase in the capitalist reproduction cycle was getting into trouble. The boom was further stimulated by the intensification of exploitation made possible because the machine's movements swallowed the labor process and broke up labor time into ever smaller, measurable parts (Taylorism was introduced in 1895 and quickly spread). But meanwhile, an important escape-valve was in the process of being closed. Despite

protectionism, the development of scale and productivity had greatly stimulated international trade. In 1913, foreign trade per capita was more than 25 times greater than in 1800. On the eve of World War I, the world economy was more integrated than it ever was or would be again until the aftermath of World War II. That extended the field of operation for developed capital. But the intensified competition established, at the end of the 19th century, for the first time in history uniform prices for most commodities traded on the world market.

Why was that important? Before that point, the market values of most commodities were determined by local conditions of production only. A low organic composition of capital yielded a high rate of profit and an even higher one for developed capitals exporting more cheaply made commodities that were sold above their value, at the local market value. So their export rose much faster than their production. Unhindered by transportation costs and tariffs, the export of financial capital was even more profitable and fast growing, mobilizing productive forces abroad and fostering horizontal industrial development. But after competition enforced uniform world market prices and thus established international values, the market value for an increasing number of commodities was no longer determined by local conditions but by (average) international conditions. That means that those capitals which produced these commodities cheaper (under their international value) still obtained a surplus profit but those which produced them with more backward, labor-intensive methods (above their international value) lost part of their surplus value to their competitors. As we have explained elsewhere (10), because of the tendential equalization of the rate of profit within nations, this loss was shared by their entire economy. As a result, the lower organic composition of capital of the less developed country, instead of yielding a higher than average rate of profit, yielded a lower one, the more that market values were determined by international trade. This was a radical change because it sharply reduced the incentive for developed capital to invest in the industrialization of others. From then on, capitalism's main dynamic would no longer be one of horizontally spreading development. With few exceptions, the chasm between developed and underdeveloped countries would remain unbridgeable and the latter's share of world trade almost continuously declined. Not because they were not connected to the world market but because they were. They were integrated into the international division of labor, but as permanently underdeveloped parts. The permanence of their underdevelopment reflects the permanence of a global overcapacity, of a lack of opportunity to mobilize productive forces for the creation of profit.

The first part of the 20th century was also a period of tremendous acceleration of the concentration of capital. Uncounted small companies went bankrupt, were taken over or merged. It was the time of the birth of the giant companies (Ford, General Motors, General Electric,

BASF, Siemens, Daimler-Benz, etc) which still dominate today. Up to that point, the domestic market sufficed for most capitals but now industrial forces outgrew them. Despite the increase in international trade, overcapacity was building and the rate of profit fell. In some countries, the most developed industries formed cartels to carve up the market amongst themselves. Measures were taken to restrict production and avoid overproduction, to prevent prices and thus profits from falling. But inevitably, capitalism was moving towards the point at which the shortage of productive demand and the fall of the rate of profit would compel it to a massive devalorization. Before that point was reached however, war intervened.

The moment at which the progress of real domination fundamentally changed the conditions of accumulation for global capital is hard to pinpoint. But it is certain that such a change took place, whichever term is used to describe it; that massive devalorization became an intrinsic part of the accumulation process, that therefore the continuation of capitalism imposed on society a cannibalistic violence and self-destruction, which placed the working class before the need to fight, no longer just to improve its conditions of exploitation within capitalism, but to overthrow it.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 confirmed that a new period, the decadence of capitalism, had begun. Capitalism had outgrown the conditions that gave rise to it and had thereby created new conditions that cried out for a new social order. Capitalism developed and became global in response to conditions of scarcity and lack of productivity, in order to mobilize resources and labor power as efficiently as possible, in the interests of a privileged ruling class, but indirectly of society in general as well. But it also needs scarcity, that is, an effective demand that is greater than the supply so that production can grow at the pace dictated by the inherent scale-enhancement of the productive forces, a pace that must accelerate because of the tendential decline of the rate of profit. The development of productivity made possible by capitalism tendentially destroyed the conditions of scarcity, which made the perspective of a new society freed from the slavery of value-production real. But for capitalism, a lack of scarcity means overproduction, crisis. The restoration of scarcity therefore became a matter of survival for capitalism, so that returning bouts of massive devalorization became an integral part of its functioning.

Devalorization accomplishes the destruction of excess capital in all its forms –financial capital, commodities, constant and variable capital-- creating for the surviving capital more space to grow. It takes the form of currency devaluations, stock market crashes, deflation of fixed capital and assets such as real estate as well as commodities in general. Such devalorization is the direct result of capitalist crisis and as such occurred several times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the uneven development of real domination (devalorization resulting from the implosion of speculative bubbles occurred of course much earlier even). But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the devalorization

accomplished by crisis was not enough; the literal destruction of excess capital through massive, inter-capitalistic war became a 'vital' requirement for the continuation of value accumulation.

In that century, war would produce more casualties than in the entire preceding human history combined. It is true that amidst this endemic destruction, capitalism continued to develop and to grow, that real domination continued to deepen and spread, and that the resulting technification continued to stimulate productivity and thus also the quantity and quality of use values, even for the working class. It's also true that the deep crises caused by the need for periodic massive devalorization, provoked savage attacks on the living standard of workers. But those who think that the conditions for revolution require the irreversible stagnation of capitalism and abject poverty for the vast majority of the working class, will wait forever. They have not understood that an irreversibly stagnating capitalism is an oxymoron, that crisis and productivity growth are not mutually exclusive, that capital seeks higher productivity to fight its crisis, yet worsens it this way, that the struggle of the working class is not merely one of variable capital reacting only against its own demobilization but of the part of humanity which, because

of its place in the production process, is most capable both of recognizing the mortal danger that capitalism represents for humanity and of eliminating it.

The onset of decadence cannot be explained as mechanically imposed at a given point in time by the objective state of the economy. The case can be made that if the capitalist class would have recognized the counter-productive effects of its protectionist policies and would have retracted them, the capitalist system would have entered its phase of massive destruction considerably later. And if the capitalist class would not have clung to the gold standard or to the balanced budget-dogma, if it would have embraced Keynesianism much earlier and used the monetary and fiscal levers that were potentially there, then it could have been delayed for much longer still. But as the saying goes, with 'ifs' you can put Paris in a bottle. The understanding of the capitalist class of its own situation and possibilities (and the weight of the past upon it) is a material force that impacts the course of history. We reject vulgar Marxism's mechanistic infrastructure-superstructure deterministic causal relation that reduces consciousness or the lack of it to a mere passive, reflective factor and thereby fails to understand history.

## **ON DECADENCE: ELEMENTS FOR A RESPONSE TO CRITIQUES**

*The primary task of revolutionaries is to seek to understand the world in which they live, and, therefore, the framework and the perspective in which the proletariat develops its consciousness and activity as a class.*

Among the different "takes" on the world within the revolutionary political milieu, is the one that divides the evolution of the capitalist mode of production (CMP) into a phase of ascendance and a phase of decadence. One of the groups which defends such a position, and which has based its very political coherence on that theoretical basis, is the ICC. Within IP, that theory, like so many other fundamental theoretical issues, has been subject to question, and the issue is now open. That is to say, if our group now rejects the old conception of decadence as it had been defined by *Bilan* and then by the ICC – a halt or slackening in the development of the productive forces – we are now in the midst of a thoroughgoing debate, and therefore do not yet have a fully worked out or generally accepted position. The position presented in this article is conceived more as a contribution to that debate, rather than as a synthesis of the position of our group.

Putting together the critiques that have been made, or questions that have been raised, over the past few years, we can indicate the general points that need to be addressed according to the following axes:

- 1) Must one speak of a CMP in terms of an evolution or divided into distinct historical periods?
- 2) Did the CMP once have a progressive nature or has it always been profoundly destructive for humanity?
- 3) How can one reconcile the idea of a decline with the development of the productive forces?
- 4) Does decadence entail a definitive breakdown of the economic system?
- 5) How can an historical perspective and a revolutionary situation be determined? Is it conditioned by a "ripening" of the objective conditions in the sense of a certain level of development of the productive forces combined with the gravity of global economic contradictions? Or, how can a context favorable to the development of the proletariat's class consciousness be defined?



- 6) Finally, what is the present global situation and its impact on the development of the struggles and consciousness of the working class?

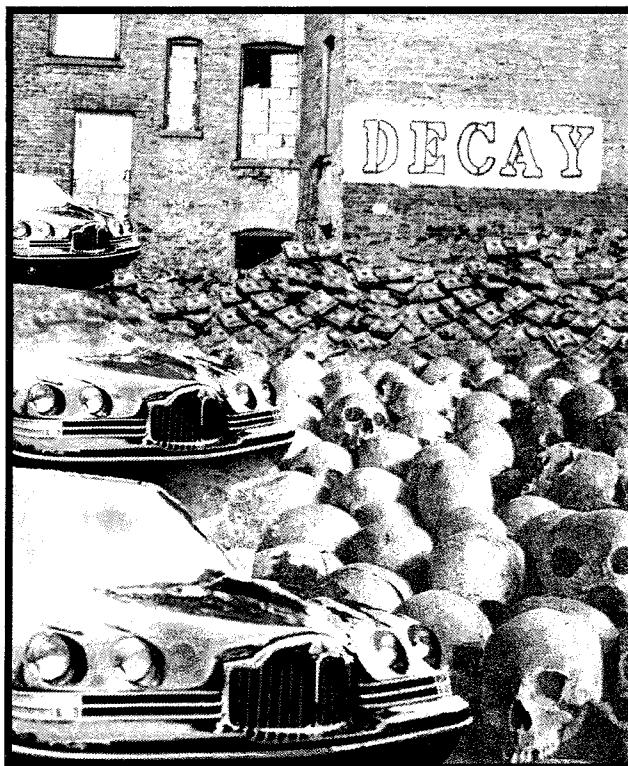
### Progressiveness and/or Periodization

The CMP, like every historical system, is a living, global social relation, which has undergone an evolution and profound social transformations in the course of its history. Among those transformations, the passage from a capitalism that relies almost exclusively on human labor to a system that relies on the employment of machines and the most advanced technology must be stressed. That profound mutation of capitalism can be grasped as the passage from the *formal domination of capital* (in which surplus-value is extracted from that part of the working day that is unpaid by capital, the period when exploitation is intensified by a lengthening of the working day) to the *real domination of capital* (characterized by the growing recourse to the machine and to technology). The massive utilization of technology increases, in an exponential way, the productivity of labor, and, consequently, also increases the volume of production of commodities, that is to say, the quantity of use-values.

A first contradiction appears with this massive recourse to technology: the growing tension, then the contradiction, between use-value and exchange-value, which do not grow in a harmonious way. A first gap occurs thanks to the formidable increase of productivity: There, where the manual laborer had time to make his product, the mechanization of the labor process, and the organization of labor on a gigantic scale, considerably increase the speed and the volume of production. Moreover, under the pressure of competition, producers tend to produce ever more cheaply, utilizing ever more modern techniques, and, therefore, producing a value below the average market value. More and more products are produced, productivity ceaselessly increases, and exchange-value shrinks.

That leads to another extremely important phenomenon: the necessity to destroy value in a massive way. We know that capitalism rhymes with scarcity: according to the law of supply and demand, the more rare a product is, the more expensive it will be, and, therefore, the more profit it will provide its producer. Over-production can only mean an abundance of goods that would benefit the whole of humanity. That entails the destruction of surplus foodstuffs, the massive destruction brought about by war, but also by the exclusion of "surplus" workers, entailing chronic – not periodic – unemployment and job insecurity. All that is still the "soft" description of conditions in the most industrialized countries, because in the poorest zones of the globe, not only are populations subject to the conditions just described, but, as a result of unequal competition, they increasingly face the absolute impoverishment that the

world economic crisis inflicts on the worst off regions, with its cortege of famine, sickness, and social tension.



The increase of productivity explains the contradictory conditions of existence of the proletariat, inasmuch as it has more material comforts than in the past, disposes of more material objects and has access to technology and its utilization through education, while at the same time it is exploitation is greater than ever! The quality of life cannot be determined by the single measure of access to material goods, but is constituted by a totality of factors that correspond to general human needs. For example, in a world where the increase of productivity of the developed countries could feed the poorest populations on the planet, three quarters of humanity is on the brink of starvation. And in those zones where there is access to health-care, education, and material comforts, workers whose incomes afford them such access are increasingly stressed, more and more anxiety-ridden, and suffering from a loss of any meaningful social bonds. If modern science has made possible a potential improvement in the conditions of life, it has not responded to our specifically human and psychic needs.

This phenomenon of massive devalorization, which continuously grows in amplitude, means that at a given moment in the history of the CMP it has become a necessary and general feature of the functioning of the world economic system. From that moment on, the development of the productive forces can only take place on the condition of a massive *destruction* -- of the environment, of the very conditions of existence of humanity, of the number of those employed, of value.



It is here that the *see saw* character of society becomes apparent: on the one hand, there is an unprecedented development of productivity, of production, of technological advance, and, on the other hand, a parallel development of destructiveness at all levels of life. It's a matter, then, of an inversion of the global perspective of the trajectory of society. For me, *decadence* is characterized by an, apparently contradictory, double movement: development on one side and destruction on the other. Therefore, decadence has an economic basis: it's the deepening of the real domination of capital, but it concerns the global perspective and general functioning of society. Decadence entails a global, and qualitative change, that results from a increasing economic transformation. The perspective of development becomes synonymous with death for the human species, and therefore has profound implications for the life of humankind as well as for the perspective that the CMP henceforth represents. To speak of ascendance and decadence certainly does not mean the intrusion of *moral* categories into the analysis of society, but rather serves to designate different modes of the accumulation of capital. However, focusing exclusively on the strictly economic aspects of social existence means failing to see how the economy serves as the material base for the transformation of the whole of society. It would be to fail to grasp the CMP as a global social relation in which the proletariat constitutes a fundamental contradiction.

The ascendant phase of the CMP is not characterized by less exploitation or by a greater well being compared to its decadent phase. Nonetheless, the perspective of ascendance was that of hope for a real development of the life of the human species (the fight against sickness, scientific breakthroughs, etc.) to which there corresponded the development of humanist ideologies. There was also the belief that the proletariat could be integrated into society, through – among other things – parliamentarism, the creation of representative bodies, and working class pressure. It was for that reason that the proletariat did not make the perspective of a change in the system the basis of its confrontations with the bourgeoisie. Ascendance and decadence are, therefore, the reflection of different modes of the accumulation of capital, but above all, of a different perspective for the working class. The phase of decadence entails the reversal of that perspective: the horizon has become uncertain, fraught with insecurity, hopelessness and death for the human species. Everywhere, there is instability, loss of political coherence, loss of social meaning, an exclusively short-term vision, unprecedented waste, the development of unproductive sectors, and the spread of wars.

The link between real domination and decadence is found there: in that reversal of perspectives, in that qualitative change provoked by the economic transformation of the system. For me, it is not a question of a continuous transformation of the system, but of a qualitative change resulting from that increasing economic transformation, one that has implications for domains

much larger than just the economic. That qualitative change affects all aspects of human life, and, indeed, becomes a threat to it. Decadence is not an ideological concept, as some might think, but is rather the materialist expression for the transformation of both the objective and subjective conditions in which the working class evolves, develops its own activity, and its own consciousness.

## Different Perspectives according to the Period Or a Uniformly Destructive System ?

For some comrades, the CMP must be seen in a uniform way, as a system that is destructive in its essence, and has known no modifications other than the passage from formal to real domination. For those comrades, one of the consequences of this is that, from the end of the nineteenth-century, the “conditions for revolution” have been ripe – a point to which I shall return.

That way of seeing the system does not take into consideration the formidable potential that the development of the productive forces under ascendant capitalism contained. For the first time in the history of humanity, that development represented the potential for the elimination of scarcity. It was the development of science and technology that made possible the important discoveries in the domain of health-care and the eradication of serious diseases. Potentially, then, certain tendencies borne by capitalism prepared the way for a better perspective for humanity. In that phase the system itself needed labor-power in a better state of health and education. The lure of the passage to real domination is that it was synonymous with new forms of exploitation compatible with a reduction in the working day and with access to less onerous material conditions than those prevailing in the nineteenth-century. In a certain sense, worker's struggle dovetailed with the needs of the system. Nevertheless, let's not fall into the trap of appearances: the exploitation of the working class has always been ferocious, whatever the specific form that exploitation has taken. Moreover, there is no “pure” science, no “untainted” technology: all the advances, the research, the discoveries, have taken place within the straitjacket of capitalist interests. Moreover, so-called purity would increasingly become an outdated dream with the pre-eminence of the real domination of capital, the penetration of the law of value into all aspects of life, surely including science, medicine, and research. The development of science in this phase of capitalism also entails the abandonment of the systematic recourse to religion or to magical beliefs to explain the functioning of the world, and thereby to a significant de-mystification of human thought. Finally, that same period is also characterized by the development of revolutionary theory.

When real domination becomes the dominant mode of the functioning of the capitalist system, massive devalorization gives the system its feature of generalized massive destruction. Inasmuch as no domain of social life

can now escape the law of value, a part of the proletariat becomes chronically unnecessary for the needs of capital, and the global perspective is reversed in a fundamental way: where ascendant capital could provide certain improvements in the lives of its working class, the phase in which the necessity for massive devalorization predominates can only be the bearer of a perspective that is largely destructive. The system has created the possibility for material comfort and the elimination of scarcity, AND the system artificially maintains scarcity and absolutely corrupts any possibility of a better real life.

## **Development of the Productive Forces and Decadence**

It is that reversal of perspectives, conditioned by the very way in which the capitalist system develops, that explains how there is no contradiction, but rather a link, between the development of the productive forces and decadence. We need to re-emphasize the fact that equating decadence with a halt or slackening in the development of the productive forces was a mistaken way of describing the functioning of the capitalist system. Capitalism absolutely must develop the productive forces, and it does so in an exponential way. But it is precisely that development that stimulates the intensification of its internal contradictions and the perspective of its own decadence.

The development of the system, particularly in its phase of decadence, moreover habituates us to this coexistence of ever more intense contradictions: the production of value entails the necessity to destroy value; the extension of the limits of the world market brings about a rejuvenation of regional or even local capital entities; the harmonious circulation of goods and of capital in that gigantic market, with neither barriers nor frontiers heightens the inter-imperialist tensions between states.

## **Decadence and Breakdown**

The deepening of the contradictions within the capitalist system does not mean that it will collapse on its own, leaving a vacant space for the proletariat to fill. A system can be undermined by its internal crisis, function with ever greater difficulty, develop increasingly aberrant practices, and yet not breakdown. We therefore oppose determinist or mechanistic visions of history that see a capitalist system proceeding to its ineluctable historical finish, and a proletariat waiting to pluck the fruits of such a development. In a sense, the “economistic” vision developed by the ICC (and by us in the past) led to such an ineluctable perspective: decadence being seen as an economic decline, it had to end in a final collapse.

The revolutionary process is not an economic process, but a global *political* process. And if a system is increasingly obstructed, that doesn't mean that the political conditions necessarily exist for a class to extricate itself from the laws of motion of that system and to create

another. One of the characteristics that we have emphasized in speaking about the class struggle is that the CMP is a mode of domination over the totality of society, and of its objective and subjective relations, the two being inextricably linked. Thus, it is the functioning of capital that provides the model for the very forms of subjectivity of individuals, and nothing, a priori, can guarantee that the deepening of the contradictions of the system will necessarily result in the revolutionary action of the proletariat. The living contradiction within the capitalist system, the working class is the potential representative of the survival of the human species. But for such a transformation to occur, it is necessary that the proletariat develop its own consciousness and its political action against the system.

## **The “Ripening” of the Conditions for Revolution**

Even to speak of the “ripening” of the objective and subjective conditions for revolution is a mechanistic and reductionist way of seeing things. It corresponds well to that “economistic” vision of decadence as a linear and ineluctable process leading to a pre-determined end. The maturation of objective conditions would imply that the conditions for revolution would be so linked to the economic evolution of a system that a given level of crisis would mean the necessary action of the revolutionary class. The maturation of subjective conditions would entail a static vision of the political consciousness of the proletariat, which would no longer be understood as a living, contradictory, and contingent process, but rather as the virtually mathematical agglomeration of a certain number of criteria that must come together for a revolution to occur.

We know that things happen in a much more complex way, and that the political consciousness of the revolutionary class develops through the daily practice of opposition to the ruling class. That political consciousness develops through a contradiction between the ways that capital induces modes of thought and subjectivity on the proletariat and the proletariat's progressive autonomization with respect to those modes of subjectivity imposed by the reigning ideology. Similarly, we cannot just look at the impact of the evolution of the CMP on the consciousness and activity of the working class, but must be sensitive to the mutual impact of these two factors, both united and contradictory, on one another.

## **The Present Context for the Development of Class Consciousness and Struggle**

In this phase of decadence, the class struggle has changed its objectives. It can no longer limit itself only to resistance to the conditions of exploitation, as it did in the ascendant phase of the capitalist system. It must now become a struggle of opposition to the system as a whole. This has

other implications: it requires a much more global understanding; it is no longer constituted by a series of defeats (brief economic “victories” do not lead to real solutions), the organs of economic struggle have become outdated organizations that keep the struggle on the sterile terrain of negotiating the conditions of labor when the perspective of any kind of better life for workers necessitates a more fundamental opposition to capital. When IP spoke of a “new period” to characterize the social movements of 1995-96, it was not to indicate that we were at the outset of an “ascendant wave” of struggles (in the sense in which the ICC modeled the class struggle as a series of successive waves, each one beginning from the highest point reached by the earlier struggles). For us, it was a question of a series of struggles that would question the general perspective provided by capital. Even if that questioning was posed in very fluid terms, it was important to emphasize the new character of what we were seeing. On another level, the conditions change between the ascendant and decadent phases of capitalism with respect to the question of parliamentary or electoral struggle and of political parties whose objective is negotiations around the conditions of the working class within the capital/wage labor relation, and not in opposition to it. That kind of electoral struggle is obsolete, and worse it keeps the workers from grasping the

necessities posed by the phase of capitalist decadence.

The class struggle manifests a profound antagonism, the fruit of a global social relation. That global social relation is, as Marx said, “a social relation between persons mediated by things. But not individual persons: it is a relation of worker to capitalist, of farmer to landowner, etc.” When one speaks of that global social relation, one speaks at the same time of a totality, but above all of a living system, one that undergoes transformations: it’s about the history of the CMP and of the profound transformations that mark its existence. If that totality is transformed, all its components are transformed too.

To speak of a periodization of the CMP implies the capacity to understand history as the evolution of living systems that correspond to evolving necessities, and which are replaced as the need arises, and under the pressure of the activity of humankind. But that also means that the conditions of existence so modified, in their turn change the conditions in which humans must develop their own activity and transform themselves.

Rose

# For a Non-productivist Understanding of Capitalist Decadence

*The concept of capitalist decadence as a significant component of revolutionary theory has recently come under increasing attack in the proletarian political milieu.*

Aufheben's critique seems to have acquired a steadily growing influence, while the concept of decadence is currently being re-assessed within the IBRP. The critique developed by the CDP has directly challenged the theory defended by the ICC. (1) Even within Internationalist Perspective (IP), having critiqued and rejected the ICC's theory, the concept has recently been questioned as to its theoretical significance, partly as a result of the increasing theoretical (and political) significance within IP of the concept/theory of the real domination of capital. Of course, many in the milieu never defended the idea of capitalist decadence. Instead of retreating into a defensive posture, these developments should be welcomed as a healthy challenge to put forward a clearer, more coherent and further developed conception and theorization of decadence and its place in revolutionary theory today. At the same time, we need to acknowledge the positive theoretical contributions developed during the debate on decadence which occurred in IP in the years 1995-98 (cf. nos. 28, 29, 32-33, and 34).

If the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital (over labor, and ultimately, over all of society) is becoming the principal factor in IP's theoretical explanation of the moving of the class lines in the years leading up to WWI to exclude trade unionism, parliamentarism, and national liberation struggles, then what significance (if any) should we ascribe to the theory of the decadence of capitalism? If the transition to real domination explains the actual movement of the class lines in relation to the forms of struggle referred to, if it explains capital's tendency to integrate such previously independent organs of practice into its sphere of control and domination – primarily through the ‘intermediary’ of the capitalist state – what it does *not* explain is the radical change in orientation or direction of such organs and practices circa 1914.

Such a radical change it was that in the space of a few years, these organs and practices went from apparent defenders of the interests of the entire working class and (in the case of national liberation struggles) oppressed peasant masses throughout the world, to arch-enemies of those same interests in the name of the defense of the national interest within the context of modern inter-imperialist (world) war and global economic crisis. (2) This radical change needs to be explained, and the theory

of transition to real domination by itself is insufficient for that. Only a theory of capitalist decadence, of a periodisation of the history of capitalism between an early period of ascendance and unfettered growth, and a later period of decline and permanent crisis, can adequately explain this radical shift. In a few short years, all middle (neutral) ground between the global domination and mass destruction of modern capitalism and the revolutionary struggle of the world working class was eliminated. As Rosa Luxemburg (one of the first Marxists to develop a theory of capitalist decadence) presciently predicted, from hence-forth the prospect for humankind was socialism or barbarism. In short, then, without a theory of the decadence of capitalism, revolutionaries are incapable of explaining the urgency of the need for autonomous revolutionary struggle by the working class since 1914.

However, the problem for revolutionaries today is that all of the existing theories of capitalist decadence have been demonstrated to be inadequate. Luxemburg's theory, based on the saturation of pre-capitalist markets, and the theory of Grossman and Mattick, based solely on the tendency for the average rate of profit to fall, have both been shown insufficient to explain the reality of the course of decadent capitalism through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his series of texts on Marxist crisis theory in the pages of *IP*, Sander has both critiqued these previous theories and put forward the bases of an improved, dual-component theory, based on the work of Marx. While I consider this work to be an important step forward in the theorization of the permanent crisis of capitalism, it is still widely ignored or misunderstood within the revolutionary milieu. In this text I will not be concerned with the critique of such 'classical' theories of decadence; I begin from the assumption that such critique has already been accomplished. My concern here is more with what decadence itself is considered to involve, the content or meaning of the concept.

What do we mean when we say that capitalism at some date becomes decadent? What is it about capitalism at a certain point in its historical development that it enters into a period of decline, of decay, of permanent crisis? Virtually all Marxists who have defended the thesis of capitalist decadence have made reference to Marx's famous passage from the Preface to his **Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy**, viz. that "[a]t a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution." From this, the conclusion is invariably drawn by all such Marxists that capitalist decadence consists in the productive forces being fettered (constrained, blocked, slowed, etc.) by the capitalist relations of production. To question Marx on this matter would appear to be unthinkable ... as long as one considers oneself to be a Marxist.

It is to question Marx on this matter that I wish to do here ... while still considering myself to be Marxist. First off, though, I need to make clear that I see two (very different) possible interpretations of what Marx meant by "the development of the productive forces" in the passage just quoted. (3) The 'standard' interpretation, made by all of the revolutionaries and groups referred to above, is what I call the *productivist* version. It understands by "development of the productive forces" only quantitative increase in productive capacity. "Development" is understood as genesis or bringing into existence only. Productivity, as an empirically verifiable quality of the productive forces is the key. The other interpretation understands by "development of the productive forces" their actual implementation, utilization, or application, as opposed to their genesis. In this sense, their development is fettered if their full utilization or implementation in practice is blocked. New productive forces may have been brought into being (by the decadent society), but they haven't been really developed in the sense of being fully utilized to the benefit of society. This interpretation will be elaborated below with the aid of a few key quotes from Marx.

The way the passage quoted above from the Preface is worded, it is difficult to argue against the productivist interpretation of it; especially when one considers the famous sentence (which comes a little after the one quoted above) that "[n]o social order disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed ...." The wording does seem to me to definitely reinforce the productivist interpretation of the earlier sentence (the "fetters" one). However, there is some powerful evidence to be found for the alternative interpretation of what Marx's view really was in the **Communist Manifesto** (CM). In fact, in the section entitled "Bourgeois and Proletarians", Marx and Engels discuss the same themes at one point, and even use the word "fetters" (or "fettered") three times! And it is clear to me that their view there was NOT productivist.

First, though, the productivist interpretation directly contradicts another position that I would argue is fairly basic to Marxism, viz that "[t]he bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production ...." If decadence means that the productive forces cease to develop -- in a quantitative, productivist sense of "develop" -- then it would also have to mean, for Marx, that the bourgeoisie ceases to exist, and that capitalism collapses of its own accord. Of course, some decadence theorists have indeed held this view, but I think it safe to say that this view is highly untenable at this point in history.

Now to Marx (and Engels) on the conflict between forces and relations of production from the CM.

"We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in

the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property, became no longer compatible with the *already developed* [emphasis by ER] productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder."

Then, two paragraphs later, they deal with 19th century bourgeois society, in which, "[f]or many a decade past, the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule." This revolt is not that of variable capital, of the working class. Rather, Marx had the periodic "commercial crises" of his day in mind, in which there exists the "epidemic of overproduction." Marx reasons: "[t]he productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, *they have become too powerful* [emphasis by ER] for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and as soon as they overcome these fetters they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them."

Another quotation from Marx, from the **Grundrisse** (written just prior to the Preface), further supports the non-productivist interpretation: "On the one side, then, it [i.e. capital] calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labor time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labor time as the measuring rod for the giant forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value." (4) This confining of productive forces within the existing relations of production must be understood as the latter fettering the former.

These quotations seem to me to clearly militate against the productivist interpretation of Marx's position (or expression of it) concerning capitalist production relations at a certain stage fettering the development of the forces of production. Rather, they suggest the alternative interpretation, which is that the enormously powerful productive forces capitalism develops (without respite) are "fettered" by the capitalist relations of production in the sense that capitalism is incapable of fully utilizing or employing or taking advantage of these forces, of their enormous capacity to produce. Capitalist relations of production become incompatible with these productive forces it has itself developed (brought into being), creating the need for a new social formation, and new relations of production, relations which *will* be compatible with such productive forces.

This interpretation of Marx's position I find to be far more compatible with the rest of Marx's theory and political/historical perspective than the productivist interpretation developed by Trotsky, Bilan, the GCF, ICC and IBRP. While there are bases for both productivist and non-productivist interpretations in the works of Marx, the latter makes far more sense in light of the rest of Marx's theoretical work.

Setting aside for now the alternative interpretation, I will focus here only on assessing the standard, productivist interpretation of Marx's position. Why, it needs to be asked, should one – Marx especially – think that capitalist social relations will one day fetter the forces of production? The continued survival of capitalism requires unrelenting growth of capital, perpetual accumulation of exchange-value. Competition serves to facilitate this constant growth. In the era of the transition to the real domination of capital (first over labor, then over society generally), this process is accomplished – as Marx first pointed out – by each individual capitalist attempting to lower the real individual value of his commodities under their social (market) value, thereby enabling him to realize a surplus-profit over and above the average rate of profit. And the only means to do this is to increase the productivity of the means of production at his disposal, in order to lower the labor content of each individual commodity produced; that is, to relentlessly develop the forces of production. Even when capital is in a period of open crisis, when growth is non-existent or negative, competition continues to drive each capitalist to further develop the forces of production in order not to fall behind or risk failure. At the same time, once the development of the productive forces reaches a certain scale and degree of complexity, the state involves itself in the overall task of developing the social productive forces, especially in periods of open crisis. Such state 'intervention' is not necessarily a sign of weakness or crisis of capital, although, of course, it could be. Rather, it may simply be a factor of the greatly increasing scale and complexity of the technology involved in the developing productive forces, and, at the same time, of the degree of unification and centralization of the capitalist class of a given nation. Under the conditions of global competition on world markets, which have been in effect since the early years of the twentieth century in all the industrialized sectors of the world economy, all of the states of the most developed countries have increasingly pursued this task. Thus, the history of the last century, of the period since Marx's death, has demonstrated that capitalist relations of production have done anything but fetter the development of the productive forces.

But that doesn't mean that the history of the past 90+ years hasn't been one of historic decline, or of permanent crisis for capitalism. As has previously been argued in the pages of *IP*, while there may be a contradiction in it, there is certainly no impossibility in a historical reality of both permanent crisis and frenetic development of the productive forces (even considered relative to the rate of

their development previously). Such a characterization could well apply to the history of the past century, although it would seem that this view is not very popular within the current revolutionary milieu. The reason for that, I would think, is that it is so widely accepted (as more or less a 'canon' of Marxism) that if the productive forces are developing at a 'healthy' rate, if they are not fettered, then the social formation and mode of production must be 'progressive' and, thus, not in a state of decline or permanent crisis. It is exactly (but not only) this productivist dogma that has allowed Marxism to be tainted by the terror of the Russian counter-revolution, spearheaded (in both practice and theory) first by Trotsky, then Stalin (5), followed by all the various 'Communist' regimes around the world during the 1945-90 period. In this 'orthodox' Marxist view of historical progress, the forces of production become universally benign, to be unquestioningly supported in the development that they take. Whether it is capitalism or a 'socialist' state that is pursuing this development is irrelevant, in this orthodox Marxist view, since the productive forces are *neutral*, that is, they don't have either a specifically capitalist or socialist content, and their development is continuous in the course that it takes, first under capitalism, then under a period of socialist transition to communism (and presumably under the latter as well). Therefore, as long as capitalism is able to continue developing the productive forces, it remains a progressive mode of production and the period of revolutionary struggle remains for the future. This dogma forces its adherents to either deny that there has been any significant development of the productive forces over the past century (Trotskyists, the ICC, the CWO – until recently, at least, etc.), or else to defend further capitalist development (especially in the 'developing world') as well as 'reformist' means of struggle (unionism, parliamentarism, etc.).

I think it is high time to openly challenge this dogma of orthodox Marxism, and at the same time, to acknowledge its source in the work of Marx (and Engels). For the dogmatists of an 'invariant' Marxism, this heresy would be enough to count as an outright betrayal and abandonment of Marxism. Such a Marxism I want to have nothing to do with. Marx was not infallible. He was not right about everything that he claimed. Moreover, he himself opposed the establishment of a 'Marxist' orthodoxy and of any cult following in which every claim a great thinker ever made is unquestioningly defended. It seems clear to me that Marxism is a whole body of theory (along with a method of investigation/analysis), or even a web of various theories, which form a more or less coherent whole – not to deny that there are some significant gaps in the web. It is the coherence of the whole, and the explanatory and analytic potential of the theory and method, that makes Marxism the foremost theory of the revolutionary proletarian movement. There are various versions or interpretations that 'Marxism' can take, other than that of orthodox or traditional Marxism. And I think that the productivist dogma assessed above can be removed from Marxism without taking away from

the coherence and explanatory power of it. In fact, I would argue, by excising the productivist dogma, and replacing it with a non-productivist viewpoint, a viewpoint in which the productive forces are not neutral, in which they can actually embody the relations of production of the class society which engendered them, we can develop a superior form of Marxist theory.

I want it to be clear that, of the passage from Marx quoted above, I was only questioning the one specific claim he made, about productive relations fettering the productive forces (in the productivist interpretation). Thus, I do not question his claim that "[a]t a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production ...." (Nor do I question the idea, implicit in the quoted passage, that this conflict contributes to the opening up of a period of revolution.) Even if the relations of production don't *fetter* the forces of production, there still can be, and *is*, I would argue, a real conflict between the forces and relations of production, characteristic of the period of capitalist decadence. What, then, is the nature of this conflict? It is, in fact, the same conflict as that between the production of use-values (real wealth) and the production of exchange-value (capitalist abstract wealth). While the production of use-values increases exponentially, the production of exchange-value declines relatively, as each commodity contains less and less value. It is actually the productive *capacity* of the productive forces developed which conflicts with the amount of exchange-value realized and realizable by capital, as a totality (which is determined, of course, by the capitalist relations of production). The market barrier to unlimited production and sale (based on effective, productive demand) as a result of the exponential increase in productivity plays a key role here, as productive capacity increasingly outstrips actual productive output, because, as less and less labor-power is required for production, effective demand increasingly falls behind potential supply, limiting the amount of exchange-value that capital can realize. And the non-usage, or even the under-utilization, of existing means of production is a form of devalorization, as part of their value is sterilized.

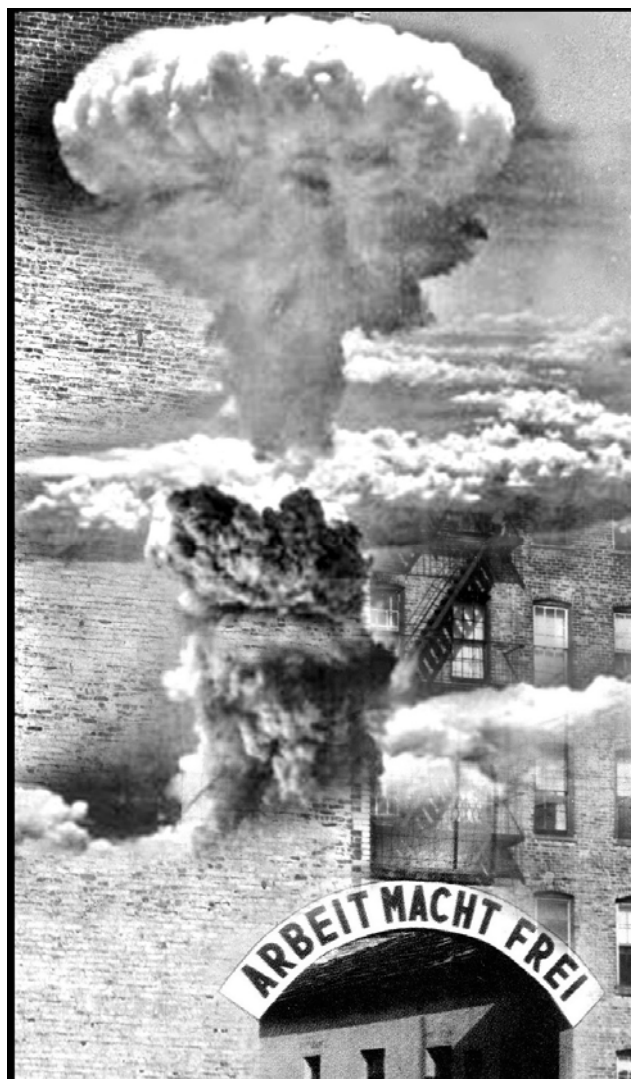
So what, then, does the decadence of capitalism consist in, if it is not the fettering of the productive forces by the relations of production? My position is that capitalist decadence is simply a matter of a permanent crisis of the continued accumulation of (total) capital. The permanent crisis of capitalism is a *crisis of valorization*. The problem is not that capital becomes incapable of continuing the development of the productive forces. The problem is, rather, that capital finds it increasingly difficult to continue valorizing itself without destroying part of itself. Of course, both of the two traditional theories of permanent crisis, Luxemburg's and that of Grossman and Mattick, as well as the one Sander has been developing in the pages of *IP*, theorize the crisis as one of valorization, of expanded reproduction, or of the continuation of accumulation. The question of the development of the

productive forces is really an entirely separate one from that of a permanent economic crisis resulting from the historical development of a mode of production founded on a number of irreconcilable contradictions. None of the defenders of the 'orthodox' Marxist conception of capitalist decadence has ever considered it necessary to actually demonstrate just how a permanent crisis of valorization comes to block the development of the productive forces. The reference to the above-quoted passage from Marx is invariably found to suffice in lieu of an actual theoretical explanation.

There is, however, in my opinion, an integral link between the permanent crisis of capitalism and the development of the productive forces. Rather than blocking or fettering their continued development, the relation between the two is such that the forces of production developed within the period of decadence become not only increasingly powerful and potent, but that they become increasingly dangerous, increasingly deadly, increasingly murderous, and this not just 'incidentally' or 'accidentally', but because capital in permanent crisis increasingly requires forces of *destruction* rather than forces of production in order to sustain itself. The need for devalorization of capital on a massive scale, which is the fundamental driving force of capitalism in decadence, under conditions of ever-intensifying international competition for global markets and resources, fuels this need for the development of destructive forces and of increasingly destructive productive forces. Such devalorization inevitably requires the mass destruction of capital, fixed, variable, and circulating. At the same time, as the productive forces developed by capital become increasingly powerful and complex, and as the search for i) ways of producing (and transporting) cheaper, ii) new products which will enable the formation of new markets, and iii) rapidly depleting 'natural resources' necessary for industrial production – as all of these intensify as a result of the global crisis, the dangers to workers, other people, and the natural environment increase exponentially. This process tends towards capitalism increasingly threatening not only the well-being, but the very survival, of both humankind and the biosphere itself.

The defining feature of capitalist decadence in this view, then, is neither a halting nor a deceleration in the development of the productive forces; it is, rather, the increasingly destructive tendency of the productive forces developed by capital, and not just because these become increasingly powerful. It is not necessarily that *all* productive forces developed within the period of decadence are destructive or become increasingly destructive. The tendency towards destructiveness applies to the totality of the productive forces developed, not each individual one, but to them all generally. It is thus a general tendency, covering a given period of time, applicable to total global capital.

o0o



In the text "The Development of the Productive Forces and the Decadence of Capitalism" in *IP* 29, in the final section, M. Lazare raises an important question, one which is rarely, if ever, raised in discussions of the issues concerned in the political milieu. The question is: "... what is meant by the development of the productive forces?" (p. 14) The problem, which was previously raised in a text by Mac Intosh in *IP* 28, is that "...of the nature of the development of the productive forces brought about by decadent capitalism." (ibid.) Mac Intosh argues that a new, viable conception of capitalist decadence "... must be based on a radical distinction between the development of the emancipatory potential of the human species on the one hand, and the development of technology and the quantitative expansion of the productive forces on the other." "What is at issue is no reactionary romantic repudiation of technology, but rather an understanding of the inseparability of a certain *kind* of techno-scientific development from the logic of value production." (p.18) All of these points raised point to an understanding that a different course of development of the productive forces and technology than that taken under the direction of decadent capitalism is possible. That understanding is clearly consonant with, and should involve, I believe, the



point made earlier in this text that the defining feature of decadent capitalism is that the productive forces, which do not cease to rapidly develop, become increasingly destructive for humankind and the biosphere. The idea is that capitalism's development of the productive forces was historically progressive up to a certain point, because that development contributed to the "development of the emancipatory potential of the human species" (Mac Intosh), or to the "liberation of humanity from the reign of necessity" (M.L.). Since then, capital's continued development of those forces has been "to the detriment of humanity, in ways which threaten its very existence" (Mac Intosh); that development "is accompanied at the same time by a perpetual regression", it "even becomes destructive, in terms of the needs of humanity." (M.L., *IP* 29, p.15) This, as I have argued, is the central defining feature of the decadent period of capitalism as a historical social formation. Capitalism was historically progressive as long as it contributed to the potential liberation of humankind from the reign of necessity – by developing the productive forces to the point at which scarcity of the material necessities of life for all of the human species is eliminable – while it has been retrogressive or decadent since it has embarked on a (specific) course of development of the productive forces which has, overall (taking all relevant factors into consideration, that is), become increasingly destructive in relation to the needs of humanity.

The underlying assumption here is that – at least at a certain stage in the historical development of technology – different courses of development of the productive forces are possible. This idea is entirely foreign to traditional or orthodox Marxism, with its productivist (and usually economic determinist) basis. For such Marxism, the productive forces developed by capitalism, decadent or otherwise, are neutral (between capitalist and communist deployment of them) because there is only one possible course or trajectory of their development, and thus any development of them at all, whether brought about by capitalism or not, is historically progressive. Examining the level of development and complexity of the technology brought into being under the domination of capital since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (at the latest), it seems obvious (to me, at least) that alternative courses of technological development to the one that has taken place exist. A new form of Marxism, in which productivism and economic determinism are eschewed, would be able to account for this possibility of alternative courses of development. It would also be able to show how a course of economic development radically different from the existing one is possible. This point should not be underestimated in terms of the concern of the development of a consciousness within the working class of just how radically different from capitalism a new society (communism) can/will be.

Moreover, IP has already developed theoretical tools which can aid in the explanation of how different courses of development of the productive forces are possible. In particular, in developing the theory of the *real domination*

*of capital* (actually, of the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital, first over labor, then over society as a whole), the point has been made that, in this process of transition to real domination, the law of value comes to penetrate all spheres of social existence including the development of science and technology. In fact, the technology and science involved in the development of the productive forces would have to be one of the first spheres of human activity to be penetrated by the law of value. It is not just that science and technology, as supposedly neutral instrumentalities, come to serve solely capitalist goals. Rather, their very mode of operation and functioning become subsumed under the operation of the law of value. From the viewpoint of Lucaks (who actually argued this about science), their mode of thought becomes *reified*: they interact with the world they look to understand and transform in a uniformly abstract, fully rationalized, entirely quantified manner, without any reference to the qualitative, sensuous content of the material they concern themselves with. In this way they are perfectly suited to serving the capitalist goal of maximizing productivity and efficiency solely as a means to means to maximizing surplus-value production and accumulation. They are so perfectly suited to serving capitalist goals, Lukacs argues, because this science is a product of the bourgeois enlightenment worldview, a mechanistic materialist determinism, in which everything in the natural (and human) world is potentially subject to quantification and exploitation, with the aid of science and technology, in the service of the accumulation of capital. This is how capitalist social relations can actually be *contained within* certain productive forces and other technological systems, making those forces and systems *inherently* capitalist in nature. If they are inherently capitalist in nature, then they aren't neutral, and a post-capitalist society would have to reject them in favor of productive forces and technologies which have been liberated from the yoke of the law of value. This liberation would have to occur through the conscious, qualitative transformation of the productive forces and technologies developed by capitalism into forces which do not involve the alienation of humans from themselves, each other, and nature. (6)

## E.R.

## Notes

1. IBRP = the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party, composed principally of the Communist Workers Organisation in the UK and the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy; CDP = the Cercle de Discussion de Paris; ICC = the International Communist Current.

2. I say "apparent" because even though there may have been the beginnings of a separation between such organs and practices and proletarian interests in the years leading up to WWI, all but a handful of Marxist revolutionaries worldwide continued to consider them to be working class or at least non-capitalist in nature. It should be pointed out that revolutionary syndicalists (such as those in the IWW in the US and the CGT in France) were able then to

appreciate, at least at an instinctual level, the non-working class nature of such organs and practices.

3. I also need to point out that I am concerned here only with the science and technology involved in production, and not with the working class or labor power, which is also a productive force.

4. Marx, **Grundrisse**, p. 706 (Vintage, 1973).

5. Both of them in both capacities as leaders of the ‘Soviet’ state and as ideologues of state capitalism, and, at least for Trotsky, with active agreement of Lenin.

6. In this vein, we should recall that Marx himself designated certain forms of production as specifically capitalist in nature, e.g. the factory system based on large-scale industry, such as it existed in the 1860s. (Unfortunately, I have no reference here.) And as Marx saw the development of capitalism moving from a “formally” capitalist mode of production – in which the means of production are neutral between either feudalist or

capitalist deployment of them (since they were actually developed under feudalism) – to a “specifically” capitalist mode of production – that is, one in which capital remakes the entire production process, the rest of the economy, and the productive forces themselves, into its own image, its own form and content – he would have seen all development of the productive forces since the 1860s as becoming increasingly specifically capitalist in nature. All development, that is, at least up to a certain point, since he did see the increasing socialization of the means of production as moving in the direction of communism. Also, it isn’t clear (as far as I can tell) whether or not Marx thought that capitalism would be able to develop productive forces which a revolutionary communist movement could deploy without first qualitatively transforming them. Of course, the orthodox interpretation is that he thought it could do so. But my point here is that Marx’s viewpoint was more complex, and more contradictory, than a simple productivism and economic determinism, as assumed by all orthodox versions of Marxism.

---

## THE POLITICAL NEED FOR A CONCEPT OF DECADENCE

At this early stage in the discussion of decadence, I want to make some *tentative* comments. I think that it is the concept, based in Marx, of a transition from the formal to the real domination of capital, provided we expand it from the immediate point of production, or even the economic realm as a whole, to all domains of social being, that can grasp the trajectory of capital over the past 150 years. It is on the basis of that concept that we can understand the operation of the law of value, and its invasion and conquest of the virtual totality of social existence. And it is on the basis of that concept that the phenomenon of crisis (including economic crisis), state capitalism, reification (in all its forms), and the construction of a subject appropriate to the perpetuation of value production, can be theoretically explained. Moreover, that vision of a process (still continuing) of transition from formal to real domination permits us to free ourselves from the dead-end of “orthodox” Marxism, with its mechanistic and deterministic vision of base/superstructure – a vision that shaped the Second International, the Communist International, Trotskyism (quite apart from the politics of these movements), and even – in large part -- the communist left, both Dutch/German and Italian.

However, does that mean that the concept of the *decadence* of capitalism is no longer needed or that it is even an obstacle to a theoretical grasp of the historical trajectory of the capitalist mode of production? Here I have serious doubts, and I am in broad agreement with the

need for a concept of decadence. What the concept of the transition from formal to real domination *lacks* is a compelling *political* vision, a clear perspective on the *necessity* for revolution, for communism, *now*. Perhaps, and I say this without providing the needed theoretical elaboration, it lacks an *ethical* imperative (not in the sense of a transcendental, a-historical, truth, law, or moral code, but in the sense of a decision or will to action, guided by a clear goal or vision of communism). It is quite possible on the basis of an analysis of the trajectory of capitalism based on the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital, to conclude that the capitalist mode of production is still historically “progressive,” that it assures the development of the productive forces, that the necessity of communism is for the future, etc. That is not a conclusion that any of us would draw, but it is compatible with such an analysis of the trajectory of capital. However theoretically or (I hesitate to use this term) “scientifically” compelling the analysis of the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital may be (and I believe that in our articles we have made a powerful case for just that), I think that it is *insufficient*, on its own, for a revolutionary politics. What is needed, and what Marxism has always provided, is the kind of political vision found in Rosa Luxemburg’s stirring and frightening image of “socialism or barbarism,” which is no mere rhetorical device, but a theory no less grounded in the trajectory of capital than the transition from formal to real domination. Here is how Maximilien Rubel, at the end of a long life as a militant expressed the dilemma that the human species today faced:

“either survival through the realization of the ‘communist idea’ or perishing because we have not put an end to the yoke of capital and the state.” (Guerre et Paix Nucléaires, p. 153) Quite apart from the specific analysis that led to that conclusion, the vision of the necessity of communism seems to me to be essential to a revolutionary politics. And that entails a theory such as decadence, barbarism, social retrogression, decline of civilization, etc. I agree that there are problems with the concept of “decadence,” the historical freight or baggage with which it is burdened (not least of all its link to the decline of ancient slave societies and a halt or slackening in the growth of the productive forces). Similarly, “social retrogression,” can imply a return to an earlier social formation or historical stage, and “barbarism” entails visions of mass murder (which is an accurate depiction of the trajectory of capital), but also images of earlier social formations based on hunting or gathering; not to mention its links to a vision of the cultural superiority of the “West.” That said, and recognizing the need to clearly explain what we mean, and how we are using a given term, I still believe that our political vision requires – in addition to an elaboration of the meaning of the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital – a concept of decadence, decline, retrogression, or barbarism, as the reality of social being in this epoch. And beyond that, a clear link between the two concepts.

**Mac Intosh**

## **Technology and Consciousness**

**CONTINUATION FROM PAGE 25**

relation which is capital, its institutions and motives; a conflict which tends to make more visible the possibility of revolution.

Concerning the tendency to valueless production: the more information technology and thus automation develop, the more pronounced this tendency becomes. An increasing number of commodities exist only as information. Independently of the quantity of value that created them in their original form, their reproduction - their transmission- is practically valueless. The value of the original must be recovered by selling the copies with a large surplus profit, but this is only possible if the seller has a monopoly position on the market. Since his commodities are easy to copy, that is difficult to maintain. The exchange is no longer sanctioned automatically, it must be protected by the power of the state. The more important information technology becomes in the economy, the more pronounced this projection of power must become. To a large extent, the foreign policy of the United States, wars included, is aimed at defending a world order in which copyrights, trademarks and patents are respected. Which becomes increasingly more difficult, and cannot prevent the tendency to valueless production from creating increasing opportunities for collectivizing information goods and the other non-commodified relations described by Raoul (and more examples could be

given). Even if it is true that free software is advantageous for many capitalists (since they are gifts for them too) and that capitalism is very creative in finding ways to integrate non-commodities into the world of commodities (as the case of Linux shows), that does not refute the argument that this aspect of technological development tends to make more visible the fact that the world does not need the law of the value.

Although the point of production remains the principal battlefield between the old and the new world, there are others. The Internet is also a battlefield, where capitalists continuously try to lock us up in the isolation of the consumer, and (mostly) proletarians continuously try to use the new opportunities to create non-commodified relations. It goes without saying that the proletarians in struggle, in the factories and offices, as well as in the streets, will fully use the means of communication at their disposal (they do it already) and that information technology has greatly increased these means.

I share neither the position of those who see only negative aspects in information technology, nor the position that makes it the condition which finally will open the door to revolution. In this respect, I have some questions about the framework in which Raoul places his observations. In this text, it is rather implicit, but I remember discussions on decadence in which he (and others of the Paris Discussion Circle) insisted pointedly on the famous passage where Marx writes that no mode of production disappears before having developed all the forces of production that it can contain. On this, it should be said that Marx painted with a very large brush here or else that he was mistaken. But if one insists on defending that statement interpreted literally, one again plunges fully into productivist mythology. Would capitalism be out of danger as long as it was capable of modernizing something? But why? And why would it lose this capacity at some point? The analysis of Raoul on the new technology could be useful for an update of this vision : "we were mistaken when we thought that capitalism was condemned to stagnation since 1914, that it had developed all the productive forces that it could contain and that the era of the revolution had thus begun. In fact, it is only today that it develops the productive forces necessary so that the revolution becomes possible." In such an update also fits an over-estimation of China as a new [last?] field of expansion for capitalism (in my opinion, its development should be seen in the first place as part of a global attack on the price and value of variable capital). Is it possible that Raoul, the author of a fundamental text on decadence in the productivist tradition, would not have given up this basic theory, but would have simply changed the starting point of decadence, from the past to the (near, one hopes) future? If that is the case, he should explain it a bit more. As for me, I believe that to understand the effect of technology on proletarian consciousness, it is necessary to reject the productivist mythology .

**Sander**

*The article below by Raoul Victor, as well as the response by Sander that follows it, arose from a debate within the Francophone International Discussion Network on technology and the development of revolutionary consciousness.*

# New Technologies and the Visibility Of the Revolutionary Project

*How to explain the weaknesses and failures of the revolutionary movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What must be deduced for the future?*

It is in connection with these questions that, in a debate with Jacques Wajnsztein,<sup>1</sup> I had written:

*"I believe that one of the things which was lacking most in 1917-1923 as in 1968-74 is the visibility of the revolutionary project and that, 'tomorrow', in particular thanks to the developments of 'globalization', including the catastrophes and threats that it entails, and the current technological upheavals (the exponential development of 'information and communication technologies'), the project of a post-capitalist society, without borders or commodity exchange, could be much more easily envisaged, more perceptible."*

I had insisted on the importance of this "visibility" also in relation to the possible connection between proletarian economic demands and revolutionary struggles:

*"It is far too limited to want to understand the possibilities of a connection between economic struggle and revolutionary struggle without taking into account the visibility of the revolutionary project. It is difficult to radically oppose capitalist logic if one remains convinced that it is the only one possible."*

JW had sharply responded, to the first text in these terms:

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Wajnsztein is one of the animators of the group *Temps critiques*, itself a part of the milieu in France designated as *communisateurs*, which is characterized by a critique of the "objectivism," the economic determinism, that they see as a hallmark of Marxism. The debates in question took place within the Francophone discussion circle.

*"What you call 'the visibility of the revolutionary project' is only the consciousness of the revolution of capital and what it allows. The horrors of world war one and the fierce exploitation and impoverishment of Germany did not lead to a clear vision of the world, but were nevertheless seen as favorable conditions according to the theory of the proletariat. As for the end of the Sixties, one can say that they were a real opening to other social relations and that it was rather the political dimension that was lacking. While today, how can you speak of the visibility of a project when the single thought and idea that we live in the least bad kind of society prevails? (...) There is thus no need to discuss what there will be to do, as that is imposed on its own. (...) One could believe the discourse of capital on the necessity and the ineluctability of everything that it makes happen (...) Individuals can remain on their own. 'Automatization and planetary communication' shape everything! But if that is the case, there will never be a revolution, only the completion of capital or catastrophe and the barbarism of social relations."*

With different variants, the point of view of JW is unfortunately frequent among "the old" revolutionaries. From a justified denunciation of that which capitalism does and can do with new technologies, they end in a veritable technophobia, very much in the air in this period with its tendencies to despair, and, in a puerile way, attributing to machines the responsibility that belongs to the social system which governs them.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In his latest book, *L'évanescence de la valeur*, (Jacques Guigou and Jacques Wajnsztein, editors, L'Harmattan), JW cites Marx on the Luddite movement, one of the first expressions of the worker's movement in England at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which opposed the "industrialization" of the textile mills: "It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which

I will try to answer some of these arguments and to show that capitalism does not have absolute control of all that new technologies are making possible; that new social practices, arising from the particular qualities of digital goods<sup>3</sup> and from the development of the internet, occur on an openly non-commodity basis; that these practices are only going to develop and that they will constitute with time (perhaps 10 or 20 years?) a powerful element in the deployment of the visibility of the revolutionary project.

But, in order to avoid misunderstandings, let us start by specifying what I understand by the “visibility of the revolutionary project”.

I have employed the term “project” in its most traditional sense, such as one can find it defined in the dictionary: “the image of a situation, of a state that one thinks is attainable.” To have a revolutionary project is to have it in mind, with more or less precision to represent what the new society, the post-capitalist world, will be.

Henri Simon made a comment in relation to this during a discussion on the connection between economic struggles and revolutionary struggles: “A project in the sense that Raoul understands, is inevitably very vague, in the negative rather than in the positive sense, and, if it is precise, it immediately becomes obsolete following the development in technologies and methods of production which flow from it” in the same sense, Marx already said in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that he did not want to make “recipes for the cooks of the future” and Rosa Luxembourg, at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century insisted on the idea that to define the new society we only have signposts, especially negative ones.

It is true that it is difficult, if not practically impossible to envisage exactly what a post-capitalist society could be, inasmuch as, on the one hand, it will be the work of human beings who by definition will have changed and moved away from the alienating framework of capitalism and where, on the other hand, the techniques and relations of production will be radically overturned. However, it is absurd to think that after a century and a

---

utilizes those instruments.” (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Penguin Books, pp. 554-555) JW sees that as “one of the passages in Marx most deserving of criticism.” (p. 135)

<sup>3</sup> These are goods in the form of a “text,” composed of “digits,” of numbers “1” and “0,” that can be used electronically. This can take the form of software that controls an automated assembly line in a car plant or a simple image on a computer. They can take the form of producer or consumer goods. What is unique about them is that they can be endlessly produced at an insignificant cost, and transmitted, by cable or wave, with the speed of electric current. Once created, they cannot easily be kept scarce, subject to the usual bounds of scarcity. “Digitable” goods are not necessarily digital. For example, a painting can be “digitalized,” but in contrast to software, is not originally so.

half of historical experience and technological development we do not have anything to add to the great and “vague” general principles formulated at the outset. Even if it is only in the negative sense, has the Russian experience and its failure taught us nothing? Don’t we have anything to add to the ideas on communism formulated at the time of the horse-drawn trolley and “telecommunications” by semaphore? I believe that, even while remaining on the very general level of the great principles and the “general signposts” there is already a little more to put meat on the revolutionary project than there was a century ago.

This said, it is not by putting on paper precise new formulas on how a post-capitalist society should or could be, which is central to the development of the revolutionary potential. Even reduced to the most general formulations, what is important, and what was most lacking in the past, is “the visibility” of this project, the possibility of seeing in reality the actual conditions for its realization.

In this sense, I can share the concern expressed by Christian<sup>4</sup> when he responded to me on this subject: “revolutionaries meet and work out their ideas for a communist project, a human community, based on what they know today. That comes down to the Leninist project: there are those who know and those who do not know. The revolutionaries bring with them the Tables of the Law.” I believe that indeed, until now, the idea of a communist society, without commodity exchange, classes, borders or States too often remained “a dogmatic abstraction”, to use the expression of Karl Nesik: an abstraction to which reality did not seem to want to give flesh and bones, if it was not in the grotesque form of a ruthless state capitalism. Rarely did social evolution make the communist project visible. But here there arises a crucial question. The anti-capitalist revolution can only be the work of the immense majority of society and it must be a conscious work. Such a consciousness cannot be the product of the preaching – however well formulated -- of a minority of “enlightened” revolutionaries. It is historical practice, the evolution of material and social conditions, that alone can convince billions of individuals, including “revolutionaries,” that their discourse has a solid foundation. As the Communist Manifesto says: “*The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.*”

Understood in this sense, the visibility of the revolutionary project during the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained basically limited. That is not what JW thought, when he wrote: “The horrors of world war one and the fierce exploitation and impoverishment of Germany did not lead to a clear vision of the world, but were nevertheless seen

---

<sup>4</sup> A participant in the discussion circle that meets in Paris.

as favorable conditions according to the theory of the proletariat. As for the end of the Sixties, one can say that they were a real opening to other social relations and that it is rather the political dimension that was lacking."

The revolt against the horrors of the war and its outcome certainly constituted the principal stimulant of the revolutionary wave that would mark the end of the first world conflict. But by that very fact, the visibility of the revolutionary project found itself greatly limited. Generally, the first project aimed at by agitation directed against war – one that is understandable -- is peace. And peace, in itself, could also be a capitalist peace. The German bourgeoisie had learned the lessons of the Russian revolution. As soon as the revolutionary movements against the war broke out, it immediately signed the Armistice. And, as soon as peace returned, the revolutionary movement lost the basis of its energy. The revolutionary attempts, which continued in Germany until 1923, were always the work of a small minority. Moreover, because revolutionary events occurred only in countries defeated during the war, the question of the future society inevitably tended to be posed in national and non-global terms. As for the "beacon" of the October revolution, with the famines of "war communism", with its new "horrors of war", civil this time, with the pitiless dictatorship of a totalitarian bureaucracy, it served just as much as a foil against the very idea of revolution as it did as a model of "state capitalism".

The revolutionary project was not that much clearer in the social movements at the end of the Sixties. The struggle against the Viet Nam war would play an important role in rebuilding the progressive image of "anti-imperialist," Stalinist regimes. In the younger generation, which played so important a part in the movements during those years, both in the universities and in the factories, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Yugoslav "self-management" models, etc., continued to weigh upon and distort the issue. Even if a part of the movement asserted its opposition to those models, as it had not for decades, it could not go much beyond the simple opposition of rejection. Capitalism still experienced its "thirty glorious years," of post-war boom, and in the demonstrations "against unemployment" one fought for "the maintenance of full employment", because that still seemed realistic. The question of knowing what a post-capitalist society might look like was a pressing concern only for a very small minority.

JW embellishes the reality of past experiences and expresses a low opinion of the consciousness of the present generation:

*"Today how can you speak about the visibility of a project when a single thought and idea, that we live in the least bad of kind society, prevails? Even the opponents of globalization passed from the "anti" form to the "alter" form. It is striking to see to what extent one reasons within the terms of capital."*

First of all, I do not say that currently, now, there is already a clear, generalized, visibility of the revolutionary project. I have not just landed from another planet. I situate myself within a perspective and speak about a process that can take years, even decades, but which is happening even now. In addition, and even before coming back to this point, I believe that it is not true that the prevailing thought today is that "we live in the least bad kind of society". In the ambient pessimism, it is rather the idea that this society is heading for planetary social and ecological disaster that prevails. What is generalizing is the idea that "children will live less well than their parents". The consciousness of the present generation is in certain ways clearer than those of the years 1917-23 or 1960-70, in particular on the questions which are fundamental from the point of view of a revolutionary perspective, namely the global vision of society and the system which governs it, on the one hand, and the loss of illusions in capitalism, on the other hand. The "thirty glorious years" ended a long time ago, and have given way to massive and chronic unemployment, to insecurity and fear about the future. It is still the lack of visibility of the revolutionary project that constitutes the principal difficulty, but, as we shall see, it is also what is changing.

However, I would first like to respond to the somewhat specious argument of JW according to which I claim that the revolution will be the automatic outcome of the technological development induced by capital. That will necessitate recalling the connection between development of the productive forces and the advent of a new society.

JW writes: *"There is no questioning of capital. One simply awaits its crisis or its degeneration, but one remains in thrall to the 'sense' of history. One would have to believe the discourse of capital about the necessity and ineluctability of all that happens (...) Individuals can sit on their hands, 'automatization and global communication' will do it all!"*

JW deforms what I say or pretends not to understand it so as to dodge questions. I have never claimed that, from a revolutionary perspective, technological development under capitalism rendered the action of "individuals" or of classes useless. It is, on the contrary, starting from the problem of knowing what explains the weaknesses of the proletarian revolutionary struggle in the past, and what can make it possible to overcome those weaknesses tomorrow, that I grapple with the question of the present and future evolution of the productive forces. If I speak about "visibility" it is for individuals and for classes -- of what else could it be a question? Machines?

What is it that JW wants to say? That revolutionary "individuals" have to tackle the question of the possibility of revolution independently of the technological evolution of the productive forces? Would building communism with computers and global means of communication be the same as doing it with the material means available at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or, why not, with those of

antiquity, say at the time of the Spartacus revolt? *"Men make their own history – said Marx – but they do not do it arbitrarily, under the conditions chosen by them, but rather in conditions directly given and inherited from the past."* The armies of Spartacus defeated the Roman legions and saw the numbers and disposition of their troops swell, but they could have no realistic project for a society with neither classes nor exploitation. No more than any of the other slave revolts of that time, could that of Spartacus, which was the most important and most dangerous for the Empire, seek to set up a new social order. And the attempts that did take place only ended by reproducing slave relations. The peasant jacqueries of the Middle Ages against the feudal nobility ran up against the same limits. It was necessary to await capitalism and the explosion of the productive forces that it initiated for the project of a society without exploitation to begin to take on a coherent, non-religious form, with its bases firmly anchored in reality.

Property, the right that it contains of allowing some to dispose of another human being, his life, his work, cannot disappear without destroying that which renders it "useful" for the life of society. Private property and its corollary, commodity exchange, are the most effective means of managing material scarcity. The project of a non-commodity society can rest only on the possibility of going beyond this state of scarcity. One cannot make a free product without making it abundant relative to needs. And that requires a degree of development of the productive forces that only begins to be reached with capitalism. Utopian socialism, anarchism, Marxism, all the socialist theories of the 19th century, were also products of the industrial revolution. The question of knowing what level of development of capitalism is necessary can be eventually be discussed, but the need for that development is obvious for whoever understands that the revolutionary project is not a simple religious incantation.

"Automation and global communication" are realities developed under modern capitalism and about them one thing is certain: their deployment and their impact on social life can only increase under capitalism, ever forced to increase the productivity of labor and the globalization of its markets. That constitutes of the "conditions directly given", not "chosen" by men, to make their history in the future. The question of JW about what would happen if these realities *"were all there is"*, as if *"individuals and classes"* could suddenly disappear, is of little interest and is only a dodge. The real question, simple but crucial, is: for individuals and classes desirous of overcoming the capitalist horror, will the evolution of new technologies facilitate or block the possibility of revolution, and more particularly the visibility of the revolutionary project?

Will the development of new technologies make it possible to better perceive what the new society can be? One can distinguish two dimensions within which to envisage the effects of the development of new technologies on the visibility of the revolutionary project, even if in the reality the two are interconnected: the first

relates to the increase in the productivity of labor, the second concerns the new kinds of social practice thereby made possible.



On the productivity of labor, I will only insist on recalling the fact that the condition for making products freely available, and therefore eliminating commodity exchange, depends on the possibility of abundance and that, beyond the question of natural limitations and on the form of social organization, that depends on the increase in the productivity of labor, or of productive activity, if one doesn't like the term labor.

The Nobel Prize winner Robert Solow declared in 1987: "One sees computers everywhere, except in the statistics." At the time, indeed, productivity, such as it is measured by the relation of production (measured in monetary terms) divided by employment (the number of people or hours worked), was not particularly marked by a more growth than in the past. Since the second half of the 1990's, things have changed and the effects of the introduction "of computers everywhere" can be seen in a spectacular way, including the problems thereby posed for employment levels in the Western economies. The importance of that growth is even more impressive when instead of measuring it in monetary terms (the price of the goods produced) one evaluates it "physically", in the use value produced by the same labor.

New technologies bring about a qualitative upheaval in the level of the growth of productivity, and thus in the possibility of a world without scarcity, where everyone can receive according to his needs and give according to his abilities, in the words of the old but still valid formula. The visibility of a project of a society freed from the laws of capital, which prevent such an outcome, would thus be



enhanced. It is easier to dream of a world where goods are free when the necessary effort to satisfy human needs is being reduced at an accelerated rate, and that, and when that becomes visible.

But it is especially on the new social practices made possible by modern technologies that I would like to insist. To fully understand the significance and the range today, I believe that there are two essential conditions: the first is situated at the qualitative level and consists in knowing how to recognize the authentically non-commodity, therefore non-capitalist, character of these practices; the second is situated at the quantitative level, and consists in seeing reality and the importance of its repercussions on social life within a temporal perspective of several years, or even decades.

Jacques W, and with him a number revolutionary "technophobes" see in the evolution of technologies only what capital does and can do with them, and conclude that that can lead only to the "barbarization of social relations". They can thus show how the development of the Internet and all the applications of electronics lead to an expansion and intensification of commerce and the commercialization of social life, of control and spying on the life of individuals, of improvement in the means of destruction and self-destruction, etc. But they see only that, ignoring, often with an ironic contempt, the whole universe that develops with it, and which is built on non-commodity – therefore non-capitalist -- bases, therefore not capitalists. They see "in misery only misery", as Marx reproached Proudhon. They see the extension of commodity and capitalist relations to all aspects of social life but do not realize that simultaneously there also develops a sector that escapes that logic. Capitalist trade through the Internet represents a sector in full expansion and the world wide net is becoming an essential instrument for any competitive enterprise. But, simultaneously, the Internet constitutes as of now the greatest experiment in "sharing", in sharing non-commodifiable goods, in the history of humanity. The combination of the prospects of communication via the net and that of digital goods has generated, and is generating, an unprecedented development of "sharing." This phenomenon has three dimensions:

- The sharing of digital goods;
- The sharing of individual efforts for the development of a project, a common, public work;
- The sharing of means materials (computers).

The sharing of digital goods (software, pieces of music, images, plans, films, books, comic strips, electronic games, in short, all that can be digitized) constitutes the most obvious form of this new type of practice. That can go from the individual who puts on the "web" his best vacation photographs and the history buff who "publishes" the results of his latest research, to the "hacker" who makes available software, that is normally subject to the payment of copyright fees, accompanied by a data-

processing "key" allowing one to bypass commercial protection and "safety walls," and to make use of it for free, and including groups of engineers who publish construction plans. To make known what is available and to access it, placing it at the disposal of others, without having recourse to centralized forms, what is called the "P2P" ("peer-to-peer"), has been developed. This system has recourse to software which makes it possible "to download" directly onto a computer the digital goods "taken" from another computer. It is not a question of "exchange," in a strict sense of the term, because there is no systematic reciprocity. Each one can take from the heap what he/she wishes, independently of whether they also give something or not. It is a logic completely alien to commodity relations.

This practice is becoming a mass practice, in particular among young people. It is estimated, for example, that in 2004, *"nearly 4,6 million people at every moment exchange music via unauthorized sites in France"*. It poses increasingly important problems for the film and music industries, as well as for data processing, the creators of proprietary software. The policies of the various governments against what they call "piracy" are fast developing. But they fear, rightly so, that a too systematic repression will do nothing but stimulate the development of a parallel world where, for example, musicians and other creators place their work free of charge on the net. It is interesting to note that certain "modern" economists had announced the failure of the P2P at its outset because its operation does not comply with the elementary rules of "economic rationality", founded on individual selfishness. They announced learnedly that everyone would be ready to take, but that nobody would be ready to give, to make the effort to put something at the disposal of the others. Some recognized thereafter their error and the need to "reconsider" the theory. At least, they recognize that there is something new. The old but effective argument against the very idea of a truly communist society -- "human selfishness" -- has been shaken, not just on ethical grounds but in practice. We will come back to this point.

The sharing of individual efforts for the development of a collective work is a dimension relatively less known than the sharing of music and films, but it is perhaps more significant and heralds what the life of a post-capitalist society might be. I want to show how free software, which can take the shape of consumer or production goods, depends for its creation, as well as its distribution, on non-commodity principles. Even if today certain commercial firms like IBM or Sun, take part in this production, for reasons of quality and also in their war against the monopoly of Microsoft, the bulk of free software is the fruit of co-operation of thousands of voluntary and impassioned programmers through the Internet. If one thinks of GNU/Linux (a system making possible the basic operation of a computer) as the best known and most widespread free software, it is estimated that it is the work of more than 3,000 programmers and a mass of more than 10,000 unknown contributors and testers, divided between

90 countries. Another significant example of the sharing of will and effort is the Wikipedia encyclopedia. It is continuously produced by volunteers on the Internet and freely put at the disposal of all. With it, there is no commodity relation either in its production or distribution. The control of the contents is ensured by the participants themselves with a minimum of centralization or without any centralization at all. Technically it functions entirely with free software. Started in 2001, it now already exists in 80 languages. The English version which is naturally the most developed contained at the beginning of 2005 more than 450 000 articles; the second in importance, the German version contains 195 000 articles, the Japanese 97 000, the French 78 000... the Chinese version, the 13<sup>th</sup> in rank, 19 000. At the end 2004, it was estimated that more than 13 million pages of Wikipedia were consulted per day. How does such a collective work, which has neither police force nor government, continue to exist and not be destroyed by acts of "data-processing vandalism", which obviously exists? It is the collective itself, the action of each participant, who ensures its protection and the compliance with certain implicit rules. There are really many more partisans of its existence than destroyers. And that has been enough, until now. The "Wiki" model is expanding into other spheres of activity. It constitutes a new form of cooperation and of collective production -- and it is non-commercial.

The sharing of means is the third dimension of the new practices made possible by new technologies. It's a matter, for the moment, of voluntarily sharing the power of personal computers. That especially concerns the work of scientific research requiring an astronomical number of calculations and normally requiring the use of computers as powerful as they are expensive. The idea was to replace the latter by thousands of personal computers connected by the Internet. These receive packages of data from a center through the Internet and return them, processed, to this center by the same way. The owners of personal computers can let make these calculations automatically with their computers while they are not using them or in tandem while they make use of it without using all its computing power. One of the first cases in which that was done was for the analysis of the gigantic mass of radio signals in space in the search for possible evidence of extra-terrestrial civilizations. In 1993 the American Congress decided to cut the appropriations allocated to NASA for this project. The scientists called upon volunteers on the Internet. They today number several million. Since then, this voluntary form of cooperation has developed in many scientific fields. It is employed, in particular, for research on protein folds by Stanford University. This research, which also requires calculations on a gigantic scale, can be crucial for the treatment of diseases like Alzheimer's or cancer, in which it is thought that bad folds of proteins play a role.

These practices thrive and develop side by side with the commercial universe. Because of their new effectiveness, they are the prey of the voracity of the commercial undertakings which see a means to thereby

appropriate free work, a weapon in the wars in which they are engaged, and even an instrument to adorn their image. In certain cases, some of these practices also face the repression of the State, and new legal structures are being set up to try to keep control of them. But, whatever the degree of interpenetration with the capitalist world, whatever the effort to control them that they encounter, they constitute a reality qualitatively new reality, one that is different from commodity relations. These new social practices are still, for the most part, just beginning, but the forms which they have taken until now are only the first in a universe which will not stop growing as it changes old activities and generates new ones. The possibilities opened up are infinite and to the extent that the world of the Internet grows, the creativity of new, possible, communities can only grow with it. It is estimated that there were nearly a billion Internet users at the beginning of 2005 and 1.2 billion are foreseen for 2006. That's a lot, if one takes into account what the population was only five years ago; it's only a little if one considers the part of humanity which still does not yet have access to the network of all networks. Besides, non-commodity practices are only one part of the reality of the Internet, which, moreover, has become an indispensable means of trade and of the organization of companies and governments. Nevertheless, these practices are a concrete demonstration that commercial exchange and the pecuniary search for profit are not the only motivations making it possible for humans to socially act and live together, contrary to what the dominant ideology repeats ad nauseam. And it is not unimportant, when it is a question of envisaging the possibility of a revolutionary project.

The influence of these practices in the social body, and within the exploited classes in particular, can only become significant with their development and extension, and that will take time. How much time? It would be foolhardy to guess. If the growth in the number of users of the Internet continued to grow at the current rate, in 6 years that number could equal almost half of humanity. It would exceed 6 billion in 10 years. That is only one mechanical projection and ignores some important questions, such as knowing socially who will have access to the Internet or what part non-commodity practices, sharing, will play in it. What we can be sure about is that their development is inescapable. There are two essential reasons for that:

1. The inevitable productivity race, the veritable nerve center of capitalist commercial war, leads to the increasingly intense and extended recourse to new digital technologies. Which means that the number of goods that can be digitized (thus freely reproduced), and the share of the "digital" in each good, can only increase;

2. Relations based on exemption from payment, free co-operation and the disdain of borders, constitute the most effective forms to manage new technologies of communication and data processing.

Here are the elements of the "*conditions directly given*" in which one can foresee that humans will make "*their own history*", to again use the words of Marx. But,

the evolution and the taking advantage of these objective conditions depend on the consciousness of men. At present, what consciousness do the humans who now engage in those non-commodity practices made possible by the evolution of technology have? Can these practices contribute to the generalization of a revolutionary anti-capitalist consciousness?

JW tackles the question, indirectly, when, so as to insist on the completely negative character of any technological dynamic (which he completely identifies with the dynamics of the capital), he writes:

*"The need to make visible other possibilities surely exists in various practical alternatives and it is for reason that that we say "alternative and revolution" and not alternative or revolution. But it is not the dynamic of capital that produces this. It is resistance to that dynamic. Cf. without mythifying this form of action: the anti-GMO actions."*

Independently of knowing if JW, according to this logic, would propose "anti-Internet" actions, he seems to be unaware that the non-commodity practices related to new technologies often had their origin in opposition (more or less vague) if not to capitalism at least to fundamental aspects of it, in particular to the right of private property in digitized goods, the copyright. The Internet itself is mainly the product of this state of mind. Admittedly, its primarily a matter of digitized goods, but we know the increasingly central place in the production process which these goods have, and, on another level, the importance of the question of property from the Marxist point of view: *"In this sense, Communists can summarize their theory in this single formula: the abolition of private property."* (Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto).

This kind of contestation can go from the elementary form of action of the teenager who "illegally" downloads a piece of music, "because it is less expensive", without raising any other questions, to theoretical developments as radical as "The dotCommunist Manifesto" of Eben Moglen who announces *"the downfall of property"* and *"the advent of a new social order"*.

The contradiction between the development of the productive forces and social relations becomes even more glaring when it confronts the reality of free reproducible goods with the laws of capitalist property. As opposed to what JW in his last book affirms, namely that "the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is no longer operative",<sup>5</sup> this contradiction is more real than ever and produces a powerful work of undermining the foundations of the capitalist commodity ideology.

It would take several pages to take account of the debates and tendencies that traverse the "hackers"

milieu, on the potential of the new technologies. One of the principal cleavages occurs around the question of the attitude to take with respect to the commodity world, with, on one side, tendencies that seek to better integrate the new practices into the capitalist commodity world and, on the other, tendencies that seek to preserve their autonomy and assert themselves as alternatives to the practices of the dominant system. Partly, the capacity of these practices to fertilize the revolutionary potential of which society is the bearer will depend on the relative strength of these two tendencies.

Today, on the one hand, we see the struggles of wage workers that seem blocked in a dead end of powerlessness by the lack of any alternative to the logic of capital. The non-visibility of a revolutionary project leads to divisions, and to the discouragement of a struggle for a ... "better form of exploitation". On the other hand, the communal movement of hackers runs up against the limits of the non-digitizable world, whose goods are not freely reproducible. Overcoming the limits that these two dynamics confront proceeds through their interpenetration, partly facilitated by the fact that the greatest number of hackers and protagonists of the new practices are proletarians, employees exploited by capital.

In any event, it seems to me not very serious to envisage the future of the revolutionary movement without being aware of the reality of these new practices, or worse to reject them out of of hand as mere contributions to the "barbarization of social relations". I am always astonished to see the indifference, if not the contempt, with which certain "Marxists" see these realities. They are however of luminous proofs of two essential ideas of Marxism, namely that the development of the productive forces tends to shape social relations, and that the development of the productivity of labor leads to the establishment of non-commodity relations.

Lastly, a word in connection with the argument advanced by Christian: *"If one awaits the effects of the technological revolution, I am afraid that meanwhile the world will become a dustbin"*. It is true that the ecological evolution of capitalist society is alarming, as has just been confirmed by the very official report made by 1,360 experts to the United Nations in March 2005: "Evaluation of Ecosystems for the Millennium." This report puts 40 years as the point of no return. But, if one wants to have at least a chance to accelerate a revolutionary process, it is necessary to start by giving up all technophobia and discern the profound realities of the "historical movement that is taking place under our very eyes."

**Raoul Victor**

May 11, 2005

---

<sup>5</sup> *L'événescence de la valeur*, p.134.

# Technology and Consciousness

*The above text by RV is a welcome contribution towards the articulation of an answer to the most crucial question facing us: How can revolutionary desire capture the imagination of the working class, of humanity?*

For orthodox Marxism, the answer to this question starts with the conflict between the development of the productive forces and the capitalist relations of production, which must lead to a higher stage in the development of human society: communism. This is posed as a law, valid not only in the present but throughout history. Personally, I never understood the essence of this "law", that is to say, what it is that fundamentally connects the decadence of slave, feudal and capitalist societies. But, at the empirical level, it seems that indeed, in each case (even if there is a danger of exaggerating the similarities) the development of the productive forces creates a new revolutionary class which imagines itself seizing power over society, in spite of the fact that the old dominant class organized it as a function of the conservation of its own power. The revolutionary class manages to seize power when it sees its potential power. It is thus, indeed, a question of visibility.

I speak of class, because it is the essential element of the productive forces. One cannot speak of the productive forces without speaking about the working class, or of the working class outside of the productive forces. The question is thus not so much how technology evolves, but how the working class evolves. Both are connected, of course. For orthodox Marxism, technological development clashes with the conditions of valorization, which brings crisis, then economic collapse, which convinces the proletariat to free itself from its chains. Unfortunately, that led many of those orthodox Marxists to focus their critique of capitalism on its so-called incapacity to 'grow' the economy, and to present communism as a superior model of growth (under their management, of course). It is on this design that the "traditional" theories on the decadence of capitalism (from Trotsky and Luxemburg to the ICC and the IBRP) are based. Arriving at the fatal point X, capitalism cannot accumulate any more, therefore, the undeniable need to continue production, causes the revolution. Too easy, much too easy! Even with the party added as a catalyst. And refuted by history. If one recognizes that since the first global self-destruction of capital, a new context is presented for capital and for the proletariat, that we can term "decadence" while awaiting a better term, it is necessary to recognize also that during this time, the capacity of world capitalism to grow the economy did not disappear, and that the temporary interruption of growth does not guarantee the revolution.

It is comprehensible that at the beginning of decadence, this productivist vision was credible, but today

it is manifest that it is not a lack of productivity that is responsible for the misery of humanity. Therefore, revolutionary theory cannot be based on the productivist argument. But the rejection of this argument does not imply the rejection of the materialist position on consciousness, nor does it deny that the conditions that the proletariat undergoes determine, not what *must* occur, but what *can* occur. It thus should be hoped that these conditions evolve in a way favorable to the development of revolutionary consciousness. Any position, which ignores the conflict between the productive forces and relations of production, is not materialist.

The basic argument remains valid: that this conflict, by making the necessity of the revolution visible, creates the conditions for the generalization of revolutionary consciousness. Even when the decadence of capitalism is no longer seen as a permanent incapacity to accumulate, and its effects on the working class are no longer seen in terms of the kind of misery and want that was typical in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the poisoned fruits of this conflict, the destruction which it causes capitalism to inflict (war and ecocide as well as unemployment and wage reductions) are the most potent argument for the revolution (if the working class can see capitalism as the source of the problem).

Raoul insists that the visibility of the need is not enough, that the possibility also must be visible. He is right, but again, that means in the first place that the revolutionary class must be visible to itself. In this respect, it is difficult to see the recent technological development as favorable. It seems to me that the changes that it has brought at the level of the recomposition of the working class, the decentralization of the work place, etc., have a very negative side for the capacity of the class to recognize itself, at least, for the moment. It is this difficulty which weighs heavily on the class struggle and which makes some believe that there is no more working class as a revolutionary subject, that our fate is in the hands of the "multitudes" (Negri). It is not by chance that the techno-determinist Marcuse is again à la mode.

But the effect of technology is a lot more complex, and contradictory. I agree with Raoul that information technology can make the possibility of a world based on non-commodified relations more visible. The technological evolution creates some new obstacles for the proletariat, but also new opportunities. One cannot conclude from it that it determines an ineluctable revolution, nor an ineluctable defeat.

Let me return once more to the question of the validity of the concept of the conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production as the motor of the development of revolutionary consciousness. Since the

productivist interpretation of this concept was largely accepted in the revolutionary Marxist milieu, the debate focused on whether the revolutionary party is the essential ingredient or an obstacle in this "ineluctable" process. While there were sensible arguments on both sides, given their schematic, productivist, framework, neither made sense. Those who reject both may also be enticed to reject the connection between capitalist crisis and the rise of proletarian revolutionary consciousness. For Aufheben, quoted with approval by Christian, "to consider history in terms of the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and existing social relations, is to take the point of view of capital." If that is true, the Communist Manifesto and many other fundamental texts of the revolutionary movement are capitalist documents. While affirming the opposite, I also think that the Manifesto and other texts need to be criticized for their determinist vision, for the idea that communism is the ineluctable result of economic development, to which the proletariat becomes the heir. Why would that be the case? Because capitalism arrives at a point of irreversible collapse? The theoretical arguments for such a position are faulty and rejected by the historical experience. Because communism would be more intelligent, more human, more pleasant? As if that were the only criteria determining the choices that humanity made throughout its history. What is ineluctable is that capitalism proceeds toward terrible economic crises to which it will react by causing massive destruction (it does it already). As JW writes, it is a pity that the only thing that is not ineluctable, is the revolution. He jokes, but he is right.

The revolution is not ineluctable, because it can be only a human choice. One cannot predict the future of humanity. If human beings are robots up to a certain point, they are also much more. I do not suggest a "free will" given by a god, but a complexity to which the simplistic Marxists "laws" do not render justice. But does the rejection of determinism imply a denial that objective conditions determine consciousness? Does it imply the negation of the position that affirms that the objective conditions for the revolution mature through the (negative) demonstration of its necessity (the collapse of the capitalist economy) and the (positive) demonstration of its possibility (by the presence of necessary material conditions, technology included)? This is what Christian seems to think when he denies that the development of the productivity of labor under capitalism was necessary for communism to become possible. In my opinion, he leaves materialism and falls in a kind of romanticism when he claims that "communism will not recuperate the productive forces of capitalism to liberate them and to develop them. IT WILL RAZE THEM." It is almost a religious vision, with technology in the role of Satan.

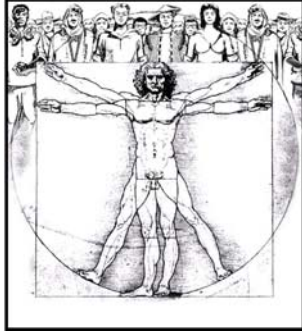
Christian is right when he affirms that technology is not neutral. It is deeply impregnated by capitalism, by the law of the value. The capitalist social relations do not exist outside of it, but are inside. Communism cannot simply recuperate it as it is and change its goal, but it will not make *tabula rasa* of technology either. Let us avoid simplistic

radicalism. It is easy to see only unfavorable aspects in the development of technology: its destructive application, reification, commodification, the isolation that it imposes on us more and more, in work as well as in our "free time"... this tendency can hardly be seen as facilitating the revolution. For a vision that is only based on that, the observations of Raoul are a welcome antidote. Such contradictory analyses can be made and both can be correct (but too limited and thus incorrect) because the dynamic of the development of technology, and of the productive forces in general, is contradictory too. There is of course nothing ambiguous about the direction in which capitalism leads this development: intensification of exploitation, increase in its totalitarian control, etc. But the inherent contents of this development are more complex. On the one hand, technology is, perhaps from its origin and certainly as of the Middle Ages, the fruit of a vision of reality as subject to control, to manipulation. It develops and is spread with the law of the value, and as a function of the latter. Its evolution, narrowly bound, culminates in the real domination of capital, where everything is manipulated, everything is quantified, everything becomes capital. But this capital valorizes itself with increasing difficulty. That goes for variable capital too, which means the rapid growth of the multitudes of humans becoming valueless objects.. The whole of humanity is transformed into capital and this capital is on a bloody race toward devalorization.

Information technology is an extreme expression of this dynamic. It pushes the tendency to the interiorization of work in the machine, to the integration of "spare time" in the market, to the penetration of the law of the value into all aspects of life. Since this tendency becomes omnipresent, its effect on class consciousness must be powerful too. Nothing can be understood, if this question is avoided.

But there is not only that. Information technology is also the most developed expression of the inherent tendency of technological development to make production increasingly more social, collective, interdependent, worldwide, and to require a proletariat increasingly trained, educated, literate. Information technology makes the world more connected, increasingly more dependent on the free transmission of information. That makes it impossible for the dominant class to suppress the expression and the communication of ideas, in spite of its totalitarian instincts. It is also the most developed expression of tendencies which result from the fact that under the real domination of capital, the creation of real wealth (use values) and the capitalist creation of wealth (exchange value) are disconnected and follow separate paths: tendencies to valueless production, on the one hand, and to overproduction, on the other. All these characteristics have in common that they exacerbate the conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production, between the working class and the social

**CONTINUES ON PAGE 16**



# Internationalist Perspective

*Internationalist Perspective* is a publication defending Marxism as a living theory, one that can go back to its own sources, criticize them, and develop hand in hand with the historical social trajectory. As such, if *Internationalist Perspective* bases itself on the theoretical accomplishments of the Communist Left, *IP* believes that its principal task is to go beyond the weaknesses and insufficiencies of the Communist Left through an effort of incessant theoretical development. *IP* does not believe that that is its task alone, but rather that it can only be accomplished through debate and discussion with all revolutionaries. That vision conditions the clarity of its contribution to the struggle and to the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat. *IP* does not aim to bring to the class a finished political program, but rather to participate in the general process of clarification that unfolds within the working class.

In its ascendant phase, the capitalist mode of production developed the productive forces to a very high level. The proletariat, through its struggles, could win durable improvements in its living conditions, and worker's parties and unions represented that possibility for struggle *within* the system.

As with every living system, after its phase of ascendance, the capitalist mode of production entered a phase of decline, generating the conditions for its own replacement by another kind of society. The decadence of capitalism has revealed the contradictions of the system in a stark fashion, and capitalism has become a fetter on the development of society. Today, when the productive forces have never in history been so advanced, capitalism hurls entire populations into insecurity, starvation, and unceasing violence.

The passage from the *formal* domination of capital (marked by the extension of the working day) to the *real* domination of capital (characterized by the thoroughgoing incorporation of technology into the process of production) has increased the productivity of labor, accelerated the development of capital, but has also led the system into crisis and profoundly modified the composition of social classes and the conditions in which they struggle. Permanent struggle *within* the system has become illusory, and the mass organizations of workers are totally integrated into the state, guarantors of social *control* and *cohesion*.

The proletariat by its very condition within capitalism is impelled to free itself from the alienation that capitalism, as a social relation, subjects it to, and is, therefore, the bearer of the project of a society freed from the law of value, money, and the division of society into classes.

Such a project has never before existed in history. If the Russian revolution was a proletarian one, it did not result in the emergence of a communist society. The so-called "communism" of the former Eastern bloc, like that of China or Cuba, was nothing other than a manifestation of state capitalism. The emergence, on an historical scale, of a new society can only occur through the total negation of capitalism, and by the abolition of the economic laws that regulate the movement of capital. Such a new society entails a profound transformation in the relation of humans to themselves and to each other, of the individual to production, to consumption, and to nature; it entails a *human community* at the service of the expansion and satisfaction of all human needs.