

Alienated Labor

Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.

Karl Marx, *Economic & Political Manuscripts*

We have started out from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed private property; the separation of labor, capital, and land, and likewise of wages, profit, and capital; the division of labor; competition; the conception of exchange value, etc. From political economy itself, using its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity, and moreover the most wretched commodity of all; that the misery of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and volume of his production; that the necessary consequence of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands and hence the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that, finally, the distinction between capitalist and landlord, between agricultural worker and industrial worker, disappears and the whole of society must split into the two classes of property owners and propertyless workers.

Political economy proceeds from the fact of private property. It does not explain it. It grasps the material process of private property, the process through which it actually passes, in general and abstract formulae which it then takes as laws. It does not comprehend these laws -- i.e., it does not show how they arise from the nature of private property. Political economy fails to explain the reason for the division between labor and capital. For example, when it defines the relation of wages to profit, it takes the interests of the capitalists as the basis of its analysis -- i.e., it assumes what it is supposed to explain. Similarly, competition is frequently brought into the argument and explained in terms of external circumstances. Political economy teaches us nothing about the extent to which these external and apparently accidental circumstances are only the expression of a necessary development. We have seen how exchange itself appears to political economy as an accidental fact. The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are greed, and the war of the avaricious competition.

Precisely because political economy fails to grasp the interconnections within the movement, it was possible to oppose, for example, the doctrine of competition to the doctrine of monopoly, the doctrine of craft freedom to the doctrine of the guild, and the doctrine of the division of landed property to the doctrine of the great estate; for competition, craft freedom, and division of landed property were developed and conceived only as accidental, deliberate, violent consequences of monopoly, of the guilds, and of feudal property, and not as their necessary, inevitable, and natural consequences.

We now have to grasp the essential connection between private property, greed, the separation of labor, capital and landed property, exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of man, monopoly, and competition, etc. -- the connection between this entire system of estrangement

[Entfremdung: often translated as “alienation”] and the money system.

We must avoid repeating the mistake of the political economist, who bases his explanations on some imaginary primordial condition. Such a primordial condition explains nothing. It simply pushes the question into the grey and nebulous distance. It assumes as facts and events what it is supposed to deduce -- namely, the necessary relationships between two things, between, for example, the division of labor and exchange. Similarly, theology explains the origin of evil by the fall of Man -- i.e., it assumes as a fact in the form of history what it should explain.

We shall start out from a present-day economic fact. The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labor not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general. This fact simply means that the object that labor produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor embodied and made material in an object, it is the objectification of labor. The realization of labor is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy, this realization of labor appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.

So much does the realization of labor appear as loss of reality that the worker loses his reality to the point of dying of starvation. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects he needs most not only for life but also for work. Work itself becomes an object which he can only obtain through an enormous effort and with spasmodic interruptions. So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital. All these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the product of labor as to an alien object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the fewer objects the worker possesses. What the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The externalization [Entausserung] of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and beings to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.

Let us now take a closer look at objectification, at the production of the worker, and the estrangement, the loss of the object, of his product, that this entails. The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material in which his labor realizes itself, in which it is active and from which, and by means of which, it produces. But just as nature provides labor with the means of life, in the sense of labor cannot live without objects on which to exercise itself, so also it provides the means of life in the narrower sense, namely the

means of physical subsistence of the worker. The more the worker appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, through his labor, the more he deprives himself of the means of life in two respects: firstly, the sensuous external world becomes less and less an object belonging to his labor, a means of life of his labor; and, secondly, it becomes less and less a means of life in the immediate sense, a means for the physical subsistence of the worker.

In these two respects, then, the worker becomes a slave of his object; firstly, in that he receives an object of labor, i.e., he receives work, and, secondly, in that he receives means of subsistence. Firstly, then, so that he can exist as a worker, and secondly as a physical subject. The culmination of this slavery is that it is only as a worker that he can maintain himself as a physical subject and only as a physical subject that he is a worker. The estrangement of the worker in his object is expressed according to the laws of political economy in the following way: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more worthless he becomes; the more his product is shaped, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work, the more powerless the worker; the more intelligent the work, the duller the worker and the more he becomes a slave of nature.

Political economy conceals the estrangement in the nature of labor by ignoring the direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production. It is true that labor produces marvels for the rich, but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It produces beauty, but deformity for the worker. It replaces labor by machines, but it casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labor and turns others into machines. It produces intelligence, but it produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker. The direct relationship of labor to its products is the relationship of the worker to the objects of his production. The relationship of the rich man to the objects of production and to production itself is only a consequence of this first relationship, and confirms it. Later, we shall consider this second aspect. Therefore, when we ask what is the essential relationship of labor, we are asking about the relationship of the worker to production.

Up to now, we have considered the estrangement, the alienation of the worker, only from one aspect -- i.e., his relationship to the products of his labor. But estrangement manifests itself not only in the result, but also in the act of production, within the activity of production itself. How could the product of the worker's activity confront him as something alien if it were not for the fact that in the act of production he was estranging himself from himself? After all, the product is simply the resume of the activity, of the production. So if the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. The estrangement of the object of labor merely summarizes the estrangement, the alienation in the activity of labor itself.

What constitutes the alienation of labor? Firstly, the fact that labor is external to the worker -- i.e., does not belong to his essential being; that he, therefore, does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence, the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labor is, therefore, not voluntary but forced, it is forced labor. It is, therefore, not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy

needs outside itself. Its alien character is clearly demonstrated by the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, it is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external character of labor for the worker is demonstrated by the fact that it belongs not to him but to another, and that in it he belongs not to himself but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, the human brain, and the human heart, detaches itself from the individual and reappears as the alien activity of a god or of a devil, so the activity of the worker is not his own spontaneous activity. It belongs to another, it is a loss of his self. The result is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions -- eating, drinking, and procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment -- while in his human functions, he is nothing more than animal. It is true that eating, drinking, and procreating, etc., are also genuine human functions. However, when abstracted from other aspects of human activity, and turned into final and exclusive ends, they are animal.

We have considered the act of estrangement of practical human activity, of labor, from two aspects: (1) the relationship of the worker to the product of labor as an alien object that has power over him. The relationship is, at the same time, the relationship to the sensuous external world, to natural objects, as an alien world confronting him, in hostile opposition. (2) The relationship of labor to the act of production within labor. This relationship is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him, activity as passivity [Leiden], power as impotence, procreation as emasculation, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life -- for what is life but activity? -- as an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him. Self-estrangement, as compared with the estrangement of the object [Sache] mentioned above. We now have to derive a third feature of estranged labor from the two we have already examined. Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species -- both his own and those of other things -- his object, but also -- and this is simply another way of saying the same thing -- because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.

Species-life, both for man and for animals, consists physically in the fact that man, like animals, lives from inorganic nature; and because man is more universal than animals, so too is the area of inorganic nature from which he lives more universal. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., theoretically form a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of science and partly as objects of art -- his spiritual inorganic nature, his spiritual means of life, which he must first prepare before he can enjoy and digest them -- so, too, in practice they form a part of human life and human activity. In a physical sense, man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of nourishment, heating, clothing, shelter, etc. The universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. Nature is man's inorganic body -- that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature -- i.e., nature is his body -- and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.

Estranged labor not only (1) estranges nature from man and (2) estranges man from himself, from his own function, from his vital activity; because of this, it also estranges man from his

species. It turns his species-life into a means for his individual life. Firstly, it estranges species-life and individual life, and, secondly, it turns the latter, in its abstract form, into the purpose of the former, also in its abstract and estranged form. For in the first place labor, life activity, productive life itself, appears to man only as a means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to preserve physical existence. But productive life is species-life. It is life-producing life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man. Life appears only as a means of life.

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity; it is that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being. Or, rather, he is a conscious being -- i.e., his own life is an object for him, only because he is a species-being. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labor reverses the relationship so that man, just because he is a conscious being, makes his life activity, his being [Wesen], a mere means for his existence. The practical creation of an objective world, the fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious species-being -- i.e., a being which treats the species as its own essential being or itself as a species-being. It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwelling, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need; they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product. Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.

It is, therefore, in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being. Such production is his active species-life. Through it, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of the species-life of man: for man produces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created. In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labor therefore tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.

In the same way as estranged labor reduces spontaneous and free activity to a means, it makes man's species-life a means of his physical existence. Consciousness, which man has from his species, is transformed through estrangement so that species-life becomes a means for him. Estranged labor, therefore, turns man's species-being -- both nature and his intellectual species-power -- into a being alien to him and a means of his individual existence. It estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence [Wesen], his human existence.

An immediate consequence of man's estrangement from the product of his labor, his life activity,

his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confront himself, he also confronts other men. What is true of man's relationship to his labor, to the product of his labor, and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, and to the labor and the object of the labor of other men. In general, the proposition that man is estranged from his species-being means that each man is estranged from the others and that all are estranged from man's essence. Man's estrangement, like all relationships of man to himself, is realized and expressed only in man's relationship to other men. In the relationship of estranged labor, each man therefore regards the other in accordance with the standard and the situation in which he as a worker finds himself.

We started out from an economic fact, the estrangement of the worker and of his production. We gave this fact conceptual form: estranged, alienated labor. We have analyzed this concept, and in so doing merely analyzed an economic fact. Let us now go on to see how the concept of estranged, alienated labor must express and present itself in reality. If the product of labor is alien to me, and confronts me as an alien power, to whom does it then belong? To a being other than me. Who is this being? The gods? It is true that in early times most production -- e.g., temple building, etc., in Egypt, India, and Mexico -- was in the service of the gods, just as the product belonged to the gods. But the gods alone were never the masters of labor. The same is true of nature. And what a paradox it would be if the more man subjugates nature through his labor and the more divine miracles are made superfluous by the miracles of industry, the more he is forced to forgo the joy of production and the enjoyment of the product out of deference to these powers.

The alien being to whom labor and the product of labor belong, in whose service labor is performed, and for whose enjoyment the product of labor is created, can be none other than man himself. If the product of labor does not belong to the worker, and if it confronts him as an alien power, this is only possible because it belongs to a man other than the worker. If his activity is a torment for him, it must provide pleasure and enjoyment for someone else. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over men.

Consider the above proposition that the relationship of man to himself becomes objective and real for him only through his relationship to other men. If, therefore, he regards the product of his labor, his objectified labor, as an alien, hostile, and powerful object which is independent of him, then his relationship to that object is such that another man -- alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him -- is its master. If he relates to his own activity as unfree activity, then he relates to it as activity in the service, under the rule, coercion, and yoke of another man.

Every self-estrangement of man from himself and nature is manifested in the relationship he sets up between other men and himself and nature. Thus, religious self-estrangement is necessarily manifested in the relationship between layman and priest, or, since we are dealing here with the spiritual world, between layman and mediator, etc. In the practical, real world, self-estrangement can manifest itself only in the practical, real relationship to other men. The medium through which estrangement progresses is itself a practical one. So through estranged labor man not only produces his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to alien and hostile powers; he also produces the relationship in which other men stand to his production and product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men. Just as he creates his own production as a loss of reality, a punishment, and his own product as a loss, a product which does not belong to him,

so he creates the domination of the non-producer over production and its product. Just as he estranges from himself his own activity, so he confers upon the stranger and activity which does not belong to him.

Society of Spectacles: A Neo-Marxist Perspective

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence – illusion only is sacred, truth profane. In fact, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

1.

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

6.

The spectacle grasped in its totality is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. The spectacle's form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals. The spectacle is also the permanent presence of this justification, since it occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production.

12.

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears. The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.

14.

The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.

17.

The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of being into having. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of having into appearing, from which all actual "having" must draw its immediate prestige and

its ultimate function. At the same time all individual reality has become social reality directly dependent on social power and shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only to the extent that it is not.

21.

To the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.

22.

The fact that the practical power of modern society detached itself and built an independent empire in the spectacle can be explained only by the fact that this practical power continued to lack cohesion and remained in contradiction with itself.

23.

The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks for all the others. It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself, where all other expression is banned. Here the most modern is also the most archaic.

24.

The spectacle is the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence. The fetishistic, purely objective appearance of spectacular relations conceals the fact that they are relations among men and classes: a second nature with its fatal laws seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the necessary product of technical development seen as a natural development. The society of the spectacle is on the contrary the form which chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle, taken in the limited sense of "mass media" which are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to invade society as mere equipment, this equipment is in no way neutral but is the very means suited to its total self-movement. If the social needs of the epoch in which such techniques are developed can only be satisfied through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially unilateral. The concentration of "communication" is thus an accumulation, in the hands of the existing system's administration, of the means which allow it to carry on this particular administration. The generalized cleavage of the spectacle is inseparable from the modern State, namely from the general form of cleavage within society, the product of the division of social labor and the organ of class domination.

25.

Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor, the formation of classes, had given rise to a first sacred contemplation, the mythical order with which every power shrouds itself from the beginning. The sacred has justified the cosmic and ontological order which corresponded to the interests of the masters; it has explained and embellished that which society could not do. Thus all separate power has been spectacular, but the adherence of all to an immobile image only signified the common acceptance of an imaginary prolongation of the poverty of real social activity, still largely felt as a unitary condition. The modern spectacle, on the contrary, expresses what society can do, but in this expression the permitted is absolutely opposed to the possible. The spectacle is the preservation of unconsciousness within the practical change of the conditions of existence. It is its own product, and it has made its own rules: it is a pseudo-sacred entity. It shows what it is: separate

power developing in itself, in the growth of productivity by means of the incessant refinement of the division of labor into a parcellization of gestures which are then dominated by the independent movement of machines; and working for an ever-expanding market. All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces that could grow by separating are not yet reunited.

26.

With the generalized separation of the worker and his products, every unitary view of accomplished activity and all direct personal communication among producers are lost. Accompanying the progress of accumulation of separate products and the concentration of the productive process, unity and communication become the exclusive attribute of the system's management. The success of the economic system of separation is the proletarianization of the world.

27.

Due to the success of separate production as production of the separate, the fundamental experience which in primitive societies is attached to a central task is in the process of being displaced, at the crest of the system's development, by non-work, by inactivity. But this inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity: it depends on productive activity and is an uneasy and admiring submission to the necessities and results of production; it is itself a product of its rationality. There can be no freedom outside of activity, and in the context of the spectacle all activity is negated, just as real activity has been captured in its entirety for the global construction of this result. Thus the present "liberation from labor," the increase of leisure, is in no way a liberation within labor, nor a liberation from the world shaped by this labor. None of the activity lost in labor can be regained in the submission to its result.

28.

The economic system founded on isolation is a circular production of isolation. The technology is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to television, all the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of "lonely crowds." The spectacle constantly rediscovers its own assumptions more concretely.

42.

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its reign is already attested by a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by regions which are ahead in the development of productivity. In the advanced regions, social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production. It is all the sold labor of a society which globally becomes the total commodity for which the cycle must be continued. For this to be done, the total commodity has to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as a whole. Thus it is here that the specialized science of domination must in turn specialize: it fragments itself into sociology, psychotechnics, cybernetics, semiology, etc., watching over the self-regulation of every level of the process.

43.

Whereas in the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, "political economy sees in the proletarian only the worker" who must receive the minimum indispensable for the conservation

of his labor power, without ever seeing him “in his leisure and humanity,” these ideas of the ruling class are reversed as soon as the production of commodities reaches a level of abundance which requires a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker, suddenly redeemed from the total contempt which is clearly shown him by all the varieties of organization and supervision of production, finds himself every day, outside of production and in the guise of a consumer, seemingly treated as an adult, with zealous politeness. At this point the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the worker’s “leisure and humanity,” simply because now political economy can and must dominate these spheres as political economy. Thus the “perfected denial of man” has taken charge of the totality of human existence.

44.

The spectacle is a permanent opium war which aims to make people identify goods with commodities and satisfaction with survival that increases according to its own laws. But if consumable survival is something which must always increase, this is because it continues to contain privation. If there is nothing beyond increasing survival, if there is no point where it might stop growing, this is not because it is beyond privation, but because it is enriched privation.

45.

Automation, the most advanced sector of modern industry as well as the model which perfectly sums up its practice, drives the commodity world toward the following contradiction: the technical equipment which objectively eliminates labor must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity and as the only source of the commodity. If the social labor (time) engaged by the society is not to diminish because of automation (or any other less extreme form of increasing the productivity of labor), then new jobs have to be created. Services, the tertiary sector, swell the ranks of the army of distribution and are a eulogy to the current commodities; the additional forces which are mobilized just happen to be suitable for the organization of redundant labor required by the artificial needs for such commodities.

46.

Exchange value could arise only as an agent of use value, but its victory by means of its own weapons created the conditions for its autonomous domination. Mobilizing all human use and establishing a monopoly over its satisfaction, exchange value has ended up by directing use. The process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange. Exchange value is the condottiere of use value who ends up waging the war for himself.

47.

The tendency of use value to fall, this constant of capitalist economy, develops a new form of privation within increased survival: the new privation is not far removed from the old penury since it requires most men to participate as wage workers in the endless pursuit of its attainment, and since everyone knows he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail accounts for the general acceptance of the illusion at the heart of the consumption of modern commodities: use in its most impoverished form (food and lodging) today exists only to the extent that it is imprisoned in the illusory wealth of increased survival. The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.

Guy Debord & the Situationist International: A Brief Account

In the shift from 19th century competitive capitalism, organized around production, to a later form of capitalism organized around consumption, media, information, and technology, new forms of domination and abstraction appear, greatly complicating social reality. Amidst the various attempts to develop a neo-Marxist theory of this later moment in social development, Guy Debord and the Situationist International stood out by their aim of devising ways of merging art with everyday life to creatively transform life and politics. And the afterlife of the ideas of Guy Debord (and the Situationist International movement that he led) is quite striking. Economics, politics, and everyday life are still permeated with the sort of spectacle that he described in his classic work. The past decade has been marked by a profusion of cultural activism which uses inexpensive new communications technology to proliferate radical social critique and cultural activism of the sort advocated by Debord. Indeed, all the Situationist texts are experiencing an interesting afterlife in the proliferation of 'zines and Web sites many of which pay homage to Debord. Situationist ideas thus enters Cyberspace and new realms of culture and experience...

Debord's analysis of contemporary capitalism developed Marx's analysis of commodification to its latest stage. Social organization is still a mutation in capitalist organization, but current forms of social control are based on consensus rather than force; a cultural hegemony is attained through the metamorphoses of the consumer and media society into the "society of the spectacle." In this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own.

Paraphrasing Marx's opening to *Capital*, Debord said: "In the modern conditions of production, life announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (#1 above). The society of the spectacle is still a commodity society, ultimately rooted in production, but reorganized at a higher and more abstract level. "Spectacle" is a complex term which "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (#10). In one sense, it refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles, but the concept also refers to the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, to all the means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, to relegate subjects passive to societal manipulation and to obscure the nature and effects of capitalism's power and deprivations.

Under this broader definition, the education system and the institutions of representative democracy, as well as the endless inventions of consumer gadgets, sports, media culture, and urban and suburban architecture and design are all integral components of the spectacular society. Schooling, for example, involves sports, fraternity and sorority rituals, bands and parades, and various public assemblies that indoctrinate individuals into dominant ideologies. The standard techniques of education which involve rote learning and mechanical memorization of facts presented by droning teachers, to be regurgitated through multiple choice exams, is very effective for killing creativity and choking the spirit and joy of learning. Currently, the use of video technologies in the classroom can reinforce this passivity and creates a spectacularization and commodification of education, with TV "news" punctuated with ads by corporate sponsors, such as the Whittle Corporation's Channel One which is made available in thousands of schools across the U.S. Of course, contemporary politics is also saturated with spectacles, ranging from

daily "photo opportunities," to highly orchestrated special events which dramatize state power, to TV ads and image management for predetermined candidates.

For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" (#44) which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life -- recovering the full range of their human powers through revolutionary change. The concept of the spectacle is integrally connected in Debord's formulation to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is separated from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society separates workers from the product of their labor, art from life, and spheres of production from consumption, which involve spectators passively observing the products of social life (#25 and #26). The Situationist project in turn involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice.

The spectacular society spreads its narcotics mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture. This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School conception of a "totally administered" or "one dimensional" society (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964), Debord states that "The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (#42). Here exploitation is raised to a psychological level; basic physical privation is augmented by "enriched privation" of pseudo-needs; alienation is generalized, made comfortable, and alienated consumption becomes "a duty supplementary to alienated production" (#42).

The shift to a bureaucratic society of controlled consumption organized around the production of spectacles can be seen as the exploitation of use value and needs as a means of advancing profit and gaining ideological control over individuals. Unlike early capitalism, where the structural exigencies lay in the forceful exploitation of labor and nature, and in defining the worker strictly as a producer, the society of the spectacle defines the worker as a consumer and attempts to constitute the worker's desires and needs, first creating then exploiting them. In this sense, Debord claims that use value was resurrected as a referent of production: "In the inverted reality of the spectacle, use value (which was implicitly contained in exchange value) must now be explicitly proclaimed precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because counterfeit life requires a pseudo-justification" (#48). It is not that exchange value no longer dominates, but that use value is now deployed in an ideological way that exploits the needs of the new consumer self.

The spectacle not only expands the profits and power of the capitalist class, but also helps to resolve a legitimation crisis of capitalism. Rather than vent anger against exploitation and injustice, the working class is distracted and mollified by new cultural productions, social services, and wage increases. In consumer capitalism, the working classes abandon the union hall for the shopping mall and celebrate the system that fuels the desires that it ultimately cannot satisfy. But the advanced abstraction of the spectacle brings in its wake a new stage of deprivation. Marx spoke of the degradation of *being into having*, where creative praxis is reduced to the mere possession of an object, rather than its imaginative transformation, and

where need for the other is reduced to greed of the self. Debord speaks of a further reduction, the transformation of *having into appearing*, where the material object gives way to its semiotic representation and draws "its immediate prestige and ultimate function" (#17) as image -- in which look, style, and possession function as signs of social prestige. The production of objects simpliciter gives way to "a growing multitude of image-objects" (#15) whose immediate reality is their symbolic function as image. Within this abstract system, it is the *appearance* of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual "use value" and the symbolic packaging of commodities -- be they cars or presidents -- generates an image industry and new commodity aesthetics.

While spectacles like Roman bread and circuses have long distracted the masses and celebrated state power, the society of the spectacle has more immediate origins in 19th century capitalist society organized around commodity spectacles and consumption. The commodity-phansmagoria of the spectacle began in the Paris Arcades in the 19th century which put on display all the radiant commodities of the day. Department stores soon appeared in Paris and elsewhere which exhibited commodities as a spectacle and soon became coveted temples of consumption. Sears catalogues offered customers entrance to commodity paradise and companies began using images and advertising to market their wares, creating a society where images offered fantasies of happiness, luxury, and transcendence. By the 1920s, advertising had become a major social force and films were celebrating affluence and consumer life-styles, but the depression of the 1930s and World War Two prevented the consumer society from developing. After the war, however, the consumer society took off in the United States as returning soldiers came back with money in pocket to start families and to buy the all the new products offered and promoted on radio and television. Life in the suburbs was centered on consumption and new shopping malls gathered together a diversity of department stores and specialty shops in an environment scientifically designed -- right down to subliminal messages in the Muzak -- to promote consumption. The 1950s was thus era of the rise of the society of consumption in the United States and by the 1960s the U.S. began to appear in France with new "drugstores," shopping malls, and a proliferation of consumer goods and services. It is this era that is thus theorized in Debord's and the Situationist International classic analysis of the society of the spectacle.

Jean Baudrillard, Neo-Marxism & Global Consumerism

Joseph Heath & Andrew Potter, *Rebel Sell*

Jean Baudrillard's 1970 book *The Consumer Society* is a classic in the field of cultural studies and social criticism. Drawing upon the work of Guy Debord, Baudrillard argues that the commodity has become so abstract that the economy is now nothing but a system of signs. The "needs" that we express in the marketplace are not a reflection of any underlying set of real desires; they are simply a way of conceptualizing our participation in the symbolic system. In fact, the idea that we have "needs" is a type of "magical thinking," produced by the same illusion that makes us believe we are consuming "objects."

This analysis offers a convenient explanation for why modern consumer society fails to produce happiness. It is because the "needs" that it satisfies are simply a "function (induced in the individual) by the internal logic of the system." If the system could function without feeding its

workers, Baudrillard argues, there would be no bread. And, similarly, if the system could function without consumers with “needs,” there would be no needs. Thus “there are only needs because the system needs them” ...

... Baudrillard’s theory was all the more attractive because it was derived from the work of Marx. According to Marx, capitalism suffers from periodic crises of overproduction. As the factory owner goes about his business, he is constantly trying to lower his costs of production. He does so by introducing the techniques of mass production. He therefore increases the quantity of goods produced, and introduces machines as a substitute for human labor (which allows him both to lay off workers and to drive down wages). Marx’s (seemingly plausible) observation is that these two strategies are contradictory. Mass production increases the supply of goods, yet it also reduces the income of workers, leading to a shortfall in demand. So at the end of the day the capitalist is left with a mountain of unsold goods, having deprived the working class of the revenue needed to buy them. The result is a crisis of generalized overproduction.

Marx thought that this tendency toward overproduction was responsible for the business cycle. The economy generated more and more stuff, which accumulated until there was simply too much. At this point profits would collapse, all economic activity would slacken, a recession would set in and the excess wealth would be destroyed. This would reset the system, so that a new cycle of production could begin. Thus capital, as Baudrillard writes, “confronted by its own contradictions (over-production, falling rate of profit), tried at first to surmount them by totally restructuring its accumulation through destruction, deficit financing, and bankruptcy. It thus averted a redistribution of wealth, which would have placed the existing relations of production and structures of power seriously in question.”

Yet after the Second World War, most Western nations enjoyed two decades of almost uninterrupted growth. The economic crises that Marx had diagnosed appeared to have been, at the very least, tamed. This created something of an explanatory challenge for Marxists. After all, mass production and mechanization had accelerated in the 1950’s. Capitalism appeared to be “overproducing” as much as ever. So how to explain the attenuation of the business cycle?

One answer, which acquired growing popularity during the 1950’s, was that advertising had been introduced in order to resolve the crisis of overproduction. The solution to the “contradiction” of capitalism, Baudrillard argues, is to transform the worker into a consumer. The way to get rid of all those excess goods is to trick the workers into wanting more and more. Convince them that they absolutely can’t live without a new car or a fancy home in the suburbs. Thus, capitalism instills what Baudrillard calls “a compulsion to need and a compulsion to consume”: “The industrial system, having socialized the masses as a labor force, was forced to go further, in order to finish the job, and socialize them (which is to say, control them) as a consumption force.” This form of mandatory desire is initially instilled through co-optation, yet someday the violence inherent in the system may be revealed: “One can imagine laws sanctioning such constraint one day (an obligation to change cars every two years).”

There is one little glitch. Because it is mass production that creates the surplus of goods, the desires that are to be instilled in the workers cannot be individual or idiosyncratic. The goods produced are all entirely homogenous, and so the desires that are created must also be homogenous. As Stuart Ewen argues in *Captains of Consciousness*, “The control of the masses

required that people, like the world they inhabited, assume the character of machinery -- predictable and without any aspirations toward self-determination. As the industrial machinery produced standardized goods, so did the psychology of consumerization attempt to forge a notion of the 'mass' as 'practically identical in all mental and social characteristics.'"

Consumerism must therefore be a system of rigid conformity. It cannot tolerate any deviation from the norm, because the false needs that are instilled in the population are required in order to relieve the excess of commodities generated by mass production. Thus consumerism arises out of what Baudrillard calls the "attempt to massify men's consumption in step with the requirements of the productive machinery." It is here that the "totalitarian logic" of the system is revealed. Because consumption needs are dictated by the functional requirements of the production system, "the system can only produce and reproduce individuals as elements of the system. It cannot tolerate exceptions."

This is the point of contact between the critique of consumerism and the theory of countercultural rebellion. According to this view, the system cannot tolerate exceptions, either on the factory floor or in the supermarket. It requires an absolutely uniform system of functionally imposed "needs" in order to absorb the excess of commodities produced through mass production. As a result, nonstandard acts of consumption come to be seen as politically radical. Just as the worker can disrupt the entire assembly line by refusing to do the job that he has been assigned to, so the consumer can disrupt the system simply by refusing to shop where she has been told to.

Here we witness the birth of the rebel consumer ... Anti-consumerism has become one of the most important cultural forces in North American life. Sure, as a society we may be spending record amounts of money on luxury goods, vacations, designer clothing and house-hold comforts. But nonfiction best seller lists have been populated for years by books deeply critical of consumerism: *No Logo*, *Culture Jam*, *Fast Food Nation*. You can now buy *Adbusters* at your neighborhood music or clothing store. Two of the most popular and critically acclaimed films in the past decade were *Fight Club* and *American Beauty*, which offered almost identical indictments of modern consumer society.