

Basic Banalities

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Part I

1

Bureaucratic capitalism has found its legitimation in Marx. I am not referring here to orthodox Marxism's dubious merit of having reinforced the neocapitalist structures whose present reorganization is an implicit homage to Soviet totalitarianism; I am emphasizing the extent to which Marx's most profound analyses of alienation have been vulgarized in the most commonplace facts, which, stripped of their magical veil and materialized in each gesture, have become the sole substance, day after day, of the lives of an increasing number of people. In a word, bureaucratic capitalism contains the palpable reality of alienation; it has brought it home to everybody far more successfully than Marx could ever have hoped to do, it has banalized it as the diminishing of material poverty has been accompanied by a spreading mediocrity of existence. As poverty has been reduced in terms of mere material survival, it has become more profound in terms of our way of life — this is at least one widespread feeling that exonerates Marx from all the interpretations a degenerate Bolshevism has derived from him. The "theory" of peaceful coexistence has accelerated such an awareness and revealed, to those who were still confused, that exploiters can get along quite well with each other despite their spectacular divergences.

2

"Any act," writes Mircea Eliade, "can become a religious act. Human existence is realized simultaneously on two parallel planes, that of temporality, becoming, illusion, and that of eternity, substance, reality." In the nineteenth century the brutal divorce of these two planes demonstrated that power would have done better to have maintained reality in a mist of divine transcendence. But we must give reformism credit for succeeding where Bonaparte had failed, in dissolving becoming in eternity and reality in illusion; this union may not be as solid as the sacraments of religious marriage, but it is *lasting*, which is the most the managers of coexistence and social peace can ask of it. This is also what leads us to define ourselves — in the illusory but inescapable perspective of duration — as the end of abstract temporality, as the end of the reified time of our acts; to define ourselves — does it have to be spelled out? — at the positive pole of alienation as the end of social alienation, as the end of humanity's term of social alienation.

3

The socialization of primitive human groups reveals a will to struggle more effectively against the mysterious and terrifying forces of nature. But struggling in the natural environment, at once with it and against it, submitting to its most inhuman laws in order to wrest from it an increased chance of survival — doing this could only engender a more evolved form of aggressive defense, a more complex and less primitive attitude, manifesting on a higher level the contradictions that the uncontrolled and yet influenceable forces of nature never ceased to impose. In becoming socialized, the struggle against the blind domination of nature triumphed inasmuch as it gradually assimilated primitive, natural alienation, but in another form. Alienation became social in the fight against natural alienation. Is it by chance that a technological civilization has developed to such a point that social alienation has been revealed by its conflict with the last areas of natural resistance that technological power hadn't managed (and for good reasons) to subjugate? Today

the technocrats propose to put an end to primitive alienation: with a stirring humanitarianism they exhort us to perfect the technical means that “in themselves” would enable us to conquer death, suffering, discomfort and boredom. But to get rid of death would be less of a miracle than to get rid of suicide and the desire to die. There are ways of abolishing the death penalty than can make one miss it. Until now the specific use of technology — or more generally the socioeconomic context in which human activity is confined — while quantitatively reducing the number of occasions of pain and death, has allowed death itself to eat like a cancer into the heart of each person’s life.

4

The prehistoric food-gathering age was succeeded by the hunting age during which clans formed and strove to increase their chances of survival. Hunting grounds and reserves were staked out from which outsiders were absolutely excluded since the welfare of the whole clan depended on its maintaining its territory. As a result, the freedom gained by settling down more comfortably in the natural environment, and by more effective protection against its rigors, engendered its own negation outside the boundaries laid down by the clan and forced the group to moderate its customary rules in organizing its relations with excluded and threatening groups. From the moment it appeared, socially constituted economic survival implied the existence of boundaries, restrictions, conflicting rights. It should never be forgotten that until now both history and our own nature have developed in accordance with the movement of privative appropriation: the seizing of control by a class, group, caste or individual of a general power over socioeconomic survival whose form remains complex — from ownership of land, territory, factories or capital, all the way to the “pure” exercise of power over people (hierarchy). Beyond the struggle against regimes whose vision of paradise is a cybernetic welfare state lies the necessity of a still vaster struggle against a fundamental and initially natural state of things, in the development of which capitalism plays only an incidental, transitory role; a state of things which will only disappear when the last traces of hierarchical power disappear — along with the “swine of humanity;” of course.

5

To be an owner is to arrogate a good from whose enjoyment one excludes other people — while at the same time recognizing everyone’s abstract right to possession. By excluding people from the real right of ownership, the owner extends his dominion over those he has excluded (absolutely over nonowners, relatively over other owners), without whom he is nothing. The nonowners have no choice in the matter. The owner appropriates and alienates them as producers of his own power, while the necessity of ensuring their own physical existence forces them in spite of themselves to collaborate in producing their own exclusion and to survive without ever being able to live. Excluded, they participate in possession through the mediation of the owner, a mystical participation characterizing from the outset all the clan and social relationships that gradually replaced the principle of obligatory cohesion in which each member was an integral part of the group (“organic interdependence”). Their guarantee of survival depends on their activity within the framework of privative appropriation. They reinforce a right to property from

which they are excluded. Due to this ambiguity each of them sees himself as participating in ownership, as a living fragment of the right to possess, and this belief in turn reinforces his condition as excluded and possessed. (Extreme cases of this alienation: the faithful slave, the cop, the bodyguard, the centurion — creatures who, through a sort of union with their own death, confer on death a power equal to the forces of life and identify in a destructive energy the negative and positive poles of alienation, the absolutely submissive slave and the absolute master.) It is of vital importance to the exploiter that this appearance is maintained and made more sophisticated; not because he is especially machiavellian, but simply because he wants to stay alive. The organization of appearance is bound to the survival of his privileges and to the physical survival of the nonowner, who can thus remain alive while being exploited and excluded from being a person. Privative appropriation and domination are thus originally imposed and felt as a positive right, but in the form of a negative universality. Valid for everyone, justified in everyone's eyes by divine or natural law, the right of privative appropriation is objectified in a general illusion, in a universal transcendence, in an essential law under which everyone individually manages to tolerate the more or less narrow limits assigned to his right to live and to the conditions of life in general.

6

In this social context the function of alienation must be understood as a *condition of survival*. The labor of the nonowners is subject to the same contradictions as the right of privative appropriation. It transforms them into possessed beings, into producers of their own expropriation and exclusion, but it represents the only chance of survival for slaves, for serfs, for workers — so much so that the activity that allows their existence to continue by emptying it of all content ends up, through a natural and sinister reversal of perspective, by taking on a positive sense. Not only has value been attributed to work (in its form of sacrifice in the *ancien régime*, in its brutalizing aspects in bourgeois ideology and in the so-called People's Democracies), but very early on to work for a master, to alienate oneself willingly, became the honorable and scarcely questioned price of survival. The satisfaction of basic needs remains the best safeguard of alienation; it is best dissimulated by being justified on the grounds of undeniable necessities. Alienation multiplies needs because it can satisfy none of them; nowadays lack of satisfaction is measured in the number of cars, refrigerators, TVs: the alienating objects have lost the ruse and mystery of transcendence, they are there in their concrete poverty. To be rich today is to possess the greatest *number* of poor objects.

Up to now surviving has prevented us from living. This is why much is to be expected of the increasingly evident impossibility of survival, an impossibility which will become all the more evident as the glut of conveniences and elements of survival reduces life to a single choice: suicide or revolution.

7

The sacred presides even over the struggle against alienation. As soon as the relations of exploitation and the violence that underlies them are no longer concealed by the mystical veil, there is a breakthrough, a moment of clarity, the struggle against alienation is suddenly revealed as a

ruthless hand-to-hand fight with naked power, power exposed in its brute force and its weakness, a vulnerable giant whose slightest wound confers on the attacker the infamous notoriety of an Erostratus. Since power survives, the event remains ambiguous. Praxis of destruction, sublime moment when the complexity of the world becomes tangible, transparent, within everyone's grasp; inexpiable revolts — those of the slaves, the Jacques, the iconoclasts, the Enrage's, the Communards, Kronstadt, the Asturias, and — promises of things to come — the hooligans of Stockholm and the wildcat strikes... only the destruction of all hierarchical power will allow us to forget these. We aim to make sure it does.

The deterioration of mythical structures and their slowness in regenerating themselves, which make possible the awakening of consciousness and the critical penetration of insurrection, are also responsible for the fact that once the “excesses” of revolution are past, the struggle against alienation is grasped on a theoretical plane, subjected to an “analysis” that is a carryover from the demystification preparatory to revolt. It is at this point that the truest and most authentic aspects of a revolt are reexamined and repudiated by the “we didn't really mean to do that” of the theoreticians charged with explaining the meaning of an insurrection to those who made it — to those who aim to demystify by acts, not just by words.

All acts contesting power call for analysis and tactical development. Much can be expected of:

- a. the new proletariat, which is discovering its destitution amidst consumer abundance (see the development of the workers' struggles presently beginning in England, and the attitudes of rebellious youth in all the modern countries);
- b. countries that have had enough of their partial, sham revolutions and are consigning their past and present theorists to the museums (see the role of the intelligentsia in the Eastern bloc);
- c. the Third World, whose mistrust of technological myths has been kept alive by the colonial cops and mercenaries, the last, over-zealous militants of a transcendence against which they are the best possible vaccination;
- d. the force of the SI (“our ideas are in everyone's mind”), capable of forestalling remote-controlled revolts, “crystal nights” and sheepish resistance.

8

Privative appropriation is bound to the dialectic of particular and general. In the mystical realm where the contradictions of the slave and feudal systems are resolved, the nonowner, excluded as a particular individual from the right of possession, strives to ensure his survival through his labor: the more he identifies with the interests of the master, the more successful he is. He knows the other nonowners only through their common plight: the compulsory surrender of their labor power (Christianity recommended voluntary surrender: once the slave “willingly” offered his labor power, he ceased to be a slave), the search for the optimum conditions of survival, and mystical identification. Struggle, though born of a universal will to survive, takes place on the level of appearance where it brings into play identification with the desires of the master and thus introduces a certain individual rivalry that reflects the rivalry between the masters. Competition develops on this plane as long as the relations of exploitation remain dissimulated behind

a mystical opacity and as long as the conditions producing this opacity continue to exist; as long as the degree of slavery determines the slave's consciousness of the degree of lived reality. (We are still at the stage of calling "objective consciousness" what is in reality the consciousness of being an object.) The owner, for his part, depends on the general acknowledgment of a right from which he alone is not excluded, but which is seen on the plane of appearance as a right accessible to each of the excluded taken individually. His privileged position depends on such a belief, and this belief is also the basis for the strength that is essential if he is to hold his own among the other owners; it is his strength. If, in his turn, he seems to renounce exclusive appropriation of everything and everybody, if he poses less as a master than as a servant of public good and defender of collective security, then his power is crowned with glory and to his other privileges he adds that of denying, on the level of appearance (which is the only level of reference in unilateral communication), the very notion of personal appropriation; he denies that anyone has this right, he repudiates the other owners. In the feudal perspective the owner is not integrated into appearance in the same way as the nonowners, slaves, soldiers, functionaries, servants of all kinds. The lives of the latter are so squalid that the majority can live only as a caricature of the Master (the feudal lord, the prince, the major-domo, the taskmaster, the high priest, God, Satan ...). But the master himself is also forced to play one of these caricatural roles. He can do so without much effort since his pretension to total life is already so caricatural, isolated as he is among those who can only survive. He is already one of our own kind (with the added grandeur of a past epoch, which adds an exquisite savor to his sadness); he, like each of us, was anxiously seeking the adventure where he could find himself on the road to his total perdition. Could the master, at the very moment he alienates the others, see that he reduces them to dispossessed and excluded beings, and thus realize that he is only an exploiter, a purely negative being? Such an awareness is unlikely and would be dangerous. By extending his dominion over the greatest possible number of subjects, isn't he enabling them to survive, giving them their only chance of salvation? ("Whatever would happen to the workers if the capitalists weren't kind enough to employ them?" the high-minded souls of the nineteenth century liked to ask.) In fact, the owner officially excludes himself from all claim to privative appropriation. To the sacrifice of the non-owner, who through his labor exchanges his real life for an apparent one (thus avoiding immediate death by allowing the master to determine his variety of living death), the owner replies by appearing to sacrifice his nature as owner and exploiter; he excludes himself mythically, he puts himself at the service of everyone and of myth (at the service of God and his people, for example). With an additional gesture with an act whose gratuitousness bathes him in an other-worldly radiance, he gives renunciation its pure form of mythical reality renouncing common life, he is the poor man amidst illusory wealth, he who sacrifices himself for everyone while all the other people only sacrifice themselves for their own sake, for the sake of their survival. He turns his predicament into prestige. The more powerful he is the greater his sacrifice. He becomes the living reference point of the whole illusory life, the highest attainable point in the scale of mythical values. "Voluntarily" withdrawn from common mortals, he is drawn toward the world of the gods, and his more or less established participation in divinity, on the level of appearance (the only generally acknowledged frame of reference), consecrates his rank in the hierarchy of the other owners. In the organization of transcendence the feudal lord — and, through osmosis, the owners of some power or production materials, in varying degrees — is led to play the principal role the role that he really does play in the economic organization of the group's survival. As a result, the existence of the group is bound on every level to the existence of the owners as

such, to those who, owning everything because they own everybody, also force everyone to renounce their lives on the pretext of the owners' unique absolute and divine renunciation. (From the god Prometheus punished by the gods to the god Christ punished by men, the sacrifice of the Owner becomes vulgarized, it loses its sacred aura, is humanized.) Myth thus unites owner and nonowner, it envelops them in a common form in which the necessity of survival, whether merely physical or as a privileged being forces them to live on the level of appearance and of the inversion of real life, the inversion of the life of everyday praxis. We are still there waiting to live a life less than or beyond a mystique against which our every gesture protests while submitting to it.

9

Myth, the unitary absolute in which the contradictions of the world find an illusory resolution, the harmonious and constantly harmonized vision that reflects and reinforces order — this is the sphere of the sacred, the extrahuman zone where an abundance of revelations are manifested but where the revelation of the process of privative appropriation is carefully suppressed. Nietzsche saw this when he wrote “All becoming is a criminal revolt from eternal being and its price is death.” When the bourgeoisie claimed to replace the pure Being of feudalism with Becoming, all it really did was to desacralize Being and resacralize Becoming to its own profit; it elevated its own Becoming to the status of Being, no longer that of absolute ownership but rather that of relative appropriation: a petty democratic and mechanical Becoming, with its notions of progress, merit and causal succession. The owner's life hides him from himself; bound to myth by a life and death pact, he cannot see himself in the positive and exclusive enjoyment of any good except through the lived experience of his own exclusion. (And isn't it through this mythical exclusion that the non-owners will come to grasp the reality of their own exclusion?) He bears the responsibility for a group, he takes on the burden of a god. Submitting himself to its benediction and its retribution, he swathes himself in austerity and wastes away. Model of gods and heroes, the master, the owner, is the true reality of Prometheus, of Christ, of all those whose spectacular sacrifice has made it possible for “the vast majority of people” to continue to sacrifice themselves to the extreme minority, to the masters. (Analysis of the owner's sacrifice should be worked out more subtly: isn't the case of Christ really the sacrifice of the owner's son? If the owner can never sacrifice himself except on the level of appearance, then Christ stands for the real immolation of the owner's son when circumstances leave no other alternative. As a son he is only an owner at a very early stage of development, an embryo, little more than a dream of future ownership. In this mythic dimension belongs Barrès's well-known remark in 1914 when war had arrived and made his dreams come true at last: “Our youth, as is proper, has gone to shed torrents of *our blood*.”) This rather distasteful little game, before it became transformed into a symbolic rite, knew a heroic period when kings and tribal chiefs were ritually put to death according to their “will.” Historians assure us that these august martyrs were soon replaced by prisoners, slaves or criminals. They may not get hurt any more, but they've kept the halo.

10

The concept of a common fate is based on the sacrifice of the owner and the nonowner. Put another way, the notion of a human condition is based on an ideal and tormented image whose function is to resolve the irresolvable opposition between the mythical sacrifice of the minority

and the really sacrificed life of everyone else. The function of myth is to unify and eternalize, in a succession of static moments, the dialectic of “will-to-live” and its opposite. This universally dominant factitious unity attains its most tangible and concrete representation in communication, particularly in language. Ambiguity is most manifest at this level, it leads to an absence of real communication, it puts the analyst at the mercy of ridiculous phantoms, at the mercy of words — eternal and changing instants — whose content varies according to who pronounces them, as does the notion of sacrifice. When language is put to the test, it can no longer dissimulate the misrepresentation and thus it provokes the crisis of participation. In the language of an era one can follow the traces of total revolution, unfulfilled but always imminent. They are the exalting and terrifying signs of the upheavals they foreshadow, but who takes them seriously? The discredit striking language is as deeply rooted and instinctive as the suspicion with which myths are viewed by people who at the same time remain firmly attached to them. How can key words be defined by other words? How can phrases be used to point out the signs that refute the phraseological organization of appearance? The best texts still await their justification. When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity. To await and prepare for this moment is to manipulate information not as the last shock wave whose significance escapes everyone, but as the first repercussion of an act still to come.

11

Born of man’s will to survive the uncontrollable forces of nature, myth is a public welfare policy that has outlived its necessity. It has consolidated its tyrannical force by reducing life to the sole dimension of survival, by negating it as movement and totality.

When contested, myth homogenizes the diverse attacks on it; sooner or later it engulfs and assimilates them. Nothing can withstand it, no image or concept that attempts to destroy the dominant spiritual structures. It reigns over the expression of facts and lived experience, on which it imposes its own interpretive structure (dramatization). Private consciousness is the consciousness of lived experience that finds its expression on the level of organized appearance.

Myth is sustained by rewarded sacrifice. Since every individual life is based on its own renunciation, lived experience must be defined as sacrifice and recompense. As a reward for his asceticism, the initiate (the promoted worker, the specialist, the manager — new martyrs canonized democratically) is granted a niche in the organization of appearance; he is made to feel at home in alienation. But collective shelters disappeared with unitary societies, all that’s left is their later concrete embodiments for the benefit of the public: temples, churches, palaces... memories of a universal protection. Shelters are private nowadays, and even if their protection is far from certain there can be no mistaking their price.

12

“Private” life is defined primarily in a formal context. It is, to be sure, born out of the social relations created by privative appropriation, but its essential form is determined by the expression of those relations. Universal, incontestable but constantly contested, this form makes appropriation a right belonging to everyone and from which everyone is excluded, *a right one can obtain only by*

renouncing it. As long as it fails to break free of the context imprisoning it (a break that is called revolution), the most authentic experience can be grasped, expressed and communicated only by way of an inversion through which its fundamental contradiction is dissimulated. In other words, if a positive project fails to sustain a praxis of radically overthrowing the conditions of life — which are nothing other than the conditions of privative appropriation — it does not have the slightest chance of escaping being taken over by the negativity that reigns over the expression of social relationships: it is recuperated like the image in a mirror, in inverse perspective. In the totalizing perspective in which it conditions the whole of everyone's life, and in which its real and its mythic power can no longer be distinguished (both being both real and mythical), the process of privative appropriation has made it impossible to express life any way except negatively. Life in its entirety is suspended in a negativity that corrodes it and formally defines it. To talk of life today is like talking of rope in the house of a hanged man. Since the key of will-to-live has been lost we have been wandering in the corridors of an endless mausoleum. The dialogue of chance and the throw of the dice no longer suffices to justify our lassitude; those who still accept living in well-furnished weariness picture themselves as leading an indolent existence while failing to notice in each of their daily gestures a living denial of their despair, a denial that should rather make them despair only of the poverty of their imagination. Forgetting life, one can identify with a range of images, from the brutish conqueror and brutish slave at one pole to the saint and the pure hero at the other. The air in this shithouse has been unbreathable for a long time. The world and man as representation stink like carrion and there's no longer any god around to turn the charnel houses into beds of lilies. After all the ages men have died while accepting without notable change the explanations of gods, of nature and of biological laws, it wouldn't seem unreasonable to ask if we don't die because so much death enters — and for very specific reasons — into every moment of our lives.

13

Privative appropriation can be defined notably as the appropriation of things by means of the appropriation of people. It is the spring and the troubled water where all reflections mingle and blur. Its field of action and influence, spanning the whole of history, seems to have been characterized until now by a fundamental double behavioral determination: an ontology based on sacrifice and negation of self (its subjective and objective aspects respectively) and a fundamental duality, a division between particular and general, individual and collective, private and public, theoretical and practical, spiritual and material, intellectual and manual, etc. The contradiction between universal appropriation and universal expropriation implies that the master has been seen for what he is and isolated. This mythical image of terror, want and renunciation presents itself to slaves, to servants, to all those who can't stand living as they do; it is the illusory reflection of their participation in property, a natural illusion since they really do participate in it through the daily sacrifice of their energy (what the ancients called pain or torture and we call labor or work) since they themselves produce this property in a way that excludes them. The master can only cling to the notion of work-as-sacrifice, like Christ to his cross and his nails; it is up to him to authenticate sacrifice, to apparently renounce his right to exclusive enjoyment and to cease to expropriate with purely *human* violence (that is, violence without mediation). The sublimity of the gesture obscures the initial violence, the nobility of the sacrifice absolves the commando, the brutality of

the conqueror is bathed in the light of a transcendence whose reign is internalized, the gods are the intransigent guardians of rights, the irascible shepherds of a peaceful and law-abiding flock of “Being and Wanting-To-Be Owner.” The gamble on transcendence and the sacrifice it implies are the masters’ greatest conquest, their most accomplished submission to the necessity of conquest. Anyone who intrigues for power while refusing the purification of renunciation (the brigand or the tyrant) will sooner or later be tracked down and killed like a mad dog, or worse: as someone who only pursues his own ends and whose blunt conception of “work” lacks any tact toward others’ feelings: Troppmann, Landru, Petiot, murdering people without justifying it in the name of defending the Free World, the Christian West, the State or Human Dignity, were doomed to eventual defeat. By refusing to play the rules of the game, pirates, gangsters and outlaws disturb those with good consciences (whose consciences are a reflection of myth), but the masters, by killing the encroacher or enrolling him as a cop, reestablish the omnipotence of “eternal truth”: those who don’t sell themselves lose their right to survive and those who do sell themselves lose their right to live. The sacrifice of the master is the matrix of humanism, which is what makes humanism — and let this be understood once and for all the miserable negation of everything human. Humanism is the master taken seriously at his own game, acclaimed by those who see in his apparent sacrifice — that caricatural reflection of their real sacrifice — a reason to hope for salvation. Justice, dignity, nobility, freedom... these words that yap and howl, are they anything other than household pets whose masters have calmly awaited their homecoming since the time when heroic lackeys won the right to walk them on the streets? To use them is to forget that they are the ballast that enables power to rise out of reach. And if we imagine a regime deciding that the mythical sacrifice of the masters should not be promoted in such universal forms, and setting about tracking down these word-concepts and wiping them out, we could well expect the Left to be incapable of combating it with anything more than a plaintive battle of words whose every phrase, invoking the “sacrifice” of a previous master, calls for an equally mythical sacrifice of a new one (a leftist master, a power mowing down workers in the name of the proletariat). Bound to the notion of sacrifice, humanism is born of the common fear of masters and slaves: it is nothing but the solidarity of a shit-scared humanity. But those who reject all hierarchical power can use any word as a weapon to punctuate their action. Lautréamont and the illegalist anarchists were already aware of this; so were the dadaists.

The appropriator thus becomes an owner from the moment he puts the ownership of people and things in the hands of God or of some universal transcendence whose omnipotence is reflected back on him as a grace sanctifying his slightest gesture; to oppose an owner thus consecrated is to oppose God, nature, the fatherland, the people. In short, to exclude oneself from the physical and spiritual world. “We must neither govern nor be governed,” writes Marcel Havrenne so neatly. For those who add an appropriate violence to his humor, there is no longer any salvation or damnation, no place in the universal order, neither with Satan, the great recuperator of the faithful, nor in any form of myth since they are the living proof of the uselessness of all that. They were born for a life yet to be invented; insofar as they lived, it was on this hope that they finally came to grief.

Two corollaries of singularization in transcendence:

- a. If ontology implies transcendence, it is clear that any ontology automatically justifies the being of the master and the hierarchical power wherein the master is reflected in degraded, more or less faithful images.

- b. Over the distinction between manual and intellectual work, between practice and theory, is superimposed the distinction between work-as-real-sacrifice and the organization of work in the form of apparent sacrifice.

It would be tempting to explain fascism — among other reasons for it — as an act of faith, the auto-da-fé of a bourgeoisie haunted by the murder of God and the destruction of the great sacred spectacle, dedicating itself to the devil, to an inverted mysticism, a black mysticism with its rituals and its holocausts. Mysticism and high finance.

It should not be forgotten that hierarchical power is inconceivable without transcendence, without ideologies, without myths. Demystification itself can always be turned into a myth: it suffices to “omit,” most philosophically, demystification *by acts*. Any demystification so neutralized, with the sting taken out of it, becomes painless, euthanasic, in a word, humanitarian. Except that the movement of demystification will ultimately demystify the demystifiers.

RAOUL VANEIGEM

What will become of the totality inherent in unitary society when it comes up against the bourgeois demolition of that society?

- Will an artificial reconstitution of unity succeed in hoodwinking the worker alienated in consumption?
- But what can be the future of totality in a fragmented society?
- What unexpected supersession of this society and its whole organization of appearance will finally bring us to a happy ending?

IF YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW, FIND OUT IN PART TWO!

Part II

Summary of preceding sections

The vast majority of people have always devoted all their energy to SURVIVAL, thereby denying themselves any chance to LIVE. They continue to do so today as the WELFARE STATE imposes the elements of this survival in the form of technological conveniences (appliances, preserved food, prefabricated cities, Mozart for the masses).

The organization controlling the material equipment of our everyday life is such that what in itself would enable us to construct it richly plunges us instead into a poverty of abundance, making alienation all the more intolerable as each convenience promises liberation and turns out to be only one more burden. We are condemned to slavery to the means of liberation.

To be understood, this problem must be seen in the clear light of hierarchical power. But perhaps it isn't enough to say that hierarchical power has preserved humanity for thousands of years like alcohol preserves a fetus — by arresting either growth or decay. It should also be specified that hierarchical power represents the highest stage of privative appropriation, and historically is its alpha and omega. Privative appropriation itself can be defined as appropriation of things by means of appropriation of people, the struggle against natural alienation engendering social alienation.

Privative appropriation entails an ORGANIZATION OF APPEARANCE by which its radical contradictions can be dissimulated: the servants must see themselves as degraded reflections of the master, thus reinforcing, through the looking glass of an illusory freedom, everything that reinforces their submission and passivity; while the master must identify himself with the mythical and perfect servant of a god or of a transcendence which is nothing other than the sacred and abstract representation of the TOTALITY of people and things over which he wields power—a power all the more real and less contested as he is universally credited with the virtue of his renunciation. The mythical sacrifice of the director corresponds to the real sacrifice of the executant; each negates himself in the other, the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange, each fulfills himself by being the inversion of the other. From this common alienation a harmony is born, a negative harmony whose fundamental unity lies in the notion of sacrifice. This objective (and perverted) harmony is sustained by myth—this term being used to designate the organization of appearance in unitary societies, that is, in societies where slave, tribal or feudal power is officially consecrated by a divine authority and where the sacred allows power to seize the totality.

The harmony originally based on the “GIFT of oneself” contains a form of relationship that was to develop, become autonomous and destroy it. This relationship is based on partial EXCHANGE (commodity, money, product, labor power ...), the exchange of a part of oneself, which underlies the bourgeois notion of freedom. It arises as commerce and technology become preponderant within agrarian-type economies.

When the bourgeoisie seized power the unity of power was destroyed. Sacred privative appropriation became secularized in capitalist mechanisms. Freed from the grip of power, the totality once again became concrete and immediate. The era of fragmentation has been nothing but a succession of attempts to recapture an inaccessible unity, to reconstitute some ersatz sacred behind which to shelter power. A revolutionary moment is when “everything reality presents” finds its immediate REPRESENTATION. All the rest of the time hierarchical power, increasingly deprived of its magical and mystical regalia, strives to make everyone forget that the totality (which has never been anything other than reality!) is exposing its imposture.

By directly attacking the mythical organization of appearance, the bourgeois revolutions, in spite of themselves, attacked the weak point not only of unitary power but of any hierarchical power whatsoever. Does this unavoidable mistake explain the guilt complex that is one of the dominant traits of bourgeois mentality? In any case, the mistake was undoubtedly inevitable.

It was a mistake because once the cloud of lies dissimulating privative appropriation was pierced, myth was shattered, leaving a vacuum that could be filled only by a delirious freedom and a splendid poetry. Orgiastic poetry, to be sure, has not yet destroyed power. Its failure is easily explained and its ambiguous signs reveal the blows struck at the same time as they heal the wounds. And yet — let us leave the historians and aesthetes to their collections — one has only to pick at the scab of memory and the cries, words and gestures of the past make the whole body of power bleed again. The whole organization of the survival of memories will not prevent them from dissolving into oblivion as they come to life; just as our survival will dissolve in the construction of our everyday life.

And it was an inevitable process: as Marx showed, the appearance of exchange-value and its symbolic representation by money opened a profound latent crisis in the heart of the unitary world. The commodity introduced into human relationships a universality (a 1000- franc note represents anything I can obtain for that sum) and an egalitarianism (equal things are exchanged). This “egalitarian universality” partially escapes both the exploiter and the exploited, but they recognize each other through it. They find themselves face to face confronting each other no longer within the mystery of divine birth’ and ancestry, as was the case with the nobility, but within an intelligible transcendence, the Logos, a body of laws that can be *understood by everyone*, even if such understanding remains cloaked in mystery.

A mystery with its initiates: first of all priests struggling to maintain the Logos in the limbo of divine mysticism, but soon yielding to philosophers and then to technicians both their positions and the dignity of their sacred mission. From Plato’s Republic to the Cybernetic State.

Thus, under the pressure of exchange-value and technology (generally available mediation), myth was gradually secularized. Two facts should be noted, however:

- a. As the Logos frees itself from mystical unity, it affirms itself both within it and against it. Upon magical and analogical structures of behavior are superimposed rational and logical ones which negate the former while preserving them (mathematics, poetics, economics, aesthetics, psychology, etc.).
- b. Each time the Logos, the “organization of intelligible appearance”, becomes more autonomous, it tends to break away from the sacred and become fragmented. In this way it presents a double danger for unitary power. We have already seen that the sacred expresses power’s seizure of the totality, and that anyone wanting to accede to the totality must do so through the mediation of power: the interdict against mystics, alchemists and gnostics is sufficient proof of this. This also explains why present-day power “protects” specialists (though without completely trusting them): it vaguely senses that they are the missionaries of a resacralized Logos. There are historical signs that testify to the attempts made within mystical unitary power to found a rival power asserting its unity in the name of the Logos — Christian syncretism (which makes God psychologically explainable), the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

The masters who strove to maintain the unity of the Logos were well aware that only unity can stabilize power. Examined more closely, their efforts can be seen not to have been as vain as the fragmentation of the Logos in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would seem to prove. In the general movement of atomization the Logos has been broken down into specialized techniques (physics, biology, sociology, papyrology, etc.), but at the same time the need to reestablish the totality has become more imperative. It should not be forgotten that all it would take would be an all-powerful technocratic power in order for there to be a totalitarian domination of the totality, for the Logos to succeed myth as the seizure of the totality by a future unitary (cybernetic) power. In such an event the vision of the Encyclopédistes (strictly rationalized progress stretching indefinitely into the future) would have known only a two-century postponement before being realized. This is the direction in which the Stalino-cyberneticians are preparing the future. In this perspective, peaceful coexistence should be seen as a preliminary step toward a totalitarian unity. It is time everyone realized that they are already resisting it.

15

We know the battlefield. The problem now is to prepare for battle before the pataphysician, armed with his totality without technique, and the cybernetician, armed with his technique without totality, consummate their political coitus.

From the standpoint of hierarchical power, myth could be desacralized only if the Logos, or at least its desacralizing elements, were resacralized. To attack the sacred was at the same time supposed to liberate the totality and thus destroy power (we've heard that one before!). But the power of the bourgeoisie — fragmented, impoverished, constantly contested-maintains a relative stability by relying on this ambiguity: Technology, which objectively desacralizes, subjectively appears as an instrument of liberation. Not a real liberation, which could be attained only by desacralization — that is, by the end of the spectacle — but a caricature, an imitation, an induced hallucination. What the unitary vision of the world transferred into the beyond (above) fragmentary power projects ('throws forward') into a state of future well-being, of brighter tomorrows proclaimed from atop the dunghill of today-tomorrows that are nothing more than the present multiplied by the number of gadgets to be produced. From the slogan "Live in God" we have gone on to the humanistic motto "Survive until you are old," euphemistically expressed as: "Stay young at heart and you'll live a long time."

Once desacralized and fragmented, myth loses its grandeur and its spirituality. It becomes an impoverished form, retaining its former characteristics but revealing them in a concrete, harsh, tangible fashion. God doesn't run the show anymore, and until the day the Logos takes over with its arms of technology and science, the phantoms of alienation will continue to materialize and sow disorder everywhere. Watch for them: they are the first symptoms of a future order. We must start to *play* right now if the future is not to become impossible (the hypothesis of humanity destroying itself-and with it obviously the whole experiment of constructing everyday life). The vital objectives of a struggle for the construction of everyday life are the sensitive key points of all hierarchical power. To build one is to destroy the other. Caught in the vortex of desacralization and resacralization, we stand essentially for the negation of the following elements the organization of appearance as a *spectacle* in which everyone denies himself, the *separation* on which private life is based, since it is there that the objective separation between owners and

dispossessed is lived and reflected on every level and *sacrifice*. These three elements are obviously interdependent, just as are their opposites: participation, communication, realization. The same applies to their context nontotality (a bankrupt world, a controlled totality) and totality.

16

The human relationships that were formerly dissolved in divine transcendence (the totality crowned by the sacred) settled out and solidified as soon as the sacred stopped acting as a catalyst. Their materiality was revealed and, as the capricious laws of the economy succeed those of Providence, the power of men began to appear behind the power of gods. Today a multitude of roles corresponds to the mythical role everyone once played under the divine spotlight. Though their masks are now human faces, these roles still require both actors and extras to deny their real lives in accordance with the dialectic of real and mythical sacrifice. The spectacle is nothing but desacralized and fragmented myth. It forms the armor of a power (which could also be called essential mediation) that becomes vulnerable *to every blow* once it no longer succeeds in dissimulating (in the cacophony where all cries drown out each other and form an overall harmony) its nature as privative appropriation, and the greater or lesser dose of misery it allots to everyone.

Roles have become impoverished within the context of a fragmentary power eaten away by desacralization, just as the spectacle represents an impoverishment in comparison with myth. They betray its mechanisms and artifices so clumsily that power, to defend itself against popular denunciation of the spectacle, has no other alternative than to itself take the initiative in this denunciation by even more clumsily changing actors or ministers, or by organizing pogroms of supposed or prefabricated scapegoat agents (agents of Moscow, Wall Street, the Judeocracy or the Two Hundred Families). Which also means that the whole cast has been forced to become hams, that style has been replaced by manner.

Myth, as an immobile totality, encompassed all movement (consider pilgrimage, for example, as fulfillment and adventure within immobility). On the one hand, the spectacle can seize the totality only by reducing it to a fragment and to a series of fragments (psychological, sociological, biological, philological and mythological world-views), while on the other hand, it is situated at the point where the movement of desacralization converges with the efforts at resacralization. Thus it can succeed in imposing immobility only within the real movement, the movement that changes it despite its resistance. In the era of fragmentation the organization of appearance makes movement a linear succession of immobile instants (this notch-to-notch progression is perfectly exemplified by Stalinist "Dialectical Materialism"). Under what we have called "the colonization of everyday life," the only possible changes are changes of fragmentary roles. In terms of more or less inflexible conventions, one is successively citizen, head of family, sexual partner, politician, specialist, professional, producer, consumer. Yet what boss doesn't himself feel bossed? The proverb applies to everyone: You sometimes get a fuck, but you always get fucked!

The era of fragmentation has at least eliminated all doubt on one point: everyday life is the battlefield where the war between power and the totality takes place, with power using all its strength to control the totality.

What do we demand in backing the power of everyday life against hierarchical power? We demand *everything*. We are taking our stand in the generalized conflict stretching from domestic squabbles to revolutionary war, and we have gambled on the will to live. This means that we

must survive as antisurvivors. Fundamentally we are concerned only with the moments when life breaks through the glaciation of survival (whether these moments are unconscious or theorized, historical-like revolution-or personal). But we must recognize that we are *also* prevented from freely following the course of such moments (except for the moment of revolution itself) not only by the general repression exerted by power, but also by the exigencies of our own struggle, our own tactics, etc. It is also important to find the means of compensating for this additional “margin of error” by widening the scope of these moments and demonstrating their qualitative significance. What prevents what we say on the construction of everyday life from being recuperated by the cultural establishment (*Arguments*, academic thinkers with paid vacations) is the fact that all situationist ideas are nothing other than faithful developments of acts attempted constantly by thousands of people to try and prevent another day from being no more than twenty-four hours of wasted time. Are we an avant-garde? If so, to be avant-garde means to move in step with reality.

17

It’s not the monopoly of intelligence that we hold, but that of its use. Our position is strategic, we are at the heart of every conflict. The qualitative is our striking force. People who half understand this journal ask us for an explanatory monograph thanks to which they will be able to convince themselves that they are intelligent and cultured — that is to say, idiots. Someone who gets exasperated and chucks it in the gutter is making a more meaningful gesture. Sooner or later it will have to be understood that the words and phrases we use are still lagging behind reality. The distortion and clumsiness in the way we express ourselves (which a man of taste called, not inaccurately, “a rather irritating kind of hermetic terrorism”) comes from our central position, our position on the ill-defined and shifting frontier where language captured by power (conditioning) and free language (poetry) fight out their infinitely complex war. To those who follow behind us we prefer those who reject us impatiently because our language is not yet authentic poetry-the free construction of everyday life.

Everything related to thought is related to the spectacle. Almost everyone lives in a state of terror at the possibility that they might awake to themselves, and their fear is deliberately fostered by power. Conditioning, the special poetry of power, has extended its dominion so far (all material equipment belongs to it: press, television, stereotypes, magic, tradition, economy, technology — what we call captured language) that it has almost succeeded in dissolving what Marx called the undominated sector, replacing it with another dominated one (see below our composite portrait of “the survivor”). But lived experience cannot so easily be educed to a succession of empty configurations Resistance to the external organization of life to the organization of life as survival contains more poetry than any volume of verse or prose and the poet in the literary sense of the word is one who has at least understood or felt this But such poetry is in a most dangerous situation Certainly poetry in the situationist sense of the word is irreducible and cannot be recuperated by power (as soon as an act is recuperated it becomes a stereotype, conditioning, language of power). But it is encircled by power. Power encircles the irreducible and holds it by isolating it; yet such isolation is impracticable. The two pincers are, first, the threat of disintegration (insanity, illness, destitution, suicide), and second, remote-controlled therapeutics. The first grants death, the second grants no more than survival (empty communication, the company

of family or friendship, psychoanalysis in the service of alienation, medical care, ergotherapy). Sooner or later the SI must define itself as a therapy: we are ready to defend the poetry made by all against the false poetry rigged up by power (conditioning). Doctors and psychoanalysts better get it straight too, or they may one day, along with architects and other apostles of survival, have to take the consequences for what they have done.

18

All unresolved, unsuperseded antagonisms weaken. Such antagonisms can evolve only by remaining imprisoned in previous unsuperseded forms (anticultural art in the cultural spectacle, for example). Any radical opposition that fails or is partially successful (which amounts to the same thing) gradually degenerates into reformist opposition. Fragmentary oppositions are like the teeth on cogwheels, they mesh with each other and make the machine go round, the machine of the spectacle, the machine of power.

Myth maintained all antagonisms within the archetype of Manicheanism. But what can function as an archetype in a fragmented society? In fact, the memory of previous antagonisms, presented in their obviously devalued and unaggressive form, appears today as the last attempt to bring some coherence into the organization of appearance, so great is the extent to which the spectacle has become a spectacle of confusion and equivalences. We are ready to wipe out all trace of these memories by harnessing all the energy contained in previous antagonisms for a radical struggle soon to come. All the springs blocked by power will one day burst through to form a torrent that will change the face of the world.

In a caricature of antagonisms, power urges everyone to be for or against Brigitte Bardot, the *nouveau roman*, the 4-horse Citroën, spaghetti, mescal, miniskirts, the UN, the classics, nationalization, thermonuclear war and hitchhiking. Everyone is asked their opinion about every detail in order to prevent them from having one about the totality. However clumsy this maneuver may be, it might have worked if the salesmen in charge of peddling it from door to door were not themselves waking up to their own alienation. To the passivity imposed on the dispossessed masses is added the growing passivity of the directors and actors subjected to the abstract laws of the market and the spectacle and exercising less and less real power over the world. Already signs of revolt are appearing among the actors — stars who try to escape publicity or rulers who criticize their own power; Brigitte Bardot or Fidel Castro. The tools of power are wearing out; their desire for their own freedom should be taken into account.

19

At the very moment when slave revolt threatened to overthrow the structure of power and to reveal the relationship between transcendence and the mechanism of privative appropriation, Christianity appeared with its grandiose reformism, whose central democratic demand was for the slaves to accede not to the reality of a human life — which would have been impossible without denouncing the exclusionary aspect of privative appropriation—but rather to the unreality of an existence whose source of happiness is mythical (the imitation of Christ as the price of the hereafter). What has changed? Anticipation of the hereafter has become anticipation of a brighter tomorrow; the sacrifice of real, immediate life is the price paid for the illusory freedom

of an apparent life. The spectacle is the sphere where forced labor is transformed into voluntary sacrifice. Nothing is more suspect than the formula “To each according to his work” in a world where work is the blackmail of survival; to say nothing of the formula “To each according to his needs” in a world where needs are determined by power. Any construction that attempts to define itself autonomously and thus partially, and does not take into account that it is in fact defined by the negativity in which everything is suspended enters into the reformist project. It is trying to build on quicksand’ as though it were rock. Contempt and misunderstanding of the context fixed by hierarchical power can only end up reinforcing that context. On the other hand, the spontaneous acts we can see everywhere forming against power and its spectacle must be warned of all the obstacles in their path and must find a tactic taking into account the strength of the enemy and its means of recuperation. This tactic, which we are going to popularize, is *detournement*.

20

Sacrifice must be rewarded. In exchange for their real sacrifice the workers receive the instruments of their liberation (comforts gadgets) but this liberation is purely fictitious since power controls the ways in’ which all the material equipment can be used; since power uses to its own ends both the instruments and those who use them. The Christian and bourgeois revolutions democratized mythical sacrifice, the “sacrifice of the master.” Today there are countless initiates who receive crumbs of power for putting to public service the totality of their partial knowledge. They are no longer called “initiates” and not yet “priests of the Logos”; they are simply known as specialists.

On the level of the spectacle their power is undeniable: the contestant on “Double Your Money” and the postal clerk running on all day about all the mechanical details of his car both identify with the specialist, and we know how production managers use such identification to bring unskilled workers to heel. Essentially the true mission of the technocrats would be to unify the Logos; if only — because of one of the contradictions of fragmentary power — they weren’t so absurdly compartmentalized and isolated. Each one is alienated in being out of phase with the others; he knows the whole of one fragment and knows no realization. What real control can the atomic technician the strategist or the political specialist exercise over a nuclear weapon? What ultimate control can power hope to impose on all the gestures developing against it? The stage is so crowded that only chaos reigns as master. “Order reigns and doesn’t govern” (*IS #6*).

To the extent that the specialist takes part in the development of the instruments that condition and transform the world, he is preparing the way for the *revolt of the privileged*. Until now such revolt has been called fascism. It is essentially an operatic revolt — didn’t Nietzsche see Wagner as a precursor?—in which actors who have been pushed aside for a long time and see themselves as less and less free suddenly demand to play the leading roles. Clinically speaking, fascism is the hysteria of the spectacular world pushed to the point of paroxysm. In this paroxysm the spectacle momentarily ensures its unity while at the same time revealing its radical inhumanity. Through fascism and Stalinism, which constitute its romantic crises, the spectacle reveals its true nature: it is a disease.

We are poisoned by the spectacle. All the elements necessary for a detoxification (that is, for the construction of our everyday lives) are in the hands of specialists. We are thus highly interested

in all these specialists, but in different ways. Some are hopeless cases: we are not, for example, going to try and show the specialists of power, the rulers, the extent of their delirium. On the other hand, we are ready to take into account the bitterness of specialists imprisoned in roles that are constricted, absurd or ignominious. We must confess, however, that our indulgence has its limits. If in spite of all our efforts, they persist in putting their guilty conscience and their bitterness in the service of power by fabricating the conditioning that colonizes their own everyday lives; if they prefer an illusory representation in the hierarchy to true realization; if they persist in ostentatiously brandishing their specializations (their painting, their novels, their equations, their sociometry, their psychoanalysis, their ballistics); finally, if, knowing perfectly well — and soon *ignorance of this fact will be no excuse* — that only power and the SI hold the key to using their specialization, they nevertheless still choose to serve power because power, battenning on their inertia, has chosen them to serve it, then fuck them! No one could be more generous. They should understand all this and above all the fact that henceforth the revolt of nonruling actors is linked to the revolt against the spectacle (see below the thesis on the SI and power).

21

The generalized anathematization of the lumpenproletariat stems from the use to which it was put by the bourgeoisie, which it served both as a regulating mechanism for power and as a source of recruits for the more dubious forces of order: cops, informers, hired thugs, artists... Nevertheless, the lumpenproletariat embodies a remarkably radical implicit critique of the *society of work*. Its open contempt for both lackeys and bosses contains a good critique of work as alienation, a critique that has not been taken into consideration until now because the lumpenproletariat was the sector of ambiguities, but also because during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth the struggle against natural alienation and the production of well-being still appeared as valid justifications for work.

Once it became known that the abundance of consumer goods was nothing but the flip side of alienation in production, the lumpenproletariat acquired a new dimension: it liberated a contempt for organized work which, in the age of the Welfare State, is gradually taking on the proportions of a demand that only the rulers still refuse to acknowledge. In spite of the constant attempts of power to recuperate it, every experiment carried out on everyday life, that is, every attempt to construct it (an illegal activity since the destruction of feudal power where it was limited and restricted to a minority), is concretized today through the critique of alienating work and the refusal to submit to forced labor. So much so that the new proletariat tends to define itself negatively as a “Front Against Forced Labor” bringing together all those who resist recuperation by power. This defines our field of action; it is here that we are gambling on the ruse of history against the ruse of power; it is here that we back the worker (whether steelworker or artist) who — consciously or not — rejects organized work and life, against the worker who — consciously or not — accepts working at the dictates of power. In this perspective, it is not unreasonable to foresee a transitional period during which automation and the will of the new proletariat leave work solely to specialists, reducing managers and bureaucrats to the rank of temporary slaves. In a generalized automation the “workers,” instead of supervising machines, could devote their attention to watching over the cybernetic specialists, whose sole task would be to increase a production which, through a reversal of perspective, will have ceased to be the priority sector, in

order to serve the priority of life over survival.

22

Unitary power strove to dissolve individual existence in a collective consciousness so that each social unit subjectively defined itself as a particle with a clearly determined weight suspended as though in oil. Everyone had to feel overwhelmed by the omnipresent evidence that everything was merely raw material in the hands of God, who used it for his own purposes, which were naturally beyond individual human comprehension. All phenomena were seen as emanations of a supreme will; any abnormal divergence signified some hidden meaning (any perturbation was merely an ascending or descending path toward harmony: the Four Reigns, the Wheel of Fortune, trials sent by the gods). One can speak of a collective consciousness in the sense that it was simultaneously for each individual and for everyone: consciousness of myth and consciousness of particular-existence-within-myth. The power of the illusion was such that authentically lived life drew its meaning from what was not authentically lived; from this stems that priestly condemnation of life, the reduction of life to pure contingency, to sordid materiality, to vain appearance and to the lowest state of a transcendence that became increasingly degraded as it escaped mythical organization.

God was the guarantor of space and time, whose coordinates defined unitary society. He was the common reference point for all men; space and time came together in him just as in him all beings became one with their destiny. In the era of fragmentation, man is torn between a time and a space that no transcendence can unify through the mediation of any centralized power. We are living in a space and time that are out of joint, deprived of any reference point or coordinate, as though we were never going to be able to come into contact with ourselves, although everything invites us to.

There is a place where you create yourself and a time in which you play yourself. The space of everyday life, that of one's true realization, is encircled by every form of conditioning. The narrow space of our true realization defines us, yet we define ourselves in the time of the spectacle. Or put another way: our consciousness is no longer consciousness of myth and of particular-being-in-myth, but rather consciousness of the spectacle and of particular-role-in-the-spectacle. (I pointed out above the relationship between all ontology and unitary power; it should be recalled here that the crisis of ontology appears with the movement toward fragmentation.) Or to put it still another way: in the space-time relation in which everyone and everything is situated, time has become the imaginary (the field of identifications); space defines us, although we define ourselves in the imaginary and although the imaginary defines us *qua* subjectivities.

Our freedom is that of an abstract temporality in which we are *named* in the language of power (these names are the roles assigned to us), with a choice left to us to find officially recognized *synonyms* for ourselves. In contrast, the space of our authentic realization (the space of our everyday life) is under the dominion of silence. There is no name to name the space of lived experience except in poetry, in language liberating itself from the domination of power.

23

By desacralizing and fragmenting myth, the bourgeoisie was led to demand first of all independence of consciousness (demands for freedom of thought, freedom of the press, freedom of research, rejection of dogma). Consciousness thus ceased being more or less consciousness-

reflecting-myth. It became consciousness of successive roles played within the spectacle. What the bourgeoisie demanded above all was the freedom of actors and extras in a spectacle no longer organized by God, his cops and his priests, but by natural and economic laws, “capricious and inexorable laws” defended by a new team of cops and specialists.

God has been torn off like a useless bandage and the wound has stayed raw. The bandage may have prevented the wound from healing, but it justified suffering, it gave it a meaning well worth a few shots of morphine. Now suffering has no justification whatsoever and morphine is far from cheap. Separation has become concrete. Anyone at all can put their finger on it, and the only answer cybernetic society has to offer us is to become spectators of the gangrene and decay, spectators of survival.

The drama of consciousness to which Hegel referred is actually the consciousness of drama. Romanticism resounds like the cry of the soul torn from the body, a suffering all the more acute as each of us finds himself alone in facing the fall of the sacred totality and of all the Houses of Usher.

24

The totality is objective reality, in the movement of which subjectivity can participate only in the form of realization. Anything separate from the realization of everyday life rejoins the spectacle where survival is frozen (hibernation) and served out in slices. There can be no authentic realization except in objective reality, in the totality. All the rest is caricature. The objective realization that functions in the mechanism of the spectacle is nothing but the success of power-manipulated objects (the “objective realization in subjectivity” of famous artists stars celebrities of *Who’s Who*). On the level of the organization of appearance, every success — and every failure — is inflated until it becomes a stereotype, and is broadcast as though it were the only possible success or failure. So far power has been the only judge, though its judgment has been subjected to various pressures. Its criteria are the only valid ones for those who accept the spectacle and are satisfied to play a role in it. But there are no more artists on that stage, there are only extras.

25

The space-time of private life was harmonized in the space-time of myth. Fourier’s harmony responds to this perverted harmony. As soon as myth no longer encompasses the individual and the partial in a totality dominated by the sacred, each fragment sets itself up as a totality. The fragment set up as a totality is, in fact, the *totalitarian*. In the dissociated space-time that constitutes private life, time — made absolute in the form of abstract freedom, the freedom of the spectacle — consolidates by its very dissociation the spatial absolute of private life its isolation and constriction. The mechanism of the alienating spec-’ tacle wields such force that private life reaches the point of being defined as that which is deprived of spectacle; the fact that one escapes roles and spectacular categories is experienced as an additional privation, as a malaise which power uses as a pretext to reduce everyday life to insignificant gestures (sitting down, washing, opening a door).

The spectacle that imposes its norms on lived experience itself arises out of lived experience. The time of the spectacle, lived in the form of successive roles, makes the space of authentic experience the area of objective impotence, while at the same time the objective impotence that stems from the conditioning of privative appropriation makes the spectacle the ultimate of potential freedom.

Elements born of lived experience are acknowledged only on the level of the spectacle, where they are expressed in the form of stereotypes, although such expression is constantly contested and refuted in and by lived experience. The *composite portrait of the survivors* — whom Nietzsche referred to as the “little people” or the “last men” — can be conceived only in terms of the following dialectic of possibility/impossibility:

- a. possibility on the level of the spectacle (variety of abstract roles) reinforces impossibility on the level of authentic experience;
- b. impossibility (that is, limits imposed on real experience by privative appropriation) determines the field of abstract possibilities.

Survival is two-dimensional. Against such a reduction, what forces can bring out what constitutes the daily problem of all human beings: the dialectic of survival and life? Either the specific forces the SI has counted on will make possible the supersession of these contraries, reuniting space and time in the construction of everyday life; or life and survival will become locked in an antagonism growing weaker and weaker until the point of ultimate confusion and ultimate poverty is reached.

Lived reality is spectacularly fragmented and labeled in biological, sociological or other categories which, while being related to the communicable, never communicate anything but facts emptied of their authentically lived content. It is in this sense that hierarchical power, imprisoning everyone in the objective mechanism of privative appropriation (admission/exclusion, see section #3), is also a dictatorship over subjectivity. It is as a dictator over subjectivity that it strives, with limited chances of success, to force each individual subjectivity to become objectified, that is, to become an object it can manipulate. This extremely interesting dialectic should be analyzed in greater detail (objective realization in subjectivity — the realization of power — and objective realization in objectivity — which enters into the praxis of constructing everyday life and destroying power).

Facts are deprived of content in the name of the communicable, in the name of an abstract universality, in the name of a perverted harmony in which everyone realizes himself in an inverted perspective. In this context the SI is in the line of contestation that runs through Sade, Fourier, Lewis Carroll, Lautréamont, surrealism, lettrism—at least in its least known currents, which were the most extreme.

Within a fragment set up as a totality, each further fragment is itself totalitarian. Sensitivity, desire, will, intelligence, good taste, the subconscious and all the categories of the ego were treated as absolutes by individualism. Today sociology is enriching the categories of psychology,

but the introduction of variety into the roles merely accentuates the monotony of the identification reflex. The freedom of the “survivor” will be to assume the abstract constituent to which he has “chosen” to reduce himself. Once any real realization has been put out of the picture, all that remains is a psychosociological dramaturgy in which interiority functions as a safety-valve, as an overflow to drain off the effects one has worn for the daily exhibition. Survival becomes the ultimate stage of life organized as the mechanical reproduction of memory.

28

Until now the approach to the totality has been falsified. Power has parasitically interposed itself as an indispensable mediation between man and nature. But the relation between man and nature is based only on praxis. It is praxis which constantly breaks through the coherent veneer of lies that myth and its substitutes try to maintain. It is praxis, even alienated praxis, which maintains contact with the totality. By revealing its own fragmentary character, praxis at the same time reveals the real totality (reality): it is the totality being realized by way of its opposite, the fragment.

In the perspective of praxis, every fragment is totality. In the perspective of power, which alienates praxis, every fragment is totalitarian. This should be enough to wreck the attempts cybernetic power will make to envelop praxis in a mystique, although the seriousness of these attempts should not be underestimated.

All praxis enters into our project; it enters with its share of alienation, with the impurities of power: but we are capable of filtering them out. We will elucidate the force and purity of acts of refusal as well as the manipulative maneuvers of power, not in a Manichean perspective, but as a means of developing, through our own strategy, this combat in which everywhere, at every moment, the adversaries are seeking one another but only clashing accidentally, lost in irremediable darkness and uncertainty.

29

Everyday life has always been drained to the advantage of apparent life, but appearance, in its mythical cohesion, was powerful enough to repress any mention of everyday life. The poverty and emptiness of the spectacle, revealed by all the varieties of capitalism and all the varieties of bourgeoisie, has revealed both the existence of everyday life (a shelter life, but a shelter for what and from what?) and the poverty of everyday life. As reification and bureaucratization grow stronger, the debility of the spectacle and of everyday life is the only thing that remains clear. The conflict between the human and the inhuman has also been transferred to the plane of appearance. As soon as Marxism became an ideology, Marx’s struggle against ideology in the name of the richness of life was transformed into an ideological anti-ideology, an antispectacle spectacle (just as in avant-garde culture the antispectacular spectacle is restricted to actors alone, antiartistic art being created and understood only by artists, so the relationship between this ideological anti-ideology and the function of the professional revolutionary in Leninism should be examined). Thus Manicheanism has found itself momentarily revived. Why did St. Augustine attack the Manicheans so relentlessly? It was because he recognized the danger of a myth offering only one solution, the victory of good over evil; he saw that this impossibility threatened to

provoke the collapse of all mythical structures and bring into the open the contradiction between mythical and authentic life. Christianity offered the third way, the way of sacred confusion. What Christianity accomplished through the force of myth is accomplished today through the force of *things*. There can no longer be any antagonism between Soviet workers and capitalist workers or between the bomb of the Stalinist bureaucrats and the bomb of the non-Stalinist bureaucrats; there is no longer anything but unity in the chaos of reified beings.

Who is responsible? Who should be shot? We are dominated by a system, by an abstract form. Degrees of humanity and inhumanity are measured by purely quantitative variations of passivity. The quality is the same everywhere: we are all proletarianized or well on the way to becoming so. What are the traditional “revolutionaries” doing? They are eliminating certain distinctions, making sure that no proletarians are any more proletarian than all the others. But what party is working for the end of the proletariat?

The perspective of survival has become intolerable. What is weighing us down is *the weight of things in a vacuum*. That’s what reification is: everyone and everything falling at an equal speed, everyone and everything stigmatized with their equal value. The reign of equal values has realized the Christian project, but it has realized it outside Christianity (as Pascal had supposed) and, above all, it has realized it over God’s dead body, contrary to Pascal’s expectations.

The spectacle and everyday life coexist in the reign of equal values. People and things are interchangeable. The world of reification is a world without a center, like the new prefabricated cities that are its decor. The present fades away before the promise of an eternal future that is nothing but a mechanical extension of the past. Time itself is deprived of a center. In this concentration-camp world, victims and torturers wear the same mask and only the torture is real. No new ideology can soothe the pain, neither the ideology of the totality (Logos) nor that of nihilism — which will be the two crutches of the cybernetic society. The tortures condemn all hierarchical power, however organized or dissimulated it may be. The antagonism the SI is going to revive is the oldest of all, it is radical antagonism and that is why it is taking up again and assimilating all that has been left by the insurrectionary movements and great individuals in the course of history.

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So many other banalities could be taken up and reversed. The best things never come to an end. Before rereading the above — which even the most mediocre intelligence will be able to understand by the third attempt — the reader would be well-advised to concentrate carefully on the following text, for these notes, as fragmentary as the preceding ones, must be discussed in detail and implemented. It concerns a central question: the SI and revolutionary power.

Being aware of the crises of both mass parties and “elites,” the SI must embody the supersession of both the Bolshevik Central Committee (supersession of the mass party) and of the Nietzschean project (supersession of the intelligentsia).

- a. Every time a power has presented itself as directing a revolutionary upsurge, it has automatically undermined the power of the revolution. The Bolshevik C.C. defined itself simultaneously as concentration and as representation. Concentration of a power antagonistic to bourgeois power and representation of the will of the masses. This duality led it rapidly to become no more than an empty power, a power of empty representation, and consequently

to rejoin, in a common form (bureaucracy), a bourgeois power that was being forced (in response to the very existence of the Bolshevik power) to follow a similar evolution. The conditions for a concentrated power and mass representation exist potentially in the SI when it states that it holds the qualitative and that its ideas are in everyone's mind. Nevertheless we refuse both concentrated power and the right of representation, conscious that we are now taking the only *public attitude* (for we cannot avoid being known to some extent in a spectacular manner) enabling those who find that they share our theoretical and practical positions to accede to revolutionary power: power without mediation, power entailing the direct action of everyone. Our guiding image could be the Durruti Column, moving from town to village, liquidating the bourgeois elements and leaving the workers to see to their own self-organization.

- b. The intelligentsia is power's hall of mirrors. Contesting power, it never offers anything but passive cathartic identification to those whose every gesture gropingly expresses real contestation. The radicalism — not of theory, obviously, but of gesture — that could be glimpsed in the "Declaration of the 121," however, suggests some different possibilities. We are capable of precipitating this crisis, but we can do so only by entering the intelligentsia as a power against the intelligentsia. This phase — which must precede and be contained within the phase described in point a) — will put us in the perspective of the Nietzschean project. We will form a small, almost alchemical, experimental group within which the realization of the total man can be started. Nietzsche could conceive of such an undertaking only within the framework of the hierarchical principle. It is, in fact, within such a framework that we find ourselves. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we present ourselves without the slightest ambiguity (on the level of the group, the purification of the nucleus and the elimination of residues now seems to be completed). We accept the hierarchical framework in which we are placed only while impatiently working to abolish our domination over those whom we cannot avoid dominating on the basis of our criteria for mutual recognition.
- c. Tactically our communication should be a diffusion emanating from a more or less hidden center. We will establish nonmaterialized networks (direct relationships, episodic ones, contacts without ties, development of embryonic relations based on sympathy and understanding, in the manner of the red agitators before the arrival of the revolutionary armies). We will claim radical gestures (actions, writings, political attitudes, works) as our own by analyzing them, and we will consider that our own acts and analyses are supported by the majority of people.

Just as God constituted the reference point of past unitary society, we are preparing to create the central reference point for a unitary society now possible. But this point cannot be fixed. As opposed to the ever-renewed confusion that cybernetic power draws from the past of inhumanity, it stands for the game that everyone will play, "the moving order of the future."

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Raoul Vaneigem
Basic Banalities
1963

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