

INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE



Forty Years since May 68

Class struggle, Marxism and the Holocaust,
Reviews, World Economy in Crisis

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Contents

Editorial: May '68...May '08.....	1
Elements for an Understanding of the Class Struggle Today	5
Marxism and the Holocaust	10
Value-Creation and the Crisis Today	24
Review: Communicating Vessels: An Anthology of Essays.....	32

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Contact addresses

Write only as shown below:

Destryker	AM	
BP 22	PO Box 40231	PO Box 47643
1310 La Hulpe	S.I., New York, 10304	Don Mills, ON, M3C 1P0
Belgium	USA	Canada

Email: ip@internationalist-perspective.org / Web: <http://internationalist-perspective.org>

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

May '68 ... May '08

“It is only for those without hope, that hope has been given” (Walter Benjamin)

“Everything is possible”

“Power to the imagination”

For the post-war generation, May '68 was the first “strong” indication of an immense hope. All the structures of capitalist society seemed to become unhinged, every social stratum was in a state of unprecedented ferment, many countries were caught up by these rapid social changes, and political awareness could again forge links with its Marxist roots.

The working class, in the first general strike since 1936, in France, in the “hot autumn” in Italy in 1970, refuted the idea of the “disappearance” or “integration” of the proletariat. Millions of strikers claimed that a different world was possible, without putting forward wage demands or demands related to a specific job category. Workers in struggle confronted the unions, and their movements were characterized by self-organization. The workers assemblies in which everyone could participate and speak served as the crucible for making decisions, especially those that furthered a dynamic of extension to other factories. The rejection of the unions as having been integrated into the capitalist state was palpable.

The student movement, on the political plane, in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, in the United States and in Mexico, fought against imperialism vis-à-vis “national liberation struggles” (the Vietnam War), racial discrimination (the segregation of blacks in the US), sexism (with the development of feminism), and questioned the general thrust towards a standardized society, and the penetration of the university for the needs of big business.

The politics of the French Communist Party, the policies of the “USSR” (the crushing of the Hungarian revolt, 1956), were unequivocally denounced, albeit with a partial craze for dissident models of autarkic “socialism” – Chinese, Albanian, Yugoslav, Algerian -- developing.

The rediscovery of some of the fundamental texts of Marxism, until then unknown or unavailable occurred: Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Marx's *Grundrisse*, and *The Results of the Immediate Process of Production*. An interaction between students and Marxist thinkers and philosophers (Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch) who had grasped the historical potential of events occurred.

An atmosphere of euphoria, where “everything is possible,” reigned. The couple, the bourgeois family, parental authority, a rigid education, all put in question; the availability of contraception changed attitudes about sexuality. The development of new technologies gave birth to the “consumer society;” those same technologies also gave rise to the illusion of freedom from the assembly line through robotization: were we to replace the certitude of dying from starvation with that of dying from boredom?



Paris, May 6, 1968

Did May'68 announce a revolution? If not, why not?

In '68, twenty years after the end of World War II, after the period of reconstruction, capitalism again faced economic crisis. According to a mechanistic "Marxist" vision, such a crisis would have irremediably led to a slackening in the growth of the productive forces, a rapid increase in unemployment, a generalized impoverishment of the proletariat, and, therefore, an ascendant movement of working class struggles. May '68, in such a perspective, was merely a precursor of a teleological movement that had to lead towards revolution. Reality proved far more complex. May '68, with all the possibilities that it had expressed, exhausted itself in the years that followed. The very changes initiated by the movement were integrated into the trajectory of capitalist society, and its potential for revolt drained away.

Many tried to separate the "good" from the "bad," to separate the "purely working class movement" from the "student movement," the "revolutionary struggle" from the "reformist struggle." We will do nothing of the kind! The meaning of the movements of '68 was that of a *global response of revolt in a not yet revolutionary period*. It is necessary to understand the "not yet revolutionary" character of '68 and of the 1970's, to see how that period was still *full of illusions* about the prospects for being able to escape the growing control of [capitalist] technology, and about the imminent prospects for revolution. It is also necessary to grasp how capitalism has transformed its very mode of economic, ideological, political, ecological, domination since then, in order to understand how the conditions of a new period and of revolutionary consciousness are now ripening, and to give a meaning – neither triumphalist nor defeatist – to that gigantic warning signal that was the spring of '68.

Technological changes, especially the digital revolution, made it possible for capitalism, within a framework of crisis, to substantively transform production, the types of jobs performed by the working class, and the conditions of daily life and ideology linked to those material conditions. In '68, we still inhabited a world that was narrow and limited for everyone, where everything was scarce, but where access to the consumption of all sorts of "goods" was beginning: cars, TV, travel, higher education. Since

then, in the industrialized countries, an *apparently* generalized abundance has been realized. The increase in the productivity of labor has led to a reduction in the costs of production, and therefore to the production of cheaper commodities, making it possible to reproduce the labor force at a lower price.

'68 also marked the beginning of the end of the Fordist epoch, based on huge proletarian concentrations (blue collar workers) in factories like FIAT Mirafiori or Renault Billancourt. In the 1960's, if the working class could still count on its traditional bastions in steel, mines, and the auto assembly lines; since then, those concentrations have been scattered or eliminated in the most advanced countries, even as they have developed on a still greater scale in Asia. The proletariat, composed of those who can only survive through the sale of their labor-power, has been broken up into a variety of different modes or categories (part-time, temporary, etc.). Restructurations, the dislocation of enterprises, have destroyed the very physical and geographical fabric of the proletariat in the West, which must find new criteria to identify itself, and to come together.

In '68, the winds of change *seemed* to come from the periphery of capitalism, from countries struggling for their independence, against colonial or imperialist domination. The "revolutionary forces" of Vietnam, China, and Cuba, seemed by their youthful impetuosity and fervor to be able break the stranglehold of the old world that had entombed every hint of revolt within the ambit of its post-war reconstruction. Certain Western Maoist intellectuals propagated their own craze for the "cultural revolution" as a living alternative to the "Soviet Union's" socialism of steel and tanks. Only a minority amongst those who called themselves revolutionaries dared to openly criticize that brutal, totalitarian, campaign of *capitalist* terror, with its tens of millions of victims, such as Charles Reeves (*Le tigre de papier*) or Simon Leys (*Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*). Twenty years later, in 1989, before the cameras of the world, the massacres at Tien-an-Men Square bore witness to the real nature of Chinese "communism:" that of a "government that has declared war on its own people, and sent an army of murderers against the unarmed and peaceful crowds of its capital." (S. Leys, 1989 preface to *Essais sur la Chine*, Editions Bouquins, p.3) The invasion of Cambodia by its Vietnamese rival in 1978

had put an end to the atrocities of Pol Pot's "Khmer Rouge," though leaving the country quite literally drained of blood, and in a shambles, not unlike that of some of the temples at Angkor Wat. Today, events in Tibet leave no doubt about the nature of the Chinese capitalist regime: the utilization of the most brutal violence to perpetuate the totality of its political power.

1968 also saw the emergence of ecology, and of "Green" political parties. Rudi Dutschke and Daniel Cohn-Bendit are emblematic figures of that concern for the state of the world. Forty years later, the hopes for saving the planet from ecological catastrophe have considerably diminished. Ecology, as a political ideology, has been recuperated as an ideology for purely commercial goals, in becoming a source of new markets for "green" products. Ecology is even utilized in inter-imperialist struggle. The motivation for the production of bio-fuels is not to save the planet, but to free the US and Europe from dependence on imported fossil fuels. The indifference about the consequences of the production of bio-fuels on the emergence of new disequilibria in the production of food for human consumption, and the increase in the suffering of a growing part of the world's population, cannot fail to shock us: "When, in the US, thanks to 6 billion dollars in subsidies, a bio-fuels policy is set in motion that will drain 138 million tons of corn from the food market, you lay the bases for a crime against humanity because of one's own thirst for motor fuel... and when the European Union decides to increase the share of bio-fuels to 10% [of its consumption] in 2020, it puts the burden onto the smallest African peasant farmers" (Jean Ziegler, advisor to the UN on food, in *Libération*, April 14, 2008).

May '68 saw the explosion of a challenge to some of the representative institutions of bourgeois ideology: the Church, marriage, standardized education, the absence of democratic participation in the universities. The student revolts against the Vietnam War constituted an effort to overcome the de-politicization of public life in advanced capitalist society. Post-'68 is no longer managed by an ideology that is "coherent in itself," perhaps because that ideology has been replaced by a "falsification of activity" (Günther Anders): rationalized labor transcends our imagination, we do not see or we do not know what we are doing. Our political thought is skillfully controlled thanks to a mode of propaganda as systematic and organized as any other kind of production. The control of opinion,

the foundation of any government, from the most despotic to the most free, "is infinitely more important in free societies, where one cannot maintain obedience by the lash." (Noam Chomsky, *Dominer le monde ou sauver la planète*, Ed. 10/18, p. 15).



Paris May 10, 1968

The lessons of May '68: the loss of illusions

With a distance of 40 years, the following lessons can be drawn from that rich historical period that was May '68.

- 1) The question of the material and intellectual agents of the upheavals. Although working class and student combativity had been primordial in '68, the students and the workers remained powerless to change the world. The autonomous organization of the struggle, the most thoroughgoing distrust of the unions and the rejection of secret negotiations by "leaders," are the unforgettable lessons of May '68. But it is also necessary to *extend* the struggles, as quickly as possible, towards the key worker concentrations, as well as towards sectors of the proletariat working *outside* factories, or who are *unemployed*.
- 2) The absence of any substitute for the struggle against the most advanced capitalism. Contrary to the theories about a "displacement of

conflicts in advanced capitalist society,” on the link between student movements in the metropolises and struggles of national liberation in the Third World, the proletariat as *revolutionary collective worker* must confront capitalism and the law of value, *in the most developed countries*.

- 3) The “liberation from taboos” in sexual matters, equality between women and men, access to education, did not mean a “liberation of human potential,” but could go hand in hand with *the perpetuation of a repressive society* by making it possible for capitalism to extend the law of value into domains that it had until then not occupied: the *commodification* of the emotional and relational aspects of life.
- 4) *The inadequacy of the equation between industrialization, unlimited technological development and communism*. As the theorists of the Frankfurt School claimed, the unlimited technological development that has characterized value production especially over the course of the twentieth century has gone hand in hand with the subjugation of humankind: “the confinement of humankind within a rigid and ossified universe by the commodities of comfort and well-being, more and more accessible to the members of advanced industrial societies, and above all the plethora of them, comes at the expense of another human dimension: the *possible*. According to the principle of a negative dialectic, the techniques of industrialization, supposed to liberate humankind from alienated labor and the struggle against scarcity, condemn it ever more harshly to the archaic

anathema consisting in working for a living and struggling to survive. Today still, the most elementary needs (food, housing, clothes) are not satisfied except in exchange for the submission of one’s labor-power to the production of value – to the point of rendering superfluous the greater part of humanity that does not fulfill the criteria for that exploitation.” (F. Ollier, Preface, *Marcuse ou la dialectique combative*, Horizon Critique, 2007, pp. 18-19).

A different world is possible

Forty years after May ’68, the idea of the *possible*, is still -- indeed more and more -- on the agenda. The proletariat, far from having disappeared, has grown. The four decades since ’68 have been characterized by a massive loss of illusions in the future of the countries of the Third World, in the possibility of freeing the human condition *under* capitalism, in the unlimited development of technology and consumer goods. How the collective worker can oppose the law of value, pass from a “subject of labor” to a “subject of freedom,” save itself and escape the death of the world, is inscribed in the long process of the development of consciousness by the proletariat of its place in the capitalist social relation, and of the particular place as an actor that can transform the world that it occupies there. That road has become ever more necessary. The “possible” that was announced by May ’68 remains to be created.

Internationalist Perspective

Elements for an Understanding of the Class Struggle Today

I. A society in motion

As we point out in our editorial, it has been forty years since May '68. Those events marked the return of an offensive of the working class, and also expressed a profound discontent with society, a desire for change. We were then in the presence of a "Fordist" working class concentrated in huge industrial centers. And even if the May '68 movement was focused on the contours of a future society, that society could only be conceived on the basis of past models: the class was to resume the historical struggles of the proletariat; the class organizations which reappeared with the movement of '68 linked up with the old conceptions put forward by the Left and the great political currents of the past.

We know today what illusions that dynamic of May '68 entailed, but we also know the profound transformations of the capitalist system since that time. We can ask whether the social discontent expressed in '68 testified in a still confused way to a perception of the major transformations that had rendered certain social forms and values obsolete. It is this dual vision – of the illusions and the recuperation of May '68, and of the social transformations in the world -- that compels us to re-examine our theoretical conceptions about the evolution of society, of the working class, the function of its class organs, and the understanding of its struggle and the dynamic of the development of its political consciousness.

Today, the central point which serves us as a guide in our reflections about the class struggle is that of the re-composition of classes, its implications and the requirement of the period which forces the proletariat to perceive the context in which its struggles unfold as a global system where economic, political, social, and environmental stakes... are all connected. Today, the physiognomy of the proletariat assumes four modes:

- That of the traditional "Fordist" class, in "emerging" countries like China, Egypt, etc.;
- That of the "excluded" who increasingly populate the suburbs and the shantytowns, who have no hope of integrating into the normal labor process;
- That of the workers of the most advanced industrialized countries, reflecting the re-composition of the proletariat.

The forms of resistance to exploitation are very different according to the place that these proletarians occupy in production, and the specific ways in which they are subjected to capitalist exploitation. The fundamental question that all these proletarians face is how to unify, with a common perspective, their sometimes very different forms of struggle. Indeed, if for example, the Fordist worker resisted exploitation by blocking production, the isolated worker who utilizes the virtual technologies in the most industrialized countries does not necessarily have direct access to production, nor to a centralized site of labor. They must thus invent other forms of struggle, protest, resistance, which are sometimes less concrete (because less concretely connected to the production process), often shorter, situated in fleeting networks and no longer linked to a concrete site of work. As examples, we can cite actions that block certain circuits through which sales are made and recorded, or the actions of isolated workers engaged in discrete tasks who contact one another on line or by mobile phone. Such actions are often more fleeting than a traditional strike, and leave no durable trace in the form of discussion groups or even contacts. It's rather a matter of networks created for a determinate action, and dissolving immediately afterwards. As for the excluded, it is more by actions of plundering aimed at taking what they do not have, or of actions of break-in aimed at destroying what they will never have, that they express their anger and affirm their existence as excluded proletarians.

Too often, we have a tendency to create a kind of "hierarchy" among these various forms of struggles, by privileging the "classical" struggles, as if there were

“good” class struggles and “bad” class struggles. That tendency reflects a difficulty in recognizing the re-composition of the class and of one of its fundamental characteristics: its heterogeneity. Today, we can see that there are forms of struggles that are more significant, which open more of a perspective, and other less so. But we must reaffirm that the class struggle is precisely the whole of these multiple forms that are part of a global dynamic of opposition to the exploitation and the living conditions within capitalism.



Mahalla, Egypt, April 2008

II. How to see the struggle of the proletariat today?

To answer that question, we must not make a balance sheet of the struggles of the world proletariat, simply listing its strengths and its weaknesses. Rather, we must try to determine the new tendencies, and the potential, contained in the expressions of the class, and that despite the weaknesses and difficulties encountered by its struggles. This orientation is linked to our conception of the role of revolutionary minorities, which is not to teach lessons, to show the class how to struggle, but rather to link the potential of determinate movements to an historical perspective.

On that basis, we can indicate two basic features of the class struggle today: on the one hand, its extension to the majority of the world geographical areas and on the other hand, the diffuse character of its demands.

Without drawing mistaken conclusions from the first feature, and therefore seeing revolution around every

corner, one must note that social agitation, the expression of social dissatisfaction, manifests itself everywhere throughout the world, whether in strikes, demonstrations, confrontations with the forces of repression (which are also, moreover, not deprived of the possibility of going on strike). As examples, just in March of this year, there has been a wildcat strike of workers at Hyundai in South Korea, numerous demonstrations of Iranian workers demanding that their unpaid wages be paid, a strike by 3,000 bus drivers in Barcelona, and a general strike in Greece against the pension “reforms.” This is not a complete list, but just a partial “photograph.” These struggles relate to and involve all the sectors of the proletariat: active workers, pensioners, peasants without land “renting” their labor power to the great landowners, hospitals workers, teachers, researchers, etc, thus encompassing the various zones of the functioning of capitalism.

These struggles affect much broader realms than simple wage demands: they concern also the quality of life of workers (strikes of train conductors and Belgian bus drivers for job security, strikes by nurses of several European countries, various movements for access to housing, demonstrations against the high cost of living in several European countries, etc.)

If these two characteristics intersect, one can see a dynamic of social protest much more global than in the past and concerning many aspects of the functioning of the capitalist system. This constitutes a potential; it makes it possible for the various protesters to be recognized in the claims of others: access to housing, to energy sources, health care for all... are felt as general claims which reverberate everywhere, contrary to demands that are specific to one sector or to one geographical zone.

This constitutes a fundamental element in the passage from demand struggles to political struggle, from defensive struggles to the struggle for a different kind of society, without, of course, defining the current period and present struggles as already being struggles for a new society! ! ! It’s still a matter of a simple potential which must be situated, on the one hand, in a process of political awakening and, on the other hand, in an historical dimension which sees various levels of struggles and claims unfolding and, sometimes, mixing. A strike movement which starts as a precise demand can lead to a demonstration gathering strata of

the population expressing a broader and more diffuse discontent like the future of our children, the perspectives for jobs, retirement in the future, etc., in such a manner that a diffuse anxiety comes to be grafted onto a movement of protest by a sort of association of ideas, all of them being the expression of social discontent. Perhaps here too we have a possible answer to the question of how the various heterogeneous struggles of the class can one day come together with a common perspective. We have stressed that one of the great weaknesses of the class struggle was to confine itself to the partial economic demand, without managing to establish the link with the problems of the functioning of the system as a global social relation. The very heterogeneity of the class, if it currently constitutes a great difficulty for the proletariat in recognizing itself as a class with common interests, can also lead to going beyond the partial demand: the perspective of loss (loss of work, then social welfare, then of housing and social integration) is increasingly present for active workers still integrated into the system. In a sense, the existence of increasing masses of the excluded, ghettoized in the poor suburbs or neighborhoods, represents the concrete perspective that the current socio-economic system provides. If, initially, the included have the reflex to cling to work and their last welfare benefits, by saying “anything, but not that; for them but not for me,” we must also see the contradiction contained in this situation: anything but not that, but all the while knowing that “that” is inescapable. Thus, all the struggles that break out against the loss of jobs, the closing of plants, etc., contain the awareness that those struggles are pitted against a much more general, ineluctable, movement, which is that of the very dynamic of the capitalist economic system and its crisis. The current struggles, in spite of their weaknesses, their diffuse character and heterogeneity, nevertheless thrust the resistance and the discontent onto another level than that of the partial struggle alone. It is a slow transformation that contains a great potential which can develop in the future. In the same way, when one sees demonstrations where the slogan is opposition to war, to the consumer society, to the demand for a better quality of life, etc., one can detect something beyond what one could find in the ‘70’s, in the great pacifist, anti-nuclear, mobilizations, etc. We are today seeing a concern more profound in relation to society and the future, where the various facets of anxiety, formerly expressed separately, are in a way more connected, more integrated into a general questioning about the future.

Moreover, this concern today has a basis in a real and accelerated degradation in living and working conditions, even in the so-called prosperous countries: one can no longer speak of abstract things, which occur “elsewhere” or constitute a threat for the future, but of concrete things that each one feels in his/her daily life. Specifically, an element that reinforces these links between the various zones of the world is the real and direct impoverishment that involves also the “rich” countries (one wonders rich for whom). Previously the illusion existed in the poor countries that one was better off elsewhere and for the rich countries one was better off at home... Today, the famines, wars and extreme living conditions of entire zones of the world continue to push masses of famished and desperate people toward zones where their life is perhaps less directly threatened. But, concerning the rich countries, there is a growing awareness that living conditions are less and less comfortable and start to approach, under certain aspects, types of functioning seen in the poor countries (it is enough to see the vertiginous increase in the number of homeless people and, especially, the speed of this social decline). Another example relates to the access to health care in the “rich” European countries. It is now clear that an increasing mass of the population no longer has access to this health care. The increasing proportion of people being looked after in the emergency rooms (free or almost so in Belgium, which pushes the state to take coercive measures), rather than having decent care provided for everyone, is significant. “Doctors without borders” now has facilities in the large European cities. A last example, when one looks at the last report “on poverty” made in Belgium, one notes that 14.7 % of Belgians live below the poverty line. And if one adds to that all those who are not included in the figures, but who live just at this famous threshold, that includes a lot of people for a rich country... We know that Belgium still has, with Germany, an enviable system of social security, but that the situation is much worse in France, in the United Kingdom or in poorer countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal and the old Eastern European countries recently integrated into Europe. This can thus give us a sense of the perspective for real impoverishment towards which this industrialized European zone is moving. The situation with the United States, a strong economy and model of domination and economic success, is hardly better: one knows the situation of pensioners obliged to work until 80 years of age to survive, the absence of the system of social benefits and medical coverage and the precariousness of

employment for an appreciable sector of the population which, even if it works, often finds itself below the poverty line. And the famous “sub-prime” crisis only exacerbates this situation. Even if we know that there are no mechanistic links between impoverishment and the class struggle, we also know that the aggravation of the conditions of existence constitutes a factor of destabilization and questioning about perspectives and that is favorable to reactions of social revolt. This potential is all the more interesting as it relates from now on to the “rich” countries and can stimulate reflection in the poor countries about the illusion of a democratic-capitalist El Dorado.

III. How can the ruling class keep the “pot” of discontent from boiling over?

One element among the many transformations wrought by the trajectory of capitalist society concerns the control of the proletariat and, in particular, the role of the left parties and the trade unions. If these latter continue to convey the image of a protective barrier for the workers of countries with openly repressive political regimes, that is no longer true for the “democratic” states, which have long had those reformist organs. Thus, if the European countries are looked at, one must note a deep crisis of the Social-Democratic ideologies that have led the left parties into the opposition. The current period pushes the ruling class to more and more clearly reveal the cogs of its economic, social and political system: the economic crisis is global and permanent, there is no more work for everyone, it is necessary to share the social misery: to eliminate the system of early retirement, to lengthen the duration of working time and career; it is necessary to understand commercial logic and to adapt to it: to be able to sell oneself, to find a job, in short, to yield completely to the laws of the market surviving as an individual learning how to live in a climate of permanent insecurity where social violence forms part of everyday life, just as police and official violence: acceptance of controls, raids, phone-tapping, surveillance cameras, etc. In this context there emerges an idea: there are no more illusions about making it, concerning capitalism. There are indeed funny “altermondialists” who dream of an “equitable” and “green” world, but that is an ideology of the non-politicized petty bourgeois, skillfully utilized by capitalist production. Equitable commercial products, which preserve the environment, constitute a juicy market for

those who still have the financial means to buy a good conscience and to calm their anguish. For the others, i.e. the majority of the proletariat, everyday life constitutes a long struggle about how to cover the expenses of food, housing, schooling and health, without illusions as to improvement. The discourses of the left did not know how to adapt to this social “realism”. At best, with the image of Mr. Blair, they are openly relentless capitalist managers who no longer seek to hide the real goals of their decisions. In the worst case, they stick to the discourses of the past and are returned to the opposition. The question that one can pose is the significance of this cure of opposition: does it create the conditions for a return to power, or does it represent the bankruptcy of an obsolete discourse? We lean to the second hypothesis.

The ruling class has other mystifications to advance: the fear of terrorism, the danger of religious fundamentalism, etc. Nonetheless, two factors undercut those campaigns: on the one hand, the tendency to pauperization in every part of the planet has a unifying potential, despite the efforts of the bourgeoisie to fragment the proletariat. On the other hand, it becomes more and more apparent that the ruling class has no real alternative to propose, and has lost any credibility. If there are still countries where illusions persist, the tendency to a loss of credibility is becoming general. We must be alert to the control strategies that the ruling class will attempt to wield against the threat of a social explosion. One possible response will perhaps be the development of populist parties.

As for the trade unions of the industrialized countries, they are no longer seen as the defenders of the interests of the proletariat, but as specialists in labor law and negotiation. The trade-union affiliation is often conceived as a social affiliation (to obtain the payment of unemployment benefits, legal recourse in the event of dismissal, etc.). But, in conflicts, the trade-union organizations have a hard time holding on to their troops. Very often overwhelmed, even decried, they are far from being anywhere near the origin of conflicts. By way of example, the Belgian bourgeoisie acknowledged that the conflicts that took place in rail transport and in Brussels transport during 2007 were largely spontaneous conflicts. Even if it is only two sectors, nevertheless it concerns a country and two sectors where the trade unions traditionally have had an important role. We have to think about a tendency to

disillusion related to the class nature of the trade-union organs that seems to have started. Against this, the ruling class in the democratic countries is reacting more and more like the ruling class in the emerging countries: with recourse to the judicial system and making strikes illegal.



Volvo Europa workers

IV. Conclusion

This article is in no way a triumphalist apology for the class struggle, but rather has tried to delineate some of its broad features. Without denying the weaknesses of struggles, their limits, we have sought to focus on their contradictory aspects and the potential contained in them. To emphasize that potential does not mean tracing an ineluctable line that the proletariat must necessarily follow. We know that a potential is meaningless if it is not inscribed in a process of the development of a political consciousness. So, if we can see certain unifying tendencies in a general pauperization, we also know that such a pauperization can lead to a closing in on oneself, or into the trap of religious and ethnic ideologies. To emphasize the tendencies and the potential, as we have, does not entail hiding the complexity of the situation of class struggle, or the fact that its development comes about through a contradictory, a living, process, that unfolds overtime.

If capitalism continues its trajectory of profound transformations, the class struggle is also caught up in a dynamic of fundamental change. These changes are not to be seen with regard to the immediate aspects of the struggles, but must be considered on an historical scale, on the basis of the economic transformations of the capitalist system.

A first great transformation of the class struggle is its

more global character - although still diffuse and confused. Wage demands are linked to -- and sometimes lead to -- the expression of social discontent, to a more general anxiety related to living conditions and to the future. This constitutes a kind of linkage to the specific demands and a questioning of the mode of functioning of the system, as well as a possible link to aspects that, in the '70's, were the object of huge mobilizations without any link being established between these several aspects or between them and the overall functioning of the capitalist system.

A second characteristic is the heterogeneous character of the proletariat and its struggle. "Included," "excluded," "Fordist" workers, and workers in the most advanced countries and industries, represent the different facets of functioning of the same capitalist economic system throughout the world. Each one struggles on the terrain where they are, and with the means that it has, and the class struggle is to be seen as the whole of this mosaic in its different forms. If this heterogeneity represents a difficulty, it also contains a dual potential: that of going beyond the sectoral, partial, demand, linking up to other aspects of social dissatisfaction, and paradoxically providing a homogeneous vision of an economic and total social system. If the past was characterized by a majority of those included in the capitalist system in the rich countries, the present of these same countries seems to offer the perspective of the worker, pliable like rubber and seamlessly coming to enlarge the ranks of the excluded. If the poor countries could once dream of the "paradise-like" conditions of the democratic liberalism of the rich countries, they perceive today at which price this economic development takes place (China is a sad example), and they can see the economic and social conditions which are worsening in the rich countries. If the rich countries were not concerned with the sad fate of the poor countries (for example their colonies), they now see an increasing mass of their own population living in conditions that dangerously approach those in which the populations of the poor countries live.

Finally, a last characteristic relates to the extent of this social resistance throughout the world and across sectors of the proletariat, which represents a potential for the globalization of a questioning about the overall functioning of the capitalist system.

Rose

Marxism and the Holocaust



Dachau gates: Work will make you free

In this essay, I want to make, and elaborate on, three claims. First, that the Holocaust is a transformational event¹, a qualitative break in the historical trajectory of *capitalist* civilisation; indeed, a break so great that, as Enzo Traverso has argued, the Nazi genocide 'requires us to rethink the twentieth century and the very foundations of our civilisation.'² Second, that as a qualitative break in the trajectory of capitalism, the Holocaust poses a fundamental challenge to Marxist theory, such that, for

¹ The concept of the Holocaust as a *transformational event* was first articulated by Alan Rosenberg, and subsequently elaborated in a series of essays, most notably Milchman and Rosenberg, 2003.

² Traverso 1999, p. 4. Traverso is one of those rare Marxist thinkers who has seriously grappled with the implications of the Holocaust for Marxist theory; who -- in a series of books -- has sought to utilize Marxism to understand the Nazi genocide and its singularity.

Alex Callinicos, '[n]o human phenomenon can put a stronger demand on the explanatory powers of Marxism.'³ However, it seems to me, that orthodox Marxism, at any rate, has been inadequate to that challenge, has failed to provide us with a coherent or persuasive explanation of the 'Final Solution.' Third, no explanation of the Holocaust, of its origins or unfolding, that does not link it to the immanent tendencies of *decadent* capitalism, capitalism in its phase of social retrogression, one salient characteristic of which is the transformation of war into *race war*, can provide us with a purchase on what Traverso has termed this tear in the very fabric of history (*L'Histoire déchirée*).⁴ In my view, it is necessary to forge a direct link between the Nazi

³ Callinicos 2001, p. 385.

⁴ This is the title of one of Traverso's volumes on the Holocaust.

genocide and the unfolding of the operation of the law of value; to recognize, with the German dramatist, cultural critic, and Marxist, Heiner Müller, that 'Auschwitz is the altar of capitalism.'⁵

The Holocaust as a Break in History

The origins of the Holocaust must be sought in the unprecedented and ever-increasing violence that has accompanied the unfolding of capitalism from its phase of the primitive accumulation of capital and the brutal expropriation of the immediate producers from their means of production through the bloody colonial wars and orgies of mass murder that characterized the global expansion of capitalism, and that culminated in the mechanized slaughter of masses of conscript soldiers on the battlefields of the first world war. Within that bloodstained history, Auschwitz, understood as a symbol for organised and planned mass murder, marked the creation of a death-world in which the extermination of determinate groups of human beings had become the deliberate and systematic objective of the state. Thus, for Traverso, '[t]he "final solution" appears to us today, at one and the same time, as the culminating point in an uninterrupted sequence of violence, injustice, and murder that has characterized Western development and as an unprecedented *break* in historical continuity. In other words, it is only by setting Auschwitz in a larger context of racist crimes and violence that its uniqueness may be perceived and analyzed.'⁶

For Traverso, that uniqueness lies not in the numbers of those slaughtered, but rather in the fact that 'for the first time in history an attempt was made to eliminate a human group for reasons of "racist biology."⁷ What is at stake in the Holocaust is not simply race hatred, which has characterized capitalism since its very inception, but rather the project -- integrally linked to the development of science and technology brought about by capitalism -- to quite literally subordinate the biological realm itself to the logic of capitalist domination and control. The death-world, inaugurated by Auschwitz, had as its goal nothing less than a 'biological reconfiguration of humanity' [remodelage biologique de l'humanité], devoid of any instrumental nature, conceived not as a means but as an end in itself.'⁸ One aspect of that control of the biological

realm lay in the ability to remove -- through planned extermination -- those segments or groups within the human species deemed superfluous, worthless, or dangerous. For the Nazis, the Jews were such a group, a bacillus that had to be extirpated, virtually as a matter of public hygiene, though mass murder was never conceived as being limited to them. This biologisation and racialisation of alterity, and its physical elimination through state organised politico-military means has become the veritable hallmark of the death-world.

And that death-world constitutes what the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch termed a *novum* in human history. In his open system, Bloch's category of the *novum* designates what is radically new in history.⁹ It is intended to preclude any conception of a closed or completed world; any teleological vision of history, such as haunts orthodox Marxism. While in Bloch's philosophy of hope the category of the *novum* generally refers to the good *novum* of revolution or communism, as the Blochian alternative of *Alles oder Nichts* (the ontological compliment to Luxemburg's prescient vision of "socialism or barbarism") indicates, there is also the possibility of a bad *novum*.¹⁰ The Holocaust and the death-world that it inaugurated constitute just such a *novum*.

In the Holocaust the extermination of the racial Other proceeded along dual, though complementary, tracks, revealing two facets of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime. One facet of the Nazi genocide, which has dominated the historiography of the Holocaust, is the rational, bureaucratically administered, industrial production of corpses, carried out in vast factories of death utilizing poison gas, such as Auschwitz, Sobibor, or Treblinka. As Enzo Traverso has explained:

The system of extermination functioned like a factory, whose product was death. Jews were its raw material, and there was nothing primitive about its means of production, at least once the mobile gas trucks were replaced in spring 1942 with the incomparably more efficient fixed equipment: the gas chambers. Here death was brought about by streams of Zyklon B, a type of cyanide specially prepared by IG Farben, the

⁵ Müller 1991, p. 40.

⁶ Traverso 1995, p. 105.

⁷ Traverso 1995, p. 105.

⁸ Traverso 2002, pp. 9-10.

⁹ See Bloch 1986, pp. 200-05.

¹⁰ See Bloch 1975, p. 141.

most advanced German chemicals company. The victims' bodies were then burned in the camp crematoria, whose chimneys were reminiscent of the most traditional architectural forms of an industrial landscape.¹¹

There, the organisation of genocide was the responsibility of desk killers like Adolf Eichmann who could zealously administer a complex system of mass murder while outwardly displaying no particular hatred for his countless victims, no great ideological passion for his project, and no apparent sense that those whom he sent to the gas chambers were human beings and not things. An Adolf Eichmann, or a Rudolf Höss, the commandant at Auschwitz, is the high-level functionary in a vast bureaucratic organisation who does his killing from behind a desk, from which he rationally plans, organises, and administers, mass murder, treating it simply as a technical task, no different than the problem of transporting scrap metal or disposing of industrial waste. The desk killer is the quintessential bureaucrat, but functioning according to the imperatives of the death-world. As a human type, the desk killer is one more embodiment of the triumph of instrumental reason that shapes capitalism. Millions of human beings were murdered in the factory-like setting of the death camps, and it is the image of those camps, symbolised by the smokestacks of Auschwitz, that has come to define the singularity of the Holocaust.

Recently, however, Holocaust historiography has begun to pay attention to another facet of the Holocaust, to those other millions of human beings murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen*, the Order Police, the *Wehrmacht*, by the local auxiliaries of the Germans in occupied Eastern Europe, or by ordinary citizens of those occupied lands who slaughtered their Jewish or 'Bolshevik' neighbors. Those killings -- face to face, by shooting at close range or burning or beating their victims to death -- were anything but cold, rational, bureaucratic, and without passion. They were marked by an orgiastic bloodletting, by a hot rage and hysteria, by what in German can only be termed *Rausch*, an intoxication and explosion of repressed emotional content. On the surface such killing seems to have more in common with the pogroms that periodically exploded in the villages and cities of pre-

capitalist or early capitalist Europe than with the organised violence of a modern, technologically advanced, industrial state. However, these orgies of frenzied killing were not pogroms, spontaneous outbursts which have traditionally quickly run their course, no matter how violent they are, but rather an integral part of the systematic mass murder organised by a modern capitalist state. The shootings of more than thirty thousand Jews at the Babi Yar ravine in September 1941, no less than the murder of ten thousand people that Rudolf Höss claimed he had gassed in a single day at Auschwitz, proceeded from the *same* social conditions; different facets of the same project of mass murder, generated, as I will try to show, by the same capitalist civilisation.

It seems to me, that a Marxist theory of the Holocaust must account not just for the industrialisation and bureaucratisation of mass murder, and for the primordial role of the desk killer, but also for the *Rausch*, the unleashing of the orgiastic lust for blood exemplified by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their East European accomplices. Such a claim has nothing to do with the interpretation of the Holocaust as the violent and inevitable outcome of centuries of anti-Semitism peculiar to Germany, articulated by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen.¹² While Goldhagen correctly points to the role of *Rausch* in the mass murder of the Jews, his inability to recognize the enormous abyss between the Holocaust and the violent manifestations of anti-Semitism that have characterized the whole history of the West, his failure to link the Holocaust to the trajectory of capitalism, and his insistence that its bases are to be found exclusively in a purported German *Sonderweg*, vitiates that insight.

The Failure of Orthodox Marxism to Comprehend the Holocaust

Thinkers working within the framework of orthodox Marxism have failed to grasp the singularity of the Holocaust. For the most part, orthodox Marxism has treated the Nazi genocide as a byproduct of fascism, itself conceived as a screen for the rule of the most reactionary and imperialistic factions of monopoly capital or as a means for big business to mobilize the petty-bourgeoisie behind it in its effort to crush the

¹¹ Traverso 1999, p. 15.

¹² See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen 1996.

working class. The categorial arsenal deployed by orthodox Marxism is itself a formidable obstacle to any comprehension of the Holocaust. Orthodox Marxism's base/superstructure model of social reality, in which ideology is just an epiphenomenon determined by the economic base, its pronounced tendency to a kind of economic reductionism, a vision of history that equates 'progress' with scientific and technological development; a failure to theorize the role of the irrational in human history, a disregard for the role of contingency in the social realm, and a tendency to see the Nazi genocide not as a *novum* in human history, linked to the immanent tendencies of decadent capitalism, but rather as an atavistic regression to an earlier stage of human development, all frustrate the efforts of orthodox Marxists to adequately confront the Holocaust. Thus, Ernest Mandel has argued that the actions of German imperialism in Eastern Europe were rooted in the same imperatives that motivated the crimes of colonialism/imperialism at the time of the African slave trade and the Spanish conquest of the Americas ('But it was precisely German imperialism's "manifest destiny" to colonise Eastern Europe').¹³ In addition, Mandel has sought to demonstrate the at least partial economic rationality of the use of slave labour in the concentration camps ('the costs of such labour can be reduced to almost nothing, a miserable pittance which rapidly reduces the labourer's weight and health till he dies from starvation and deprivation').¹⁴ Both claims, in my view, attest to the inability of orthodox Marxism to grasp the

singularity and the break in history represented by the Holocaust.

This failure of orthodox Marxism has been clearly grasped by Enzo Traverso, for whom 'Auschwitz has shown once and for all that economic and industrial progress is not incompatible with human and social retrogression,'¹⁵ and according to whom the racism of the Nazis cannot be reduced to a screen behind which the real economic interests of big capital hid. For Traverso, '[a]n element that strikes and disconcerts historians studying the Jewish genocide is its essentially *antieconomic* nature. Where was the economic rationality of a regime which, to kill six million men, women, old people, and children, created in wartime conditions, an administrative system, transport network, and extermination camps, employing human and material resources which would certainly have been put to better use in industry and on the increasingly depleted war fronts.'¹⁶ Indeed, for Traverso, '[t]he Jewish genocide cannot be understood in depth as a function of the class interests of big German capital'¹⁷ Alex Callinicos has also challenged the orthodox Marxist interpretation of the Holocaust: '[t]he primacy of Nazi ideology in the development of the Holocaust is critical to understanding that, even if economic pressures -- for example, food shortages in the occupied USSR -- may have helped motivate particular murder campaigns, the extermination of the Jews cannot be explained in economic terms.'¹⁸ For Callinicos, biological racism is the key to the Nazi genocide, thereby providing a more sophisticated account of the orthodox Marxist relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure, and the task of Marxism is to explain 'why this ideology assumed such centrality in National Socialism.'¹⁹

While Traverso and Callinicos reject orthodox Marxism's economic reductionism and its focus on the direct class interests of big capital as the basis for explaining the Holocaust, they remain committed to understanding the Nazi genocide as an expression of the immanent tendencies of capitalism. Norman Geras, by contrast, while also rejecting the orthodox Marxist interpretation

¹³ Mandel 1986, pp. 90-1. In a work of over 160 pages, Mandel devotes a mere five pages to the Holocaust! Decades before Mandel sought to assimilate the Nazi genocide to the crimes of colonialism, Theodor Adorno pointed to the dangers of such analogies: '[t]he statement that things are always the same is false in its immediateness, and true only when introduced into the dynamics of totality. He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end.' Adorno 1978, p.235.

¹⁴ Mandel 1986, p. 93. Here Mandel links the behavior of the SS to that of ancient Roman latifundists and to early nineteenth-century Southern planters in the US. Beyond the highly questionable nature of such historical analogies, Mandel completely ignores the fundamental distinction between the latifundia and plantations, which were devoted to the production of commodities, and the Nazi death camps, the exclusive function of which was the production of corpses.

¹⁵ Traverso 1995, p. 110.

¹⁶ Traverso 1995, p. 127, my emphasis. This is indicative of what Traverso terms the 'counter-rationality' of the Nazi genocide.

¹⁷ Traverso 1999, p. 60.

¹⁸ Callinicos 2001, p. 403.

¹⁹ Callinicos 2001, p. 404.

of the Holocaust, has completely severed the link between the Nazi genocide and capitalism. In his attempt to grasp the Holocaust, Geras breaks with the orthodox Marxist vision articulated by Ernest Mandel in 1946, and subsequently only somewhat modified by him, according to which, as Geras explicates it, 'the destruction of the Jews of Europe is *rationally explicable* as the *product of imperialist capitalism*, and as such is manifestly *comparable* to the other barbarisms which this socio-economic formation throws up.'²⁰ In challenging such a vision, however, Geras does not seek to explain the Holocaust by reference to the specific trajectory of *late* capitalism and its immanent tendencies, but rather to 'something that is not about capitalism' at all,²¹ something ensconced in what he terms 'the subsoil ... of the human psyche,'²² in a transhistorical human nature itself. Thus Geras is convinced that the radical evil instantiated in the Holocaust is an ineradicable potential embedded in an essentialised human nature; a free floating danger that has haunted, and will haunt humanity, quite apart from the historically determinate social relations it constructs or civilisations it establishes. Thus, for Geras, the Holocaust tells us virtually nothing about the specific lethal potential of late capitalism, but a great deal about the capacity of an a-historical human being for murderous violence.

The Categorial Bases for a Marxist Theory of the Holocaust

A Marxist theory of the Holocaust, I believe, requires a different categorial basis than that provided by orthodox Marxism; by the Marxism of the Second, Third, and Fourth Internationals, as well as by significant elements of the communist left.²³

A Marxist dialectic comprehends the world as open, incomplete, unfinished, an *experimentum mundi*,²⁴ in contrast to the vision that prevails in so many orthodox Marxist conceptions of history in which human beings are subject to objective 'laws of history,' to their implacable logic, and to a naturalistic causality. Thus,

²⁰ Geras 1998, pp. 144-45.

²¹ Geras 1998, p. 164.

²² Geras 1998, p. 157.

²³ Space permits only a brief exposition of the Marxist categories adequate to an understanding of the Holocaust.

²⁴ This is the title of Ernst Bloch's last work, a Marxist *Kategorienlehre*.

Ernst Bloch distinguishes between cause [*Ursache*] and condition [*Bedingung*], with causes, in this sense, understood as resting on the principle of ground, and implying necessity, while conditions 'are the presuppositions of a possible realisation, that will not be brought about without the intervention of the subject.'²⁵ Conditions, therefore, are linked to what for Bloch is the primordial category of 'objective-real possibility:' a possibility the conditions for which are developing within social reality; which exist in a state of what Bloch terms 'tendency-latency.' The Blochian concepts of 'condition' and 'tendency-latency' provide an alternative to the mechanistic materialism, economic reductionism, and historical teleology, that has shaped so much of the Marxist discourse, and that has constituted a formidable obstacle to an understanding of the actual historical trajectory of capitalism. An understanding of that trajectory, including the tendency to race war in its decadent phase, requires liberating the Marxian categories from their imprisonment in the kind of metaphysical straight-jacket that led Marx himself to shout: "Je ne suis pas marxiste." What Bloch seeks, however, is a new concept of causality [*kausalität*] that is shorn of the unilinear character of mechanical causality, a dialectical causality, in which the possibility of discontinuity, 'dialectical interruptions' [*das dialektisch Unterbrechende*] is always present.²⁶ While such a concept of causality makes it possible to envisage a *revolutionary* interruption of the trajectory of capital, it also permits us to grasp the transformations internal to capital as it responds to class struggle and to its immanent crisis tendencies. It is on the basis of such a dialectical concept of causality, in which contingency also plays a central role, that it is possible to understand the Holocaust.

Such an understanding also entails, in my view, the rejection of the base/superstructure model of social reality, and its pronounced tendency to economic determinism, that has characterized orthodox Marxism. In its place, what is needed is the concept of overdetermination, first adumbrated by Louis Althusser, and then developed by the Marxists of the Amherst School. Thus, for Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff:

[t]he centrality of the concept of over-

²⁵ Bloch 1975, p. 129.

²⁶ Bloch 1975, p. 141.

determination rules out any notion that any one social aspect, such as the economic, can be ultimately determinant in some last instance of other social aspects. This centrality also carries with it a definition of the particular kind of complexity characteristic of Marxian theory. That theory focuses not on the relative importance of the economic versus non economic social aspects but rather on the complex 'fitting together' of all social aspects, their relational structure, the contradictions overdetermined in each by all.²⁷

Overdetermination does not mean that all social factors have equal weight. Indeed the complex "fitting together" of the various elements of the social totality, their specific "relational structure," is different for each mode of production, each social formation. But overdetermination is a means of acknowledging the complexity of that relational structure, a means of avoiding the economic determinism that has plagued orthodox Marxism.

The concept of overdetermination thus permits us to appreciate how biological racism could play such a central role in the unleashing and unfolding of the Nazi genocide, even when the continuation of the Final Solution had become an impediment to the German war economy and to the actual military operations of the *Wehrmacht*.

The appearance of the desk killer, of the functionaries of the death camps, and also of the troops and mobs who slaughtered Jews or 'Bolsheviks' in a state of *Rausch*, of rage and fury, and indeed of the countless bystanders whose silence or inaction were necessary for the Final Solution to be implemented, are all indicative of the need to confront the issue of philosophical anthropology, of a doctrine of an a-historical human nature, in Marxism. In contrast to such a vision, defended, for example, by Norman Geras, I believe that the modes of human subjectification are themselves historically variable; that the human subject has no 'essence,' but is socially 'constructed,' the 'product' of the social relations, the interaction of the complex causal chains and overdetermined contradictions, that shape a determinant social formation. Subjectification here means both the

way that the human being is historically 'constructed' as a subject, and the modes by which the human being is historically subjected to the prevailing social relations. This latter, as Antonio Gramsci pointed out, can take the form of coercion or hegemony. Hegemony is the way in which a dominant class instantiates its rule over society through the intermediary of ideology. For Gramsci, ideology is not mere false consciousness, but rather is the form in which humans become conscious; become subjects. The desk killer, the mass murderer in a state of *Rausch*, the bystander, as I hope to show, are all modes of subjectification produced by decadent capitalism, and its ideologies.

The Holocaust as a Refutation of the Equation between Technological Development and Human Progress

A number of thinkers on the margins of Marxism -- Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Günther Anders -- have challenged the orthodox Marxist equation of industrial, scientific, and technological development and the progress of the human species.²⁸ This equation represents the *productivist* element in Marxism, which celebrates unlimited industrial growth and technological development, conceives of capitalism as historically progressive so long as it assures such development, and insists that the same science, technology, and industrial labour, that propelled the global expansion of capitalism will serve as the basis of socialism. Even before the Nazi genocide, Walter Benjamin, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' had grasped the danger inherent in the orthodox Marxist commitment to technological progress, and its concomitant fetishisation of industrial labour, as the standard by which to measure human development: '[t]his vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor bypasses the question of how its products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism.'²⁹ Benjamin's recognition of the catastrophic side of capitalist progress, his anticipation of the death-world to come, was seconded by his friend, Ernst Bloch, who preferred 'a dash of pessimism' to 'the banal,

²⁷ Resnick and Wolff 1987, pp. 49-50.

²⁸ In his *L'Histoire déchirée*, Traverso has both elucidated the contributions of Benjamin, Adorno, and Anders, and explicitly linked them to an understanding of the Holocaust.

²⁹ Benjamin 1968, p. 261.

automatic belief in progress as such,' because it would help avoid being surprised by catastrophes, 'by the horrifying possibilities which have been concealed and will continue to be concealed precisely in capitalist progress.'³⁰ Surely, the Holocaust was one of those 'horrifying possibilities,' as Herbert Marcuse clearly recognized: '[c]oncentration camps, mass extermination, world wars and atom bombs are no "relapse into barbarism," but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination.'³¹

I want now to briefly examine this catastrophic side of industrial, technological, and scientific progress, as it has been theorised by Adorno, Marcuse, and Anders, and to show its links to the death-world symbolised by Auschwitz. In his essay on 'Society' (1965), Adorno pointed to the 'totalitarian tendencies of the social order' inherent in the spread of the commodity-form to all aspects of social reality.³² For Adorno, totalitarianism is not just a political system, but the culminating point of the subjugation of the totality of social existence to the imperatives of the commodity form. The autonomy of the various spheres of life, that still characterized early capitalism, is destroyed as the category of exchange value invades all realms of existence, even the aesthetic, the erotic, and the psychological. Thus, as Adorno claimed in his essay on 'Late Capitalism Or Industrial Society?' (1968): 'Material production, distribution, and consumption are jointly administered. Their boundaries - - which once really separated the distinct spheres, in spite of their mutual dependence within the total process, and thereby respected their qualitative differences -- dissolve. All becomes one.[*Alles ist Eins*]'³³ While Adorno's vision of the totalitarianism of late capitalism seemingly leaves no space for opposition or resistance, and thereby leaves Marxism no basis for the revolutionary optimism or hope which is its hallmark, he nonetheless has grasped an important dimension of its historical trajectory.

This vision of the totalitarian tendencies of late capitalism also shapes the work of Adorno's friend Herbert Marcuse, who, in his *One-Dimensional Man*,

argued that science, technology, and rationality, all possessed a definite, capitalist, social content:

The principles of modern science were *a priori* structured in such a way that they could serve as conceptual instruments for a universe of self-propelling, productive control ... The scientific method which led to the ever-more-effective domination of nature thus came to provide the pure concepts as well as the instrumentalities for the ever-more-effective domination of man by man. Today, domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but *as* technology, and the latter provides the great legitimation of the expanding political power, which absorbs all spheres of culture. Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination, and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society.³⁴

This science, technology, and rationality, historically generated by capitalism, and inextricably linked to its social relations, and immanent tendencies, what Marcuse designates as 'the Logos of technics' has, in late capitalism 'been made into the Logos of continued servitude.'³⁵ And this same Logos of technics constituted one of the pre-conditions for the unfolding of the project of industrialised mass murder in the Nazi death camps.

Günther Anders illuminates several of the other causal chains, whose interaction provided the necessary conditions for 'the transformation of humans into raw material[*Rohstoff*]' for the factories of death.³⁶ For Anders, the very technology generated by human beings, and brought to perfection within the framework of capitalism, risks rendering its creators -- humankind -- superfluous, obsolescent; this is the claim of Anders' two volume magnum opus, *the Obsolescence of Man* [*Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*]. Not only have man's own creations, technologies and their accompanying social relations, assumed a life of their own, become *things*

³⁰ Bloch 1986, p. 199.

³¹ Marcuse 1966, p. 4. Marcuse's linkage of Auschwitz and Hiroshima has been seconded, and elaborated, in the work of his friend Günther Anders.

³² Adorno 1979, p. 16, my emphasis.

³³ Adorno 1979, p. 369.

³⁴ Marcuse 1964, pp. 158-59.

³⁵ Marcuse 1964, p. 159.

³⁶ Anders 1986, p. 22.

which seem to escape human control, the phenomenon of reification, first adumbrated by Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*, but -- according to Anders -- they now threaten the very annihilation of the human species itself. Thus:

What we constantly aim at is to bring about something that can function without our presence and help, tools by which we make ourselves superfluous, by which we eliminate and 'liquidate' ourselves. It doesn't matter that this goal has only been approximated. What matters is the tendency. And its watchword is: 'without us'.³⁷

Indeed, for Anders, this tendency inexorably leads to an outcome in which technology becomes the subject of history. One feature of this impending 'obsolescence of man' as a result of his own technological prowess, according to Anders, is the new mode of human existence that it has wrought: being a means, 'mediality' [*Medialität*].³⁸ This mode of existence is characterised by an extreme conformism, in which the human being executes his/her assigned tasks without question. This behavior, so typical of a business office or state agency, reappears in Auschwitz, where 'the employee [*Angestellte*] of the death camp has not 'acted' [*gehandelt*], but, as strange as it seems, done a job'.³⁹ Action entails decision, thought, and conscience; doing a job, performing an assigned task, means asking no questions, especially about purpose or goal, demanding no reasons for the prescribed task, other than the order to do it. It is capitalism that generates this 'medial' existence, a mode of subjectivation integrally linked to an economy based on the law of value, and necessary for the appearance of the desk killer, that essential functionary of the death-world.

These meditations on the totalitarian tendencies of late capitalism, on the integral links between science and domination, technology and annihilation, and the medial existence of contemporary humans, raise two important problems for the kind of Marxist theory that is adequate to the task of understanding the Holocaust. First, there is the possibility that Adorno and Anders, however prescient their analyses of certain determinate tendencies

of capitalist social development may be, risk propounding a sort of negative teleology, in which the meaning or goal of history lies in totalitarianism or in nihilistic destruction. For example, such a negative teleology seems inherent in Anders' vision of technology as the subject of history, culminating in an 'Endzeit' in which 'humanity as a whole is eliminatable [*tötbar*].'⁴⁰ Such a vision appears to leave no room for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism; for the overthrow of a system based on the commodity form and the law of value. Second, these meditations need to be connected to Marx's own vast manuscripts of 1857-63, from which only volume one of *Capital* was published in his lifetime, and from which Engels then crafted volumes two and three. The bulk of these manuscripts, including Marx's reflections on technology and automation, and his analysis of the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital, have only recently become widely known, and did not directly shape the theoretical work of Adorno or Anders, and their analyses of late capitalism and its immanent tendencies. Indeed, I believe that the link between late capitalism and the death-world, requires a clear understanding of both the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital, and of the sharpening of the contradiction between value and 'real wealth,' also adumbrated in Marx's economic manuscripts -- developments that have transfigured the history of the twentieth century, and to which the Holocaust is linked.

From the formal to the real domination of capital

Marx links the formal subsumption of labour under capital to the extraction of absolute surplus-value, whereas the real subsumption of labour under capital is linked to the extraction of relative surplus-value. This transition accompanies the whole history of capitalism, and while the extraction of absolute surplus-value never ceases, an ever-greater reliance on the extraction of relative surplus-value asserts itself, and becomes increasingly dominant in the course of the twentieth century. With the formal domination of capital, the commodity form and the law of value remain largely confined to the immediate point of production: the factory and the direct extraction of surplus-value. The real domination of capital, by contrast, is characterized by the penetration of the law of value into every segment of social existence. Thus, from its original locus at the

³⁷ Anders 1981, p. 199.

³⁸ Anders 1961, p. 287.

³⁹ Anders 1961, p. 291.

⁴⁰ Anders 1961, p. 243.

point of production, the law of value has systematically spread its tentacles to incorporate not just the production of commodities, but their circulation and consumption too. Moreover, the law of value also penetrates and then comes to preside over the spheres of the political and ideological, including -- besides the modes of subjectivation of human beings -- science and technology themselves. This latter occurs not just through the transformation of technological and scientific research (and the institutions in which it takes place) into commodities, but especially through the infiltration of the value form into reason itself (the triumph of a purely *instrumental* reason), and the reduction of all beings, nature and humans, to mere objects of manipulation and control. While the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital begins in the industrial metropolises in the nineteenth-century, its triumph, consolidation, and global spread, is a twentieth-century phenomenon.

While the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital entails an increasing reliance on the fruits of science and technology to raise the productivity of labour, and thereby extract relative surplus-value, no matter how many changes occur in the forms and techniques of production, according to Marx, capitalism remains a mode of production whose 'presupposition is -- and remains -- the mass of direct labour time, the quantity of labour employed, as the determinant factor in the production of wealth.'⁴¹ However, the historical trajectory of capitalism produces a growing contradiction between its unsurpassable basis in the expenditure of living labour to produce exchange value, on the one hand, and the actual results of its own developmental tendencies on the other: 'But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of *real wealth* comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose "powerful effectiveness" is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production.'⁴² This disjunction between exchange value and 'real wealth,' the former dependent on the direct expenditure of living labour, and the latter increasingly dependent on the

overall productive power of society, and its cultural and technological development, creates the pre-conditions for the supersession of value production and the commodity form. In Marx's words: '[a]s soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The *surplus labour of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth'⁴³

Therefore, when the perpetuation of value production, with its insurmountable basis in the extraction of surplus-value from living labour, has become an obstacle to the continued production of material wealth, capitalism as a mode of production and civilisation becomes the site of social *retrogression*. At that point in its historical trajectory, only a social revolution, the abolition of the law of value, and a qualitatively different science and technology, one no longer bound to instrumental reason, quantification, and the logos of domination, can prevent the catastrophes that the perpetuation of value production will entail. In the absence of such a social revolution, the continued existence of capitalism, bound as it is to the extraction of surplus-value from living labour, and yet confronted by the tendential fall in the rate of profit, by the fact that the rate of growth of surplus-value tends to fall even as the level of surplus labour rises, compels it to *accelerate* the development of the productive forces and technology at an ever-more frenzied rate and tempo. Marx clearly grasped this imperative:

Thus the more developed capital already is, the more surplus labour it has created, the more terribly must it develop the productive force in order to realize itself in only smaller proportion, i.e. to add surplus value -- because the barrier always remains the relation between the fractional part of the day which expresses *necessary labour*, and the entire working day. It can move only within these boundaries. The smaller already the fractional part falling to *necessary labour*, the greater the *surplus labour*, the less can any increase in productive force perceptibly diminish necessary labour; since the denominator has grown enormously.

⁴¹ Marx 1973, p. 704

⁴² Marx 1973, pp. 704-05, my emphasis.

⁴³ Marx 1973, p. 705.

The self-realization of capital becomes more difficult to the extent that it has already been realized.⁴⁴

However, this very contradiction increases the pressure on every capital entity, on every business, to expand the forces of production, develop and implement new technologies, increase its productivity, in a desperate attempt to escape the downward course in the average rate of profit, and to obtain a surplus-profit by producing commodities *below* their socially average value. Therefore, the faster the rate of profit falls, as a result of the rising organic composition of capital, i.e., the growth of the productive forces, the greater the pressure on each capital entity -- nation or firm -- to accelerate the development of those self-same productive forces in the endless quest to get a jump on its competitors, and to grab a surplus-profit. One result of this frenetic growth of the productive forces in an epoch of social retrogression is the inevitable creation of a surplus population for which capital can find no profitable use.⁴⁵

Surplus Population and Mass Murder

While each stage of capitalist development entails demographic displacements, what typically occurs is a shift of labour-power from one sector to another, from agriculture, to industry, to tertiary sectors. While such shifts continue to occur as the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital takes place, a new and unprecedented development also makes its appearance when capitalism, as Marx shows, 'calls to life all the powers of science and nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it.'⁴⁶ The result is the tendential *ejection* of ever-larger masses of labour from the productive process; the creation of a population that from the point of view of capital is *superfluous*, no longer even potentially necessary to the creation of value, and indeed having

become an insuperable burden for capital, a dead weight that it must bear, even at the expense of its profitability. The existence of such a surplus population -- at the level of the total capital of a national entity -- can create the conditions for mass murder, inserting the extermination of whole groups of people into the very 'logic' of capital, and through the complex interaction of multiple causal chains emerge as the policy of a capitalist state.

In the specific case of Nazi Germany, Götz Aly and Susanne Heim have argued that the extermination of the Jews was the first stage of a far-reaching demographic project in the service of economic modernisation. Germany's attempt to confront Anglo-American domination of the world market entailed the creation of a vast economic space (*Grossraumwirtschaft*), continental autarky for Europe, under German hegemony. But such a project was not simply based on geographical expansion; it also necessitated vast demographic changes, especially in Eastern Europe. There, the German planners, demographers, and economists, whose projects Aly and Heim have investigated, confronted a problem of economic backwardness linked to *overpopulation*.⁴⁷ A vast agricultural population, with small landholdings and extremely low productivity, was a formidable obstacle both to German hopes for autarky in food production for the European continent, and for industrial development, economic modernisation, in the East, so as to make the German economic space competitive with Anglo-American capital. The Jews in Eastern Europe, both as a largely urban population, and as the owners of small, unproductive, businesses, constituted a particular obstacle to the migration of Slavs from the overpopulated countryside to the cities, such that their elimination was seen as a pre-requisite for economic development. Moreover, for these planners, such processes of economic transformation could not be left to 'market forces,' which in England, the US, and in Western Europe, had taken generations, but, given the exigencies of imperialist competition and war, had to be undertaken by the state on the quick. The *Generalplan Ost*, within which the extermination of the Jews was the first stage, envisaged the elimination, by 'resettlement' (beyond the Urals), death by starvation and slave labour, or mass murder, of a surplus population of perhaps fifty million human beings.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Marx 1973, p. 340.

⁴⁵ Besides its tendency to create such a surplus population, clearly present in the 1930's, and even more so today, I might add, capitalism also produces excess constant capital as well. The imperative of the *destruction* of both variable capital (living labour) and constant capital (factories, machines, etc.) shapes the very course of decadent capitalism, though in an analysis of genocide it is the destruction of human beings that is at issue.

⁴⁶ Marx 1973, p. 706.

⁴⁷ Aly and Heim 1993, pp. 102-24.

⁴⁸ Aly and Heim 1993, pp. 394-440.

While emphasising the economic 'utilitarianism' and rationality of this project of mass murder, and ignoring the sadism and brutality of so much of the killing, Aly and Heim have nonetheless attempted to incorporate the role of biological racism into their analysis of the Holocaust: '[s]election according to racist criteria was not inconsistent with economic calculations; instead it was an integral element. Just as contemporary anthropologists, physicians and biologists considered ostracizing and exterminating supposedly "inferior" people according to racist and achievement-related criteria to be a scientific method of improving humanity and "improving the health of the body of the Volk," economists, agrarian experts, and environmental planners believed they had to work on "improving the health of the social structure" in the underdeveloped regions of Europe.⁴⁹ What seems to me to be missing in the work of Aly and Heim, is the link between racism and science constituted by their common source in a logos of technics based on the absolute control of nature and humans, right down to the most elementary biological level of existence. And that logos, as I have argued, is the product of the spread of the capitalist law of value into the sphere of reason itself; the transformation of reason, which once included critical reason, into a purely *instrumental* reason, means-end rationality, the veritable basis of modern science and technology. However, Aly and Heims' research, particularly if it is linked to the operation of the capitalist law of value, and treats the demographic problems that German planners confronted in Eastern Europe as a manifestation of the specific tendency of decadent capitalism to create a surplus population, the extermination of which can become an imperative, can help us to grasp one of the causal chains that led to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Massification and the Nazi genocide

If we are to understand the role played by fanatical anti-Semitism, and by the orgiastic character of so much of the killing, in the Final Solution, then, it seems to me, we must also grasp another causal chain linked to the

⁴⁹ Heim and Aly 1994, p. 50. In addition to a tendency to a mono-causal analysis of the Holocaust, based on utilitarian factors, only partially modified in this and subsequent texts, Aly and Heim fail to account for the primordial role of anti-Semitism, of fanatical Jew hatred, and of the Rausch, the orgy of bloodletting, in which so much of the killing was carried out.

immanent tendencies of late capitalism: that unleashed by the phenomenon of *massification*.

One of the most dramatic effects of the inexorable penetration of the law of value into every pore of social and individual existence has been the destruction of all primitive, organic, and pre-capitalist communities. Capitalism, as Marx and Engels pointed out in the *Communist Manifesto*, shatters the bonds of immemorial custom and tradition, replacing them with its exchange mechanism, and contract. The outcome is the phenomenon of atomization, the subjectivation of the person as an individual monad, animated purely by self-interest. Moreover, that very tendency produces an ever-growing mass of rootless individuals, for whom the only human contact is by way of the cash nexus. But, those who have been uprooted -- geographically, economically, politically, and culturally -- are frequently left with a powerful longing for their lost communities (even where those communities were hierarchically organised and based on inequality), for the certainties and 'truths' of the past, which are romanticised the more frustrating, unsatisfying, and insecure, the world shaped by capital has become.

These longings can take the form of the constitution of a *mass*. In a work written in 1939, Emil Lederer analysed the formation of the mass as one of the dominant features of the epoch. In contrast to a class, this is how he described it:

I understand by a mass or a crowd a great number of people who are inwardly united so that they feel and may possibly act as a unity. The individuals in a mass belong to different social groups, but that does not matter: they are not aware of it as long as they form part of the mass. Masses are therefore amorphous; social stratification is effaced or at least blurred. The point of unity for the individuals comprising a mass is always emotional. A crowd can be united only by emotions, never by reason: reason would be lost on the masses....⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Lederer 1967, pp. 30-1. While, in my view, emotions can and

According to Lederer, 'usually the crowd will act only if there is a leader.'⁵¹ And when the mass acts, its members 'cease to think: they are moved, they are carried away, they are elated; they feel united with their fellow members in the crowd, released from all inhibitions Psychological descriptions of this phenomenon by individuals who have experienced it concur in this respect: they say they were "carried away"; that they only felt; that it is similar to intoxication.'⁵²

What is missing in Lederer's account, however, is the connection of the phenomenon of massification to the developmental tendencies of decadent capitalism. Indeed, Lederer explicitly links the formation of the mass to the end of class society; for him, the 'state of the masses' arises on the ashes of capitalism, not as one of its possible political forms. I want to refunction Lederer's concept of massification by linking it directly to the trajectory of capitalism, and by showing how this phenomenon is connected to the orgiastic features of the Nazi genocide. It is the very longing for community that sociologically underlies the formation of the mass, a longing that the capitalist state under determinate conditions, such as those prevailing in Germany on the eve of Hitler's seizure of power, could utilize in the interests of a mass mobilisation -- even as those same longings powerfully affected segments of the ruling class itself. In that sense, the Nazi vision of a 'racially pure community,' a *Volksgemeinschaft*, was directly linked to the effects of capitalism's destruction of all genuine communal bonds, and to the void that it left in its wake. The powerful impact of such an ideology, its modes of subjectivation, and its deep roots, escaped the orthodox Marxist opponents of the Nazis, both Stalinist and Trotskyist, though they were clearly understood by Ernst Bloch.⁵³

do play a significant role in the constitution of a class, and in the development of class consciousness, it is the absence of reason, especially of critical reason, and the *exclusive* role of emotions, that Lederer believes characterizes the state of the masses.

⁵¹ Lederer 1967, p. 39.

⁵² Lederer 1967, pp. 32-3.

⁵³ See Bloch 1990, especially pp. 37-185, for an insightful analysis of this phenomenon, first written in the 1930's. While Bloch grasps the significance of this longing for community, and the success of the Nazis in mobilising it for their own purposes, he does not explicitly link it to the process of massification in late capitalism.

No matter how intense this longing for community may be, it cannot be satisfied so long as the law of value regulates social existence. The organic communities of the pre-capitalist past can be neither preserved nor recreated; their destruction is irreversible. Moreover, no new communities, no human *Gemeinwesen*, can be created within the historico-economic space occupied by capitalism. The condition of massification, spawned by the very development of capitalism itself, leaves only the prospect of a 'community' in which a racial, ethnic, or religious identification is merely superimposed on the existing conditions of wage-labour. Yet, as Lederer points out, this identification is necessary to the constitution of the crowd or the mass out of the multitude of a given population:

[t]hat a multitude can easily become a crowd must not obscure the fact that its members must be susceptible to the same emotions, which presupposes ... that they speak the same language and share a common historical experience. Large numbers of people belonging to different nations and races are not likely to coalesce into what we call a crowd. The existence of a common cultural basis is very important.⁵⁴

The formation of the mass both provides a substitute gratification for the genuine longing for community felt by the multitude of the population, and a basis upon which the ruling class can establish its hegemony.

However, the basis upon which such a mass is constituted, the identity upon which the pure community is established, necessarily entails the exclusion of those who do not share the common historico-cultural bases of the mass. Those excluded, the Other, racial, ethnic, or religious minorities for example, though they inhabit the same territorial space as the mass, become alien elements within the putatively 'homogeneous' world of the pure community. The Other, the Jew within the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, for example, then becomes the scapegoat for the inability of the pure community to provide real communal bonds between people, to eliminate the alienation generated by capitalism. The more crisis ridden a society becomes, the greater the rage of the mass against alterity; the more urgent the need of the ruling class for a mobilisation of the crowd behind its

⁵⁴ Lederer 1967, p. 31.

projects (including war), the more imperious the necessity to channel anger onto the Other. Thus racism and xenophobia are inseparable from the constitution of the mass in decadent capitalist society. In an extreme situation, that rage against alterity can become one of the bases for a genocidal project directed at the Other, whose very existence is seen and felt to be a mortal danger to the pure community.

One outcome of that rage against alterity can be seen in the orgiastic bloodletting that characterised so much of the killing during the Holocaust. One example, from the war diary of Felix Landau, a member of one of the *Einsatzkommando*, active in Lemberg in 1941, can serve as an illustration:

[t]here were hundreds of Jews walking along the street with blood pouring down their faces, holes in their heads, their hands broken and their eyes hanging out of their sockets. They were covered in blood. ... We went to the citadel; there we saw things that few people have ever seen. At the entrance to the citadel there were soldiers standing guard. They were holding clubs as thick as a man's wrist and were lashing out and hitting anyone who crossed their path. The Jews were pouring out of the entrance. There were rows of Jews lying one on top of the other like pigs whimpering horribly. The Jews kept streaming out of the citadel completely covered in blood. We stopped and tried to see who was in charge of the Kommando. Someone had let the Jews go. They were just being hit out of rage and hatred.⁵⁵

The 'cold,' rational, organisation of the factories of death and the transport networks that served them, administered by desk killers like Adolf Eichmann, must be linked to the 'hot' rage and uncontrolled lust and aggression witnessed by Landau, in order to have a comprehensive picture of the unfolding of the Nazi genocide. The source of both these facets of the Holocaust, as I have argued, is to be found in the

trajectory of late capitalism, and one vital task of Marxist theory is to expose the bases for this modern barbarism.



Cambodia

The Futural dimension of the Holocaust

The Holocaust opened a door into a death-world, and so long as capitalism exists that door will remain open. The horrors of the past few decades, the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, the concentration camps filled with starving prisoners, the mass rape of Muslim women, and the mass killings by beating and shooting of Muslim men and boys in Bosnia, the ethnic cleansing, first by Serbs and then by Albanians in Kosovo, the Russian army's reduction of Grozny to a pile of rubble, beneath which are buried tens of thousands of Chechen civilians, deliberately killed by the most sophisticated modern weapons, the mass murder in Darfur, the deaths of literally millions in the Congo, all bear witness to the fact that the death-world remains an objective-real possibility on the front of history. Alex Callinicos has argued, that '... the point of Holocaust commemoration is surely not only to acknowledge the suffering of the victims but also to help sustain a political consciousness that is on guard against any signs of the repetition of Nazi crimes.'⁵⁶ That political consciousness requires a recognition that key causal chains that came together to unleash the Nazi genocide, the logos of domination that shapes science and technology, the tendency to create a vast overpopulation, a multitude that cannot be profitably

⁵⁵ Klee 1991, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Callinicos 2001, p. 386.

exploited by capital, the racism, and hatred for alterity, attendant on massification, are integrally linked to the trajectory of decadent capitalism, and decisively shape the contemporary socio-economic landscape. The narrative of the Holocaust cannot be written in the past tense, so long as the world created by the real domination of capital remains intact.

Mac Intosh

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Value-Creation and the Crisis Today

The recent implosion of the real estate bubble in the USA and related credit crisis have not yet triggered a collapse of the global capitalist economy but they do bring us one step closer to it. Marx' value-theory is an indispensable instrument to understand what is happening. It allows us to see how the tenacity of the capitalist mode of production is directly related to its development of new methods of exploitation, new terrains for value-creation. But it also makes it possible to understand how capitalists, in their unceasing hunt for surplus value, are making capitalism more obsolete and are raising the obstacles that make its economic breakdown inevitable, to new heights. The following article analyses the evolution of the conditions for value-creation from the emergence of Fordism to the present-day impasse, from which only a working class revolution offers a way out.

Introduction: On Relative Surplus Value

In *Capital*, vol.1, Marx attaches great importance to the distinction between absolute and relative surplus-value (SV), which he clearly defines:

“I call that surplus-value which is produced by the lengthening of the working day *absolute surplus-value*. In contrast to this, I call that surplus-value which arises from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from the corresponding alteration in the respective lengths of the two components of the working day, *relative surplus-value*” (*Capital*, Penguin Ed, vol. 1, p.432).

He goes on to explain that the second is a function of the rise in productivity in those branches of industry which determine the value of labour-power, adding that a rise of productivity in sectors which neither directly nor indirectly produce means of subsistence, does not alter the value of labour-power and therefore does not increase relative surplus-value. From this follows that the increase of relative surplus-value is not a conscious, direct method by which the generic capitalist seeks to increase his profit but rather a by-product of capitalism's general tendency of raising productivity: “When an individual capitalist cheapens shirts, for instance, by increasing the productivity of labour, he by no means necessarily aims to reduce the value of labour-power and shorten necessary labour-time in proportion to this. But he contributes towards increasing the general rate of surplus-value only in so far as he ultimately contributes to this result.” (p.433)

Even though it is mainly a by-product of capitalism's technological drive rather than a consciously sought result, Marx considers relative SV the main source of profit for capitalism when it develops a specifically capitalist production process, when it becomes the real subsumption of labour (the real domination of capital). So when he explains this transition, he begins by recalling the importance of relative SV:

“We have demonstrated the crucial importance of relative surplus-value. This arises when the individual capitalist is spurred on to seize the initiative by the fact that value = the socially necessary labour-time objectified in the product and that therefore surplus-value is created for him as soon as the *individual* value of his product falls *below* its social value and can be sold accordingly *above* its individual value. With the production of relative surplus-value the entire real form of production is altered and a *specifically capitalist form of production* comes into being (at the technological level too).” (pp. 1023-1024)

There is an apparent contradiction between this quote (from “Results of the immediate process of production”, the chapter of *Capital*, vol. 1 that he decided not to include when that work was published) and the first ones (from part 4 of volume 1). In the first, Marx is saying that the capitalist, by lowering the value of his product does not automatically create more relative SV, that he does so only to the extent that this contributes to a reduction of the value of labour-power in general. In the second, he seems to be saying that he

does: when the individual capitalist lowers the value of his product, he writes, “surplus-value is created for him”. It’s easy to misunderstand this as implying that the cheapening of the product is itself creating SV, which would mean that its source would not be labour power but technology. That would contradict the very basis of his value-theory, in which there is no other source of SV but labour-power. But that is not what he meant. The confusion arises in part because he is explaining things on the basis of analyses that are not part of vol. 1 but vol. 3, which is probably the reason why he decided not to include “Results...” in vol. 1. But Marx did not mean to deny that the rise of relative SV under the real domination of capital is due to anything else but the reduction of the relative value of labour-power or to imply that going under the market-value creates SV for capital as a whole. Rather, he wanted to point to the genesis of the shift from absolute to relative SV as the principal source of profit growth, and explain it as a result of a change in the basic method by which capitalists seek to increase their profits. Whereas under formal domination this method consisted mainly in reorganizing production on the basis of buying labour-power, changing peasants and craftsmen into workers and making them work as many hours as possible, now the principal method became cheapening the individual value of the commodity under its market-value in order to obtain a surplus-profit which results from a transfer of SV on the market, in the phase of circulation. That is a form of redistribution of SV, not of its creation, but the more this becomes the dominant method of seeking profit, the more means of subsistence are cheapened by the general rise of productivity, so that the paid portion of the working day shrinks in proportion to the unpaid portion.

It’s important to distinguish what drives capitalists from what makes capitalism a success or failure. The conditions for the incentive to produce and the overall conditions for accumulation are related but not the same. We have analyzed elsewhere how real domination creates a widening gap between the growth of exchange value and use values which places obstacles before capitalism, in its phase of production (tendential fall of the rate of profit) and (dialectically linked to it) in its phase of circulation (overcapacity) which it cannot overcome except through massive devalorization in crisis and war. These obstacles confront capitalists as a force from outside like stormy weather but meanwhile their drive remains to obtain

profits by going under the market value and to seek the conditions to make that possible. It should be noted that, the more homogeneous the conditions of production become, the more extra-capitalist producers and capitalist producers with a relatively low OCC (‘organic composition of capital’, the ratio of indirect, past labour to direct, living labour) are marginalized, the more difficult that becomes. In *Capital*, vol. 3 Marx remarks, if the whole world production would be in the hands of a few giant companies, “the vital flame of production would be altogether extinguished.”

Fordism

Since there are conflicting definitions of that term, let me clarify what I mean by it: industrial mass production with mechanical technology at its center and the constant increase of the scale of production as its never ceasing purpose; the large, integrated and centralized company is its typical form of appearance, the assembly-line its hallmark, repetitious, monotonous work whose content and pace is dictated by the machine characterizes the labour process and Taylorism characterizes the management of that labour process.

The first real assembly-line was introduced in a Ford-plant in 1913, but this was preceded by several decades of changes in the production process in that direction. Fordism expressed the general tendency of capitalism to raise labour productivity by lowering the value of commodities while increasing their volume, and as such realized its general tendency to reduce socially necessary labour-time, thereby realizing its latent tendencies to falling profit-rates and overproduction.

These obstacles do not exist on a merely abstract theoretical level but in the real world. As such, they are also a function of the concrete, specific characteristics of capitalism as an historical product, such as the presence of counter-acting factors to the tendential fall of the rate of profit (like the potential metabolism with extra-capitalist production) and the development of the economic-political structure of capitalism at a given point in history. This explains why the instances of massive devalorization in the 20th century occurred when they did and why Fordism knew its apogee only after the Second World War, when the Bretton-Woods framework created for the first time a vast global (more or less) free trade zone with a common, expansive world currency, serving both as means of circulation and means of payment. No longer hemmed in by

national borders (or at least much less than before), no longer hampered by the vagaries of national currencies or the tight restrictions of the gold standard (although the dollar remained, in theory, tied to gold, and all other main currencies thus indirectly also), the productivity-raising potential of Fordism was finally unleashed, creating a vast increase of relative SV-extraction.



Hoping for a miracle

This explains the strength and duration of the post-war boom. But with the homogenization of Fordist production conditions in North-America, Western Europe and Japan, the growing marginalization of underdeveloped countries and the impediments created by the cold war context to the expansion of the world market, the same twin obstacles returned by the late 1960's. To these difficulties must be added the strong resistance of the working class to the intensification of the labour process which Fordism made technologically possible. The high cost of un-utilized productive capacity made Fordism, by its nature, particularly vulnerable to strikes as well as to stagnation of market expansion. Furthermore, global overcapacity leads to chronic stagnation, even for the strongest capitals. As Marx explains in *Capital* vol. 3, in conditions of overcapacity, the social value is determined by the most favorable conditions of production, eliminating the surplus profit which those would yield under normal circumstances. The incentive to speculate replaces the incentive to invest.

The world currency was also the currency of a particular nation, which created the irresistible possibility for the U.S. to use its position to try to spend its way out of trouble, at the expense of the entire dollar-zone. This forced the U.S. to untie the

dollar from the gold standard (formally in 1971, de facto earlier) after which monetary expansion went out of control. The impossibility of resolving capitalism's contradictions by throwing money at them resulted in the stagflation of the 1970's and, by the end of the decade, brought the world economy at the brink of paralyzing hyper-inflation. It was time to try something else.

Post-Fordism

It is not a perfect term since it seems to suggest that Fordism is a thing of the past which is hardly the case. Nevertheless, in the 1980's, something different emerged at the cutting edge of capitalism.

But the changes in the mode of production proper were only part of it. A seismic shift in the overall structure of world capitalism (the end of the cold war, the end of China's autarkic course and the resulting globalization) provided the context for post-Fordism to thrive.

The changes were guided by several goals:

- To find access to the cheap labour power available in the less developed parts of the world economy in order to counter the falling rate of profit. Aside from its direct benefits, this also gave capital leverage against the working class in the developed countries to push down real wages and thereby increase profits.
- To reduce the vulnerability of capital to working class resistance, through structural changes in the organization of production allowing greater flexibility and adaptability. The centralized, vertically integrated structure of the Fordist company gradually gave way to a more decentralized, more specialized, spread out and horizontally integrated mode of operation that diminished the concentration of the working class and thus its ability to join together in struggle. At the state level, this was expressed by so-called neo-liberal policies (It also implied a less cooperative relation with the trade unions).
- (related to this :) to move away from Fordism's dependency on scale-enhancement as the principal method to bring the individual value of commodities under the social value. Given the fact that this had led to overcapacity and that capitalism was powerless to overcome this without massive devalorization, developed capitals aimed more and more to restore

conditions of relative scarcity through the development of new commodities (both producer and consumer goods), giving their makers monopolistic or semi-monopolistic market-positions and hence surplus-profits. Even if such market-positions could only be temporary, a brisk pace of technological innovation assures the continuity of a competitive advantage and thus of surplus-profits.

The main characteristic of the post-Fordist mode of production is that automation replaces mechanical technology at the nexus of production. While the first large scale development of automation dates already from the late 1950's, it accelerated enormously since the 1980's with the development and widespread application of information technology (IT). Together with this, the importance of applied science in general in the production process grew enormously and thus also the role of what's been called immaterial or cognitive labour. This entailed a huge change in the composition of the working class, whose most decisive component now embodies what Marx foresaw:

“He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct labour time he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and wealth.”
(*Grundrisse*, Penguin edition, p.705)

While Marx, in my opinion, meant with “the social individual,” the whole working class (and thus including the Fordist worker who remains an essential component of the production process), his description is particularly apt in regard to the post-Fordist worker. That his enormously productive collective labour is the foundation-stone of much wealth today seems clear. That post-Fordist production yields huge profits is also clear. But what does it mean for the creation of value? After all, direct labour time may no longer be the great foundation-stone of wealth, but it remains the measuring rod, the foundation-stone of the law of value.

Post-Fordism and Value-creation

Let's examine how post-Fordism, and the globalization (new division of labour) which it helped to make possible, have affected the creation of surplus-value.

1. It diminished the value of constant capital C (machinery, infrastructure, raw materials) and thus increased profits ($S/C+V$) by leading to cost savings on many levels. It has led to greater efficiency of resources, a faster turnover of capital, lower storage costs, lower transportation and communication costs, etc.
2. It has diminished the value of variable capital V (labour power) by reducing the value of the commodities which workers need (and thus increased the rate of relative SV).
3. It has increased the intensity of labour. IT made possible a deeper penetration of the law of value inside the production process and a much closer management and control of that process ('post-Taylorism' is even more ruthless and controlling than its predecessor).
4. It has greatly enhanced the mobility of capital and thereby altered the balance of forces between capital and labour in the former's favour, which has also helped to increase S/V .
5. It led to the transfer of a large part of Fordist production to previously underdeveloped parts of the world, China in particular. Conditions there, made accessible by geo-political changes and the steep decline of transportation and communications costs as well as other technological developments, opened the door to a vast increase in both absolute and relative surplus value extraction. The increased metabolism with extra-capitalist producers and low OCC-capitalism should be stressed in this regard. It is these backward conditions which determine what the means of subsistence are but for high OCC production they represent very little value. The historically unprecedented possibility to combine the living conditions of low productivity-society with the technology and production methods of high productivity-society yields a very high rate of SV. The vast majority of the commodities thus produced are cheap consumer goods destined for the market of developed countries. So they lower the value of labour power there (increasing relative SV) and are a main reason why inflation staid so low for so long (another

one is the global context of overcapacity, which, as Marx explains in *Capital* vol. 3, brings the social value of a commodity down to the value of those which are produced under the most favorable conditions, in other words, the cheapest). Furthermore, this transfer was relatively painless because the simultaneous move of developed capital into post-Fordist production created a division of labour, a complementary development. To this could be added the market that their development provided for the developed countries, but as we shall see further, as impressive as it is, it has severe limits.

6. It has, together with the global reorganization of capital which it helped to bring about, greatly facilitated the penetration of the law of value into areas that were not yet commodified, and thereby it opened important new avenues for value creation. Examples include the displacement of family farms by agribusiness, the displacement of services (in the marxian sense: labour that is directly consumed rather than creating a commodity that enters into the flow of capital) by service-industries, as well as the appearance of new services and goods as a direct result of its development, and even the displacement of labour exchanges done freely between family members, friends and neighbours by commodified exchanges.

All these factors have stimulated value-creation to a great extent (quite aside from the question of who benefited from this). But like all periods of innovation, it had its “*sturm und drang*”-period, after which the effect began to diminish, in part because of the homogenization it accomplished. In China, wages are rising, pushed up inevitably because changes in the very world the workers inhabit (technification of cities, destruction of the semi-proletariat which obtains part of its means of existence by farming on small plots of land) increases the value of labour power, despite the decline in industrial employment caused by the decay of low OCC-production, and the continuing flight of millions of unsettled peasants to the cities. Furthermore, the demand of the new Fordist production in China for prime resources, oil in particular, in combination with the prospect of their depletion becoming more realistic, is pushing up their prices, increasingly neutralizing China’s export’s beneficial effect on inflation. Inflation is rising rapidly in China. And in India too. Despite the growth of call centers there, the number of jobs being created by IT is lower than the number of indebted farmers committing

suicide. In model-city Bangalore, the slums are growing much faster than the prosperous parts of town. Expulsion and destruction are inevitable companions of post-Fordism’s globalization.

While it’s true that the usual suspects stay on the cutting edge in IT, we are witnessing a generalization of its myriad applications throughout the globalized chain of production. This homogenization accelerates the pace in which gains in productivity are generalized. That means that the value savings which those gains allow, are lost more quickly because of the decline of the social value (the social reproduction cost) of the commodity. The faster this decline happens, the more a gap tends to open between the value of the capital advanced for production and the (social) value of the commodities resulting from production.

Marx emphasized that the effect of the increase of the OCC and the productivity-gain it causes, is two-edged. On the one hand, it increases SV/V , the rate of surplus value, by reducing necessary labour-time (the value of the goods that constitute the value of labour power). On the other, it diminishes the weight of living labour in production, and therefore also of the part of it that is unpaid, surplus value. From the pace of living labour’s decline depends whether a rise of a part of it (SV/V) can compensate the decline of the total ($V+SV$). Which force is the strongest today? The characteristics of automation are such that the second is increasingly winning. This is especially clear in the most emblematic product of post-Fordism, digital goods and software in particular. Their growing role –as means to obtain profit, as components of the production process, tools to create wealth, tools for creativity, communication and consumption- in society cannot be denied. It is true that the creation of these goods requires a lot of labour power. This labour power is exploited by capital, its value and surplus value is crystallized in the commodity that results from it. But this value is fleeting. No matter how many hours have been spent to create a particular digital commodity, the value of its copy is, like of any other commodity, equal to the value of the direct and indirect labour spent to make it plus (average) profit on the capital advanced. In the case of digital goods, it is almost nothing. What Marx wrote about machines: “However young and full of life the machine may be, its value is no longer determined by the necessary labour-time actually objectified in it, but by the labour-time necessary to

reproduce either it or the better machine. It has therefore been devalued to a greater or lesser extent” (*Capital* vol.1, p.528) is true for all commodities. The fact that digital commodities may be highly profitable should not deceive us. Their producers obtain SV, but it comes from their customers.



But it is in the nature of information in general, and of the inherently communicative structure of IT in particular, to invite sharing, and thereby to pull the market price of digital commodities down to their next to nothing market value. That’s why the IT-sector is the most glaring example of the growing tendency to monopoly-capitalism (which has echoes in the periods preceding World War One and the 1920’s). The steep increase in the use of patents, copyrights, licences etc to commodify the knowledge that leads to surplus profits (Microsoft takes out 3000 patents a year), implies the need for a world order in which their price

can be enforced, and the untamable tendency of the market to subvert this, of the law of value to pull the price down to its real social value, can be checked. This, together with the desire for control over resources, weighs heavily on geopolitics and on American military strategy in particular.

Marx called the devaluation caused by a fast decline of reproduction costs “moral depreciation”. It does not affect only digital goods. The faster the pace of technological innovation and of its integration in production and consumption, the more constant capital loses its value before it has transferred its value into other commodities. The more technological innovation is chased for the surplus profits that it yields, the more the capitalist investor is willing to bear the cost of moral depreciation. In an earlier text, I called this hidden overproduction. It is one of the principal ways in which the market-barrier manifests itself today.

The market-barrier manifests itself not in the form of an absolute limit to the consumption power of capitalist society but in the form of growing disproportionalities. The high rate of technological innovation of post-Fordism has accelerated a long-term tendency of real domination to over-accumulate producer goods and under-accumulate consumer goods, of which moral depreciation is an expression. Another disproportionality created by the drive for surplus profit is caused by its own success, paid for by the reduction of the value of labour power as well as with the SV of other capitalists who must buy at a price above the value. With concentration of wealth on one side, creating a steep increase of demand for all sorts of luxury goods and thus a higher rate of profit in the production of goods destined for unproductive production, and a relative decline of the demand for productive consumption on the other, the proportionality achieved by the market further deviates from the proportionality required for accumulation (analyzed in *Capital* vol.2) and further mortgages value-creation. To this should be added a rise of unproductive, ‘faux frais’ in general, which includes the costs of maintaining order and projecting power. The cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are approaching \$1 trillion. The costs of anti-terrorist protection and of controlling excess population go far beyond that (in the US more than 1 % of the adult population is in prison). In addition, there is the rise in costs which capitals on the cutting edge must incur to stay on the cutting edge. Many global companies spend

more capital on marketing than on production in order to create a socially perceived, artificial scarcity (for example, the difference between “Nikes” and simply sneakers) that yields surplus profits.



Car factory in Germany

The Present Crisis

Despite the relative success of capitals on the cutting edge to create, for themselves, new markets yielding surplus profits, the overall context remains one of overwhelming overcapacity. Nevertheless, capitalism avoided a collapse, thanks to the fall of the value of labour power. But to keep the world economy growing in the face of global overcapacity, it had to be fed by an exponentially growing monetary expansion. This was what happened in the 1970's too, but during that period monetary expansion was aimed more at slowing the erosion of general purchasing power, because of the high cost of unused production capacity in the Fordist economy. The 1980's began with an abrupt curtailment of the growth of money in circulation to rein in inflation. But public debt continued to grow at an accelerating rate, while state expenditures shifted from supporting the social wage to unproductive spending such as armaments. Even more important was the expansion of the financial sector. With the elimination of most restrictions on the mobility and activities of financial capital, it grew enormously, creating all sorts of financial instruments promising to preserve and expand the value parked in them. Since all that money did not circulate goods, it did not raise their prices, so it caused no general inflation. Its fictitious character would manifest itself in other ways.

The first winner of the post-Fordist era was Japanese capital which was very successful in the 1980's in lowering the individual value of the commodities of its export-sector under the social value by pioneering post-Fordist reforms. Japan amassed huge profits but experienced growing difficulties in investing them in a way that did not disrupt the foreign markets, in the first place the American market, on which it depended and that did not cause inflation to rise in its domestic economy. The alternatives were to keep hundreds of billions of dollars in the bank (subject to huge losses when the dollar was devalued) or to park them in property whose price was perceived as able to resist the general trend of diminishing value; in other words, to speculate. Japanese capital did both. Speculation feeds on itself because the rising demand it engenders delivers massive profits at first. Because this is a pyramid-game, it always ends in even more massive losses. When the bubble burst, Japan sank into protracted stagnation. That this did not lead to depression was mainly due to the fact that, globally, post-Fordism continued to expand and Japan remained a first-rate competitor.

The next bubble exploded in South-East Asia with strong reverberations in Latin America and Russia (which later recovered thanks to the rising oil price). The enormous devalorization which property (including labour power) in these countries suffered reinforced the safe haven-appeal of assets in the central countries. This, and the cutting edge position of American capital in the most profitable sectors of production, as well as the size of the U.S.-market, created an ever growing stream of savings to the US. By 2004, 80% of the net-savings of the world flowed to the US.

But a growing size of the expansion of the U.S. market was supported by nothing. Year in year out, the U.S. consumed more than it produced, now to the tune of more than \$800 billion a year, a figure which vastly underestimates the amount of the value-transfer. In return, the rest of the world acquired stocks, bonds, treasury-notes and other debt-certificates as well as other property, with a nominal value of many trillions of dollars. The U.S. was the only country which could do that, because of its control over the world currency. But it also seems to have consciously stimulated the safe haven-effect through its global policies, as well to have encouraged the inflation of its assets, in particular

with various policies to stimulate demand for its unproductive FIRE (Finances, Insurance, Real Estate) sector. Inevitably, it grew dependent on it. By 2004, it needed its 'fix' of \$2.6 billion of foreign capital a day, just to keep going.

So that was the basic mechanism that kept the train on the tracks: the US kept market expansion alive, the profits were spread more globally, but a huge and growing part of these profits had to remain hoarded, unable to reenter into circulation or its fictitious origin would be exposed by inflation.

But the promise to capital that is hoarded in financial assets and real estate is that it will be kept alive, that it will be protected from devalorization in a world in which the overall direction is towards falling values. The promise is kept as long as demand is rising strongly. But when it begins to peter out, the speculative nature of the undertaking is revealed. The U.S. was not the only country whose paper value grew disproportionally. That the expansion of money was untethered from the blunt instrument of the gold standard was inevitable and logical. But in order to circulate value and retain credibility as a means of payment, the expansion of money had to remain tied to the expansion of value. That was not the case. Money transactions related to material goods production counted 80% of the total global transactions in 1970, a ratio which by 1997 had already dropped to 0.7%. In the U.S., since 1985, money has been growing more than six times faster than production.

Last year, the declining global demand for U.S. stocks and bonds, and the desperate attempts to keep up demand in real-estate by offering ever cheaper mortgages (many of them sold with deceit and without regard to the buyer's ability to pay), showed what was coming: Another exploding bubble, but now at the centre of capitalism.

With house-prices falling, already more than 10% of American home-owners owe more in mortgage-obligations than what their house is worth. Millions are facing foreclosure. The continuing decline threatens to wipe out several trillions of household-wealth. The asset-deflation is not limited to real estate but is

spreading to the credit market and beyond. Nobody has any idea how big the losses could be in the parallel financial markets. For example, the market of credit default swaps (derivatives), total \$45.5 trillion, more than twice the size of the entire US stock market. It consists of trade in contracts that promise payment in case of a company defaults, which can be sold, by both parties of the contract and get traded over and over again, without any guarantee that the buyer of the contract will be able to pay in case of default. The more the US sinks into a recession, the faster this market will deflate.

With so much wealth evaporating, the non-payment of countless transactions and the banks forced to tighten their loaning practice, the crisis snowballs to the production sector, leading to a wave of bankruptcies and rising unemployment, and inflation fostered by the attempts to slow the tide by increasing public spending and lowering interest rates. A painful downturn of the American economy, and by extension of all the other economies depending on it, is inevitable.

It would be easy to imagine a credible scenario of how this crisis could spiral into becoming the great depression of the 21st century. Quite a few intelligent persons do. They may be right. But they may also underestimate how the capacity of the global capitalist class to act in concert when push comes to shove, has grown since the previous depression. I don't think the US can pull itself up by its own bootstraps. It must count on the dependency of its trading partners on the American market. On the fact that they have no alternative to the present global trade patterns, and thereby are obliged to come to the rescue and invest in the recovery of the American economy. The crisis itself will have a considerable tonic effect for the strong who survive it. But nothing will be solved. This crisis is a milestone, marking the beginning of a new phase, characterized by increasingly intense economic shocks which could set the scene for increasingly intense class struggle.

Sander

March 4 2008

Review:

Communicating Vessels: An Anthology of Essays

In 1848, Marx wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that under capitalism, workers were reduced to simple commodities, appendages of the machine. Now, over 150 years later, not only humans' labour power, but almost every aspect of existence, has been enslaved by the law of value. Internationalist Perspective has written about this transformation in our analysis of the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital. This transition has seen an increased commodification of society, a greater separation, a deepening alienation.

Even those who have sought to apply Marx's critique have sometimes fallen victim to this tendency by dividing his ideas into categories: the economic, the political, the philosophical, the artistic, etc. Any authentic revolutionary current today must advance a critique which strives to overcome this separation, and a welcome addition to this struggle is the recent (2006) anthology of essays from the journal, *Communicating Vessels*. In the introduction, the author, Anthony Leskov, writes that some may view the book as "incoherent theoretical and literary cross-dressing..." However, he insists that instead, "it is the result of seeing links between various vision of the world and literary and poetic visions that present a fundamentally new way of approaching said world."

While the anthology contains nothing which has not appeared in the magazine, it is an excellent introduction to the politics and style of the *Communicating Vessels*, as well as valuable collection from some of the hard- to-find issues of the journal (especially since *Communicating Vessels* does not have a presence on the web, nor does it intend to do so). Included in the 200 page book are original and reprinted essays, poems, drawings, reviews and personal reminiscences from the publication's history.

Communication Vessels first appeared in 2001, taking its name from a 1932 book by surrealist author Andre Breton, which in turn borrowed its title from a scientific experiment. Prior to *Communicating Vessels*, Leskov was involved with the *Black Star North* zine, an anarchist publication published in Portland, Maine in the late 1990s. Since then, the author's perspective has shifted. In issue nine of *Communicating Vessels* while reviewing Murray Bookchin's *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left*, Leskov noted he was not an anarchist because anarchism provided "too nebulous of an understanding of social reality...Communism understands this society – its rule, its exploitation, its extraction of surplus value from proletarians etc – as being dominated by capitalist social relations which seek to subordinate all human activity into its exchange nexus." This perspective is further detailed in the introduction to the anthology where points out, "I have a strong attachment to a non-sociological and non-deterministic interpretation of Marxist methodology."

To apply a Marxist methodology which avoids treating Marx's writing as Holy Writ (many latter-day "Marxists") or as a quaint theory (the academy) is a goal with which we can certainly identify. And this perspective is certainly present in Leskov's choice of material.

Communicating Vessels: An Anthology of Essays contains the lengthy essays, including "Caught between Two Worlds: Russia, Spain, Modernization and Today's World", "New Orleans the City that Disaster Built", "Capitalist Development and the rise of Modern city Planning", "The Perplexities of Middle Eastern Development" In each case, the essays are clearly and intelligently written with a strong pro-revolutionary perspective.

The anthology also contains several pieces by names familiar to *IP* readers: An abridged version of Gilles Dauve's essay "Alice in Monsterland,"; Juan McIver's study of the Spanish Civil War and the work of Federico García Lorca, the Spanish poet and playwright murdered by Franco's soldiers in 1936; Paul Goodman on "the spirit of war."

Of interest also to *IP*'s readers is the section dealing with Jean Malaquais, author of the left-communist novel *World Without Visa*. The anthology contains an overview of Malaquais' life and career, as well as a reprint of an interview from the French magazine *Informations Ouvrières*, a poem, an excerpt from Malaquais' war diaries, and his essay on hipsterism.

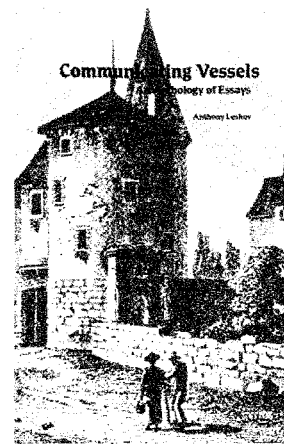
Yet, all of the above should not give the impression that *Communicating Vessels* is "merely" a political review. The anthology contains not only original poems and drawings, but also discussions on French song by Ken Knabb of the Bureau of Public Secrets, original works on literature such as "Aeschylus and the *Oresteia Trilogy*" and Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*." One of the stated concerns that Leskov expresses in his introduction is "the disregard people have for history." In this collection, he also seems to argue why shouldn't people have the "classical education" (the term is used guardedly), a sense of poetry, of art, as well as the critique of political economy?

Of course, Leskov already knows why this is not happening. The disappearance from memory of these things is not an accident brought on by TV and mass

culture. It is central to the development of the disposable commodity economy. Leskov quotes the Chinese Tang dynasty poet Tu Fu to good effect: "The busy world, fickle as a lamp flame/Hates what has had its day or is decayed."

Communicating Vessels: An Anthology of Essays is a valuable addition to the pro-revolutionary milieu. It raises important issues and its playful eclecticism makes for an entertaining and stimulating read. It should be widely read.

Fischer



Communicating Vessels: An Anthology of Essays is available for \$12 (including postage) from 35 NE 15th Avenue #127, Portland, OR 97212, USA.

Internationalist Perspective On-line <http://internationalist-perspective.org>

The Internationalist Perspective web site contains articles and discussions in both English and French. The site contains the most recent issues of our magazine, as well as debates and discussions in the organization, leaflets, and texts which do not appear elsewhere. It is important to stress that we do not see this site as solely "our" property, and hope that readers will take the time to respond to the posted articles and participate in the debates.

Internationalist Perspective now also publishes a blog to which readers may respond

English: <http://internationalist-perspective.org/blog/>

French: <http://ippi.over-blog.com/>

Internationalist Perspective

Internationalist Perspective is a publication defending Marxism as a living theory, one that can go back to its 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 the 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.

Capitalism is a transient product of history, not its end. It came into being in response to conditions that no longer exist: inevitable scarcity, labor power being the only source of social wealth. Capitalism turned labor power into a commodity to appropriate the difference between its value and the value it creates. For centuries, this hunt for surplus value allowed for a relative harmony between the development of society and capitalist accumulation. Then it gave birth to a new production process, the real domination of capital, in which no longer labor power but the machine stands at the center of production. Science and technology, set in motion and regulated by the collective worker, became the primary source of the creation of social wealth. The giant productivity this unleashed, allowed capitalism to grow both inwards and outwards. It spread over the entire planet and absorbed all spheres of society – including the trade unions and mass parties that arose from the struggle of the working class.

Scarcity was now no longer inevitable, but instead of freeing humanity from want, it condemned capitalism to overproduction. Wealth-creation was no longer dependent on the exploitation of labor power but this plunged capitalism, imprisoned by the law of value, into a crisis of profit. These obstacles to accumulation force capitalism to increase the exploitation of labor and to create room for new expansion through self-destruction, through massive devalorization in depression and war. Capitalism entered its decadent phase when such cannibalistic destruction became part of its accumulation cycle. It is decadent, not because it doesn't grow – it has developed tremendously and profoundly modified the composition of social classes and the conditions in which they struggle in the process - - but because this growth, in its rapacious hunt for profit, became itself destructive. It is decadent, because it is forced to hurl billions into unemployment and poverty because it cannot squeeze profit from them; by the very productivity that could meet all needs. It is decadent, because its need for devalorization impels it to war and unceasing violence. Capitalism cannot be reformed; it cannot be humanized. Fighting within the system is illusory: capitalism must be destroyed.

Capitalism is also decadent because it has generated the conditions for its own replacement by a new society. Science and technology, yoked to the operation of the law of value, and its quantification of the whole of life, are not liberating in themselves. But the working class who sets it in motion, is by its very condition within capitalism 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. Indeed, the emergence on an historical scale of a new society can only be realized by the total negation of capitalism, and by the abolition of the 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.