



an imbecile's guide to

Guy Debord's concept of the Spectacle



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36. In an internal SI document (1970), reprinted in *Débat d’orientation de l’ex-Internationale Situationniste* (Paris: Centre de Recherche sur la Question Sociale, 1974), 7, cited by Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et mai 1968: Théorie et pratique de la révolution* (1966-1972) (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1990), 187.

37. Cf. for example the first chapter of Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1968), especially the discussion of “Natural and Civilized Instruments of Production and Forms of Property,” pp. 81-86; or the section on “forms which precede capitalist production,” in *Grundrisse*, 471-79.

38. Karl Marx *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* (§§ 261-313), trans. Rodney Livingstone, in EW, 141.

39. Cf. *ibid.*, 146-47. As a matter of fact, “Marxism” could perfectly well have deduced from this account of Marx’s that in the last analysis social classes have a *quantitative* character and that consequently they are not a determining but merely a derivative factor in the functioning of a commodity-based society.

Theory of Value (Detroit: Black and Red, 1972; Montreal: Black Rose, 1973); this work was first published in Moscow in 1924 and barely noticed at that time.

24. The Situationists nonetheless approved in theory of this conception of organization and strove to apply it to themselves. See their pamphlet *De la Misère en milieu étudiant* (Strasbourg: Union Nationale des Étudiants de France/Association Fédérative Générale des Étudiants de Strasbourg, 1966), 25; English trans: “On the Poverty of Student Life,” in *SIA*, 334. (This pamphlet is discussed in Part 2, pp. 82-83.)

25. In the context of the present discussion, “Lukács” refers exclusively to the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*.

26. In his 1967 preface, Lukács vigorously reversed this judgment, asserting that it is in fact activity, not passivity, that is characteristic of the bourgeoisie. But one may perfectly well become active, even frantically so, on the basis of a “fact” or a “law” whose validity one accepts in a passive way, which suggests that *History and Class Consciousness* was nearer the mark than its author was later prepared to admit.

27. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, trans. Gregor Renton, in *EW*, 335.

28. Some observations on this subject will be found in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), chapter 7 of which is entitled “From the Empire of the Gaze to the Society of the Spectacle: Foucault and Debord” (see especially pp. 416ff.). A somewhat less superficial account might have been expected from Jay, a historian of philosophy well known for his work on the Frankfurt School. It is certainly worth noting, however, how quickly Debord seems to be losing his “marginality” in the eyes of the academic world.

29. Debord wavers even more than the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* between stressing the alienation of “man,” of “the individual,” and stressing the alienation of “the worker.”

30. Twenty years later, in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord reversed the terms of this proposition: he now saw the middle classes, of whom he had originally said that they would be absorbed into the proletariat, as occupying the whole of social space the rule of the spectacle being their expression. Although the conditions of their lives had been proletarianized in that they had no power over those lives, they lacked the class consciousness of the proletariat. From this point of view, therefore, even Debord eventually admitted that the proletarian class had been absorbed by the middle class.

31. Lukács says of the Hegelian analysis of bourgeois society that “it is only the *manner* of this deduction, namely the dialectical method, that points beyond bourgeois society” (*HCC*, 148), while Debord notes that although Hegel’s *conclusions* are negated by the existence of the proletariat, “the validity of [his] *method* is confirmed” thereby (*SS* §77).

32. The Club Mediterranée, as one of the earliest and most advanced examples of the alienation of everyday life, was a frequent polemical target of the Situationists.

33. The text quoted here is “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism,” originally a speech given in 1919 during the Hungarian Council Republic; according to Lukács’s preface (1923) to *History and Class Consciousness*, this essay still contains “the echoes of those exaggeratedly sanguine hopes that many of us cherished [at that time] concerning the duration and tempo of the revolution” (*HCC*, xli).

34. *Ibid.*, 167-68.

35. We should not be surprised, in this context, to see Gianni Vattimo, Turin prophet of what he himself calls “weak thinking,” proclaiming that “a large majority of us are proletarians... Proletarians not in terms of property but in terms of the quality of life” (*La Stampa*, 11 October 1990, cited in *Il Manifesto*, 12 October 1990).

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Must We Burn Debord?

Some historical periods display a strong belief in the power of critical thought. Cases in point are the reign of Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the Chinese emperor who organized the first book-burnings in history, or the age that condemned Anaxagoras and Socrates, or the one that burned Bruno and Vanini at the stake. As recently as twenty years ago, in the Iran of the Shah, a schoolteacher was sent to prison for life because she owned a copy of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

Our own era, however - meaning the last few decades in the West - has (not unreasonably) treated its thinkers as completely harmless individuals. Many a self-proclaimed sworn enemy of the world as it is has fallen rapturously into the welcoming arms of academia or of television. Guy Debord, though, must surely be numbered among the very few people deemed quite beyond the pale. For a long time, in fact, the police showed far more interest in him than did the agencies normally responsible for the diffusion of ideas. A time came, however, when this attitude could no longer prevent the theories developed by Debord and his Situationist friends from leaving their mark, despite all obstacles, on the spirit of the times. Since then another way of obscuring Debord's thinking has come into play, namely trivialization: there must be very few present-day authors whose ideas have been so widely applied in a distorted form, and generally without attribution.

That we live in a "society of the spectacle" is acknowledged by almost everyone - by television producers, by President Jacques Chirac, by the lowliest of mere spectators. The phrase seems practically de rigueur in every discussion of the invasion of life by the mass media, every denunciation of the effects on children of being stuck from babyhood on in front of the television screen; likewise the "spectacularization" of information is universally deplored apropos of the reporting of tragic events such as wars and catastrophes. Occasionally a slightly better informed commentator will mention that these terms are derived from the title of a book by a certain Debord, who is thus by implication depicted as a kind of less rarely supplied well-known Marshall McLuhan. Further details are rarely supplied.

Whether such "disinformation" is to be regretted is an open question. As an Austrian socialist of the first half of this century said, "When I began reading Marx, I was surprised never to have heard his name mentioned at school. When I began to understand Marx, I was no longer surprised in the least."

When Marx's theories are reduced to a simple economic doctrine concerning the supposedly inevitable pauperization of the proletariat, it is easy enough to trumpet the error of his thought. Here is a Marx eminently suitable for classroom discussion. A similar intent informs the presentation of Debord's ideas as nothing more than a theory of the mass media; a few specific points are then summarily conceded and the remainder of what he says passed over in silence. Nor is such a juxtaposition of Debord and Marx particularly arbitrary: a period that seeks to use the collapse of Soviet bureaucratic despotism and the seeming triumph of the Western model of social organization as weapons with which to deliver the coup de grace to everything remotely related to Marxist thought could hardly fail to be irked by one of the few theories of Marxist inspiration that has been confirmed repeatedly by the developments of the last thirty years.

There is another reason, too, why an analogy between Debord and Marx is not an

Marx's reasons for starting out with the analysis of value were purely methodological ones and that this analysis is meaningful only when viewed through the lens of the later analysis of surplus-value. Thus Louis Althusser counsels those reading Volume I of *Capital* for the first time to skip Part One, and he makes no bones about his conviction that the pages on the fetishistic character of the commodity are a harmful residue of Hegelianism that has had an extremely pernicious effect on the development of what he considers to be Marxism (see "Preface to *Capital* Volume One" [1969], in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971], 81 and 95).

10. *Capital I*, 128.

11. *Ibid.*, 128, 134.

12. *Ibid.*, 148.

13. If "one ton of iron and two ounces of gold" have the same market value, common sense suggests that a natural relationship exists here; in reality the relationship concerned is between the quantities of labor that have produced the one and the other (*ibid.*, 167).

14. *Ibid.*, 163, 165.

15. *Ibid.*, 166.

16. *Ibid.*, 167.

17. With interest-bearing capital, that is to say, with "money that produces more money," the tautologous character of the production of value achieves its clearest expression: "M [money] - M' [more money]. Here we have the original starting-point of capital, money in the formula M-C [commodity] - M', reduced to the two extremes M - M', where M' = M + ΔM, money that creates more money. This is the original and general formula for capital reduced to an absurd abbreviation" (*Capital III*, 514).

18. In the German journal *Krisis*, no. 13 (1993), one of the few publications to have elaborated upon these arguments in recent years, Ernst Lohoff writes as follows: "The contemplative and affirmative tone with which Hegel has reality evolve from the starting-point of the concept of 'Being' is utterly foreign to the Marxian account [of value]. For Marx 'value' cannot embody reality, but it subordinates reality to its own form, which form it then destroys, and in so doing destroys itself. The Marxian critique of value does not accept value as a positive basic principle, nor does it argue in its name. It interprets its self-sufficient existence in terms of appearance. And indeed the large-scale construction of the mediation known as the commodity absolutely does not lead to any definitive triumph of that form, but coincides instead with its crisis" (p. 126).

19. The Situationists, who detested dogmatism, and "isms" in general, maintained that they were Marxists "just as much as Marx was when he said 'I am not a Marxist'" (*IS* 9/26; *SIA*, 141).

20. Marx identifies the "purely economic" view with "the bourgeois standpoint" (*Capital III*, 368); this passage is also cited by Lukács (*HCC*, 243).

21. Cf. *Capital I*, 932: "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things."

22. Whereas labor under its concrete aspect invariably produces a qualitative transformation, as for instance when cloth is transformed into a coat, no such transformation occurs under its abstract aspect, merely an *increase in value* (money, objectified dead labor). This is the origin of labor's tautological character.

23. Another attempt to explore these themes should also be mentioned: Isaac I. Rubin's *Essays on Marx's*

All the same, in a more general way the Situationists persisted in thinking that postwar European society represented the last stage of a class society now several centuries old, which could be followed only by a general upheaval. As early as 1957, Debord was writing over-optimistically that the culture epitomized by a Françoise Sagan “signals a probably unsurpassable stage in bourgeois decadence” (*Rapp.*, 694). In 1965 he announced “the decline and fall of the spectacular commodity economy” (*IS* 10/3-11; *SLA*, 153-60). After 1968, the Situationists, like Hegel contemplating Napoleon or, later, the Prussian state, and like Marx during the 1848 revolution, thought that an “upside-down world was about to be set back on its feet” and that history was on the point of being realized. In 1969, reproducing an extreme example (extreme, at any rate, for its time - October 1967) of the replacement of real experience by images, the Situationists’ journal commented: “having carried its invasion of social life thus far, the spectacle was soon to experience the beginning of a *reversal* in the relationship of forces. In the following months [i.e., in 1968], history and real life resumed their assault upon the heaven of the spectacle” (*IS* 12-/50).

In Part 2 we shall see how this came about.

FOOTNOTES

1. Not overt quotations, that is. Very many passages of Debord’s book are “*détournements*” of statements by other authors.
2. Unfortunately, we are not told what the other two books might be, or whether indeed they include *Capital* which was published almost exactly a century before *The Society of the Spectacle* (14 September 1867 - 14 November 1967).
3. In this respect (and in this respect only), there is a parallel to be drawn between Debord and Wittgenstein.
4. The ideas of the Situationists are not identical in every regard to the ideas of Guy Debord, as Debord himself stressed in 1957 and again in 1985. For my present purposes, apart from books, shorter works and articles signed by Debord, I have also taken into consideration, though to a lesser degree, the many unattributed articles in *Internationale Situationniste*; these expressed the collective opinions of the Situationists, and it is unlikely, in view of Debord’s relationship to the organization, that ideas not espoused by him would have been presented in this way as “ideas of the group.” On the other hand, all citations here to writings signed by other Situationists are clearly identified as to their authors.
5. As early as the nineteen-thirties, Theodor W Adorno asserted that henceforward exchange-value could be consumed and use-value exchanged, and that “all enjoyment that achieves emancipation from exchange-value thereby acquires subversive characteristics” (*Dissonanzen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14 [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977], 24-25)
6. Debord was indeed so much taken with this formulation that he quoted himself twenty years later (*Pan.*, 83-84; Eng., 77).
7. It is worth noting once again that the spectacle implies a continual reversing of thing and image: things that were merely “ideal,” such as religion and philosophy, take on material form while things that had a certain material reality, such as money and the state, are reduced to mere images.
8. Marx, “Preface to the First Edition,” *Capital I*, 90.
9. Consequently, nothing could be further from the truth than the claim of some commentators that

arbitrary one: Debord’s theories cannot be properly grasped unless they are first properly located within Marxist thought in general. Some people will doubtless find this surprising and question the idea that Debord might be of interest on account of his interpretation of Marx. Was not Debord first and foremost the representative of an artistic avant-garde that sought to transcend art by means of “*détournements*,” “*derives*,” play, and “unitary urbanism”? Surely the fulcrum of Situationist agitation was the “revolution of everyday life”? These things certainly played an important part, yet placing all the emphasis on them means playing down Debord’s theoretico-practical activity, burying him in effect in the great cemetery of past avant-gardes, and ultimately according him no significance for the present time save that of some “father of the video neo-avant-garde” or “precursor of punk” (and these labels are not made up). This kind of incomprehension is likewise betrayed by the ever more prevalent use of the word “Situationism” - term the Situationists themselves firmly rejected from the outset on the grounds that it perversely froze their ideas into a dogma (*IS* 1/13; *SLA*, 45).

The chief concern of this study is the *relevance to the present time* of the notion of the “spectacle,” as developed by Debord, and its utility in the construction of a critical theory of contemporary society. The intention is to show that the spectacle is the most highly developed form of a society based on commodity production and its corollary, the “fetishism of commodities.” It is hoped that the real significance of this last concept will be clarified by showing the extent to which it constitutes a key to the understanding of the world of today, where the results of human activity are so antagonistic to humanity itself that they now threaten it with extinction through ecological catastrophe or war. We shall be touching on the pertinence for the present day of a central portion of Marx’s thought, the critique of the fetishism of commodities, and in this context considering Debord’s relationship to those minority strands in Marxism which have defined themselves in terms of that pivotal topic.

The main aim is to advance understanding of the theoretical issues while shedding light on the relationship between Debord and his contemporaries. Certain issues, among them the question of revolutionary organization, will be given short shrift here, because, whatever importance they once had, discussion of them now tends to resemble the Byzantine debate on the human versus the divine nature of Christ. Nor shall we devote much space to anecdotal and biographical details, which have been fairly well documented elsewhere. We will, however, be considering Debord’s practical activity, his life, and what might be called his “myth,” for they partake of an overarching desire for a rich life full of passion, not of passive contemplation, and embody a will to destroy whatever at present makes such a life impossible.

Aside from a growing disgust for those who used Marx to justify their gulags and their *nomenklatura*, it seemed in the nineteen-sixties that a good many Marxist or supposedly Marxist theories were outdated. These were years when capitalism showed no signs of any inability to increase its productive forces; it even seemed quite capable of ensuring a somewhat more equitable distribution than formerly of what it produced. This gave the lie to the belief that a revolution would be made by workers suffering ever greater poverty. Critical social thought proceeded to ask the most general, most simple, yet least frequently raised question: what use was being made of the immense accumulation of means now at society’s disposal? Had life, as actually experienced by ordinary individuals, become richer?

The answer, clearly, was negative. Whereas the power of society overall appeared to be limitless, the individual was deprived of any control over his own world.

Unlike many others, Debord did not interpret this state of affairs as an inevitable reversal of progress, or as the fate of modern man, to which there was no alternative but an improbable return to the past. Rather, he attributed the situation to the fact that *the economy had brought human life under the sway of its own laws*. Consequently, no change emanating from *within* the economic sphere would be sufficient so long as the economy itself was not subordinated to the conscious control of individuals. In what follows, an attempt will be made to explain, on the basis of Debord's own statements, how this claim differs from similar-sounding formulations that even the Pope might utter. The modern economy and its existence as a detached sphere will be analyzed here as the consequences of the *commodity*, of *exchange-value*, of *abstract labor*, and of the *form of value*. These are the topics that need addressing.

This has in fact been the concern, since the time of the First World War, of a minority tendency within Marxism that assigns central importance to the problem of *alienation*, considered not as epiphenomenal but as crucial to capitalist development. It is true that this still implies a very philosophical approach; the essential point, however, is the stress laid on the fact that the economy, once it has achieved autonomy, and no matter what form its development takes, can only be antagonistic to human life. The leading figure in this strain of Marxism is the Georg Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), who took up and further elaborated the Marxian critique of the "fetishism of commodities" in view of the transformations that had occurred in social reality since Marx's time. Later still, armed with the arguments of both Marx and Lukács, Debord would attempt to construct a theory of a particular variant of commodity fetishism that had arisen in the interim and that he called "the spectacle."

It is thus essential, if one is effectively to grasp the ideas set forth by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), to attend closely to his sources, to which he owes more than might at first be supposed. This is in no sense to diminish the originality of Debord's work, one of whose chief merits is that it adapts the earlier theories to a very different period. As he himself remarks in his autobiographical *Panegyric* (1989), "Men more knowledgeable than I have explained very well the origin of what has come to pass" (*Pan.*, 83; Eng., 77) - following which observation he quotes his own earlier paraphrase of the Marxian theory of exchange-value (SS §46). *The Society of the Spectacle* does not contain many quotations as such;¹ when they do occur, their purpose is to buttress Debord's assertions rather than to acknowledge his sources. A careful reading of the book reveals, however, that Debord hews narrowly to the Lukácsian tradition in Marxism, refining certain aspects of it and sharing certain of its problems. To trace the development of the critique of alienation in Marx, Lukács, and Debord is not, however, to endorse Debord's claim, apropos of *The Society of the Spectacle*, that "there have doubtless not been three books of social criticism of such importance in the last hundred years" (*OCC*, 183-84; *Films*, 133).²

Debord's writings are not easily susceptible of paraphrase: for one thing their stylistic elegance militates against it, and for another there is a danger of "overinterpretation." Inevitably, therefore, it will be necessary to quote a good deal. As Debord himself emphasized, he wrote little (*Pan.*, 42; Eng., 34), and only when it seemed to him necessary. No text of his

inevitably comes into play, which is at first expressed in art and then in its negation; this is the connection in which Debord quotes the lines mentioned above, from Hegel's "The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling," which he had found in *History and Class Consciousness* (SS §180; *HCC*, 139). The reunification of the forces that have been separated cannot come about until the development of the commodity economy has revealed the domination of the economy over society and completed the mastery of nature.

At bottom, Debord is in agreement with the Lukács who, in the preface of 1967 to *History and Class Consciousness*, quotes Marx in support of his - Lukács's - self-critical observation that he had earlier failed to understand that the development of the productive forces by the bourgeoisie had an objectively revolutionary function. That development, though occurring at the expense of so many human beings, was the necessary precondition of a finally liberated society (*HCC*, xvii-xviii). Implicit for both Lukács and Debord, it would seem, is the theory that the proletariat must inherit the world created by the bourgeoisie, a world that will thus merely change managers. This view is nevertheless clearly at odds with the proposition that the bourgeois mode of production is alienating by virtue of its very structure and that consequently the proletariat must not simply succeed the bourgeoisie as master of this system. One might reasonably question, too, the underlying assumption that all the sufferings of the past are acceptable in that they were necessary to arrive at the present state of the forces of production, which is confidently expected, by a more tortuous path, to precipitate the revolution - just as all the "economistic" theories say it will.

This "determinist" dimension of Debord's thinking may likewise be discerned in the claim that another factor has played a vital role in history, namely the consciousness of *the gap between what exists and what is possible*. Whereas the category of the *sacred* formerly expressed "what society *could not deliver*," the spectacle, "by contrast, depicts what society *can deliver*, but in this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible" (SS §25). The domination of nature should lead society immediately to ask the question "What for?" and then to use its mastery to transcend labor and replace it with free activity. But nature's transformation, the great achievement of the bourgeoisie, is used instead by that class to buttress existing hierarchies (*IS* 8/4-5; *SIA*, 103) and to keep the true nature of the functioning of society from becoming conscious. The fact that the forces of production must eventually subvert the relations of production remains true for the Situationists in a sense broader than the traditional one: not as "an automatic short-term judgment passed on the capitalist production system" but rather as a "judgment... passed on the development, at once niggardly and reckless, which this self-regulating system arranges for itself, as compared with the *grandiose development that is possible*" (*IS* 8/7; *SIA*, 104).

This kind of finalism is reminiscent of *The Phenomenology of Mind*. The Situationists, however, were in many respects immune to the excessive optimism to which such a position often gives rise. Debord cautioned that critical theory "expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking" (SS §203). He further noted that "a critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must *know how to bide its time*" (SS §220). Even during the most intense moments of May 1968, the SI warned against triumphalism.

In earlier times, activities of an economic kind were liable to have non-economic determinants. In medieval society, for example, productive power could be subordinated to considerations of tradition, as when guilds limited production in order to maintain a particular standard of quality; or a nobleman might dissipate his fortune for the sake of prestige alone. It is worth recalling that almost all societies prior to the society of the commodity economy devoted their surpluses to feast and luxury rather than reinvesting them in a new spiral of production. The communitarian social forms of old, whose dissolution was an absolute precondition, according to *History and Class Consciousness*, of society's contriving "to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange" (HCC, 91), were thus social forms incompletely subordinated to economic yardsticks. Indeed, in his early works Lukács looked back with nostalgia to former times, such as the medieval period, which had been "filled with meaning"; and something of this attitude survives in *History and Class Consciousness*, where he contrasts a former "organic unity" to the present-day rule of "calculation" (HCC, 88, 103). Lukács's reference to Ferdinand Tönnies (HCC, 131) is instructive in this regard. Tönnies introduced the distinction between *society* and *community*, viewing society as a purely external bond mediated by exchange among people in a state of permanent competition with one another, and community as an ensemble of concrete personal associations together constituting an organic unity which is the source of individual actions. Similarly, Debord condemns the society of the spectacle as a society without community (SS §154). In essence, Lukács and Debord both agree with Marx, for whom the unraveling of the old social bonds deprived men of the security and plenitude that membership in an estate had hitherto vouchsafed them; only in this way, however, could the free individual, no longer determined by such affiliations, have emerged.³⁷ In his *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*, the young Marx applauds Hegel for defining "the separation of the state from civil society as a contradiction."³⁸ In modern society, man is divided: in the political realm he is a *citizen*, member of an abstract community; in social and economic life he is a *bourgeois*. The contradiction inheres in the fact that something that was originally one is now split into two antagonistic parts; the old estates were communities that, in a rough and ready way, "sustained" the individual in his integrity, assigning him a status at once legal, moral, social, and economic. In contradistinction to the relationship between the person who is a "free" seller of his own labor-power and the person who buys that labor-power, the relationship between a feudal lord and his serf was not a purely economic one but extended to all aspects of existence. The classes of the present day are based exclusively on *social* differences.³⁹ The isolation, abstraction, and separations attendant upon modern society are thus an inevitable stage along the way to the reconstitution of a free community.

A comparable teleology of Hegelian inspiration is to be found in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "In the course of this development [of the commodity economy] all community and critical awareness have ceased to be; nor have those forces, which were able - by separating - to grow enormously in strength, yet found a way to *reunite*" (SS §25). Here Debord clearly expresses the idea not just that the various splits within the overall unity are destined to be mended but also that these separations were in fact a necessary precondition of growth and reunification at a higher level. The same sort of determinism seems to inform the thesis according to which "unitary societies" or "myth-based societies" are *obliged* to break down into independent elements, after which a totalizing and reconstitutive tendency

was ever written to order, at the request of an editor or under the pressure of a contractual deadline. Any attempt at exegesis must confront the problem that Debord's work, for all its succinctness, claims to have said everything essential,³ explicitly refusing interpretation and demanding to be followed, so to speak, to the letter. For a very long time Debord approved of no reading of his thought that was not strictly literal, indeed tantamount to a pure reproduction of the original text.

The Spectacle - Highest Stage of Abstraction

The concept of "the society of the spectacle" is often taken to refer exclusively to the tyranny of the television and other such means of communication. For Debord, however, the "mass media" are but a "limited" aspect of the spectacle - "its most stultifying superficial manifestation" (SS §24). Invasion by the means of mass communication is only seemingly a deployment of instruments that, even when badly used, remain essentially neutral; in reality the operation of the media perfectly expresses the entire society of which they are a part. The result is that direct experience and the determination of events by individuals themselves are replaced by a passive contemplation of images (which have, moreover, been chosen by other people).

This perception is at the heart of all Debord's thinking and action. In 1952, when he was twenty years old, he called for an art that would *create* situations rather than reproduce already existing situations. Five years later Debord's founding platform for a Situationist International (SI) contained a first definition of the spectacle: "The construction of situations begins beyond the modern collapse of the notion of spectacle. It is easy to see how closely the very principle of the spectacle, namely non-intervention, is bound to the alienation of the old world" (*Rapp.*, 699). The twelve issues of *Internationale Situationniste* (1958-69) attest to the increasing importance assumed by the notion of the spectacle in Situationist thinking. Its systematic analysis, however, awaited the appearance, in 1967, of the 221 theses that constitute Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*.⁴

In contrast to the first stage of the historical development of alienation, which may be described as a downgrading of "being" into "having," the spectacle is characterized by a subsequent downgrading of "having" into "appearing" (SS §17). Debord's analysis is based on the everyday experience of the impoverishment of life, its fragmentation into more and more widely separated spheres, and the disappearance of any unitary aspect from society. The spectacle consists in the reunification of separate aspects at the level of the *image*. Everything life lacks is to be found within the spectacle, conceived of as an ensemble of independent representations. As an example here, Debord evokes celebrities, such as actors or politicians, whose function it is to represent a combination of human qualities and of *joie de vivre* - precisely what is missing from the actual lives of all other individuals, trapped as they are in vapid roles (SS §60-61). "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" (SS §25), and individuals, separated from one another, can rediscover unity only within the spectacle, where "images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream" (SS §29). Individuals are reunited solely "in [their] separateness" (SS §29), for the spectacle monopolizes all communication to its own advantage and makes it one way only.

The spectacle speaks, “social atoms” listen. And the message is One: an incessant justification of the existing society, which is to say the spectacle itself, or the mode of production that has given rise to it. For this purpose the spectacle has no need of sophisticated arguments; all it needs is to be the only voice, and sure of no response whatsoever. Its first prerequisite, therefore, and at the same time its chief product, is the passivity of a contemplative attitude. Only an individual “isolated” amidst “atomized masses” (SS §221) could feel any need for the spectacle, and consequently the spectacle must bend every effort to reinforce the individual’s isolation.

The spectacle has two main foundations: “incessant technological renewal” and the “integration of State and economy.” And in its most recent phase it has three main consequences: “generalized secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present” (*Comm.*, 22; Eng., 11-12).

The spectacle is thus not a pure and simple adjunct to the world, as propaganda broadcast via the communications media might be said to be. Rather, it is the entirety of social activity that is appropriated by the spectacle for its own ends. From city planning to political parties of every tendency, from art to science, from everyday life to human passions and desires, everywhere we find reality replaced by images. In the process, images end up by becoming real, and reality ends up transformed into images.

Such images, furthermore, are necessarily distorted. For if on the one hand the spectacle is society in its entirety, at the same time it is also a part of society, as well as the instrument by means of which this part comes to dominate the whole. The spectacle does not reflect society overall; it organizes images in the interest of one portion of society only, and this cannot fail to affect the real social activity of those who merely contemplate these images.

By subordinating everything to its own requirements, the spectacle is obliged to falsify reality to the point where, as Debord puts it, reversing Hegel’s well-known proposition, “in a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood” (SS §9). Every power needs lies in order to govern, and the spectacle, as the most highly developed power that has ever existed, is correspondingly the most mendacious. All the more so, too, because it is the most superfluous and hence the least justifiable.

The problem lies not, however, in the “image” or “representation” as such, as so many twentieth-century philosophies argue, but rather in the society that needs such images. It is true that the spectacle makes particular use of sight, “the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived” (SS §18), but the problem resides in the *independence* achieved by representations that, having escaped from the control of human beings, proceed to address them in a monologue that eliminates all possible dialogue from human life. Such representations, though born of social practice, behave as independent beings.

It will be evident by this time that the spectacle is the heir of religion, and it is significant that the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* has a quotation from Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* as its epigraph. The old religion projected man’s own power into the heavens, where it took on the appearance of a god opposed to man, a foreign entity. The spectacle performs the same operation on earth. The greater the power that man attributed to gods of his own creation, the more powerless he himself felt; humanity behaves similarly with respect to powers that it has created and allowed to escape and that now “reveal themselves to us in their full force” (SS §31). The *contemplation* of these powers is in

attachment to such concepts appeared to him to betoken a salutary radicalism, but in actuality it was a conflation of capitalism and its earlier and unfinished forms. In consequence, Debord is noticeably prone to vacillation when it comes to defining the proletariat, which he sometimes equates in sociological fashion with the workers and sometimes depicts as the mass of people who are deprived of everything (SS §114).³⁵ He had set out in search of possible real occupiers of a place already assigned within a teleological vision of history, the place of the adversaries of the spectacle. The Situationists called in the proletariat when an agent was required to “realize art” (IS 1/8), much as Engels had once called it in as the heir of classical German philosophy. On several occasions, this problem was implicitly confronted: “for the first time, theory as the understanding of human practice [must] be recognized and directly lived by the masses [and] workers [must] become dialecticians” (SS §123). Elsewhere Debord was to say that “it is not so much a matter of the Situationists being Councilist as it is of the Councils needing to become Situationist”;³⁶ and the SI conceived its role vis-à-vis the workers as one of waiting to be approached by them (IS 11/64).

The critique of the economy as a now autonomous agency, and of separations in general, reposes inevitably on the concept of *totality*. For Debord, the concept seems to refer to *human community* in the sense of “a harmonious society” that is able to “manage its power” (OCC, 246-47; *In girum*, 47). Its opposite is “the totalitarian dictatorship of the fragment” (IS 8/33) - “one of those fragments of social power which claim to represent a coherent totality, and tend to impose themselves as a total explanation and organization (IS 6/6; *Dérive*, 109). When, with the advent of the spectacle, ideology reaches its apogee, this “is no longer the voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but rather its triumph” (SS §213).

If the nature of man lies in his historicity, this historicity implies that community is an authentic human need. Debord says that “community... is the *true social nature* of man, human nature” (IS 10/11; *SIA*, 160). But community is corroded by exchange: the spectacle means “the dissolution of all common and communicable values, a dissolution produced by the annihilating victory of exchange-value over use-value on the battlefield of the economy” (IS 10/59).

Genuine community and genuine dialogue can exist only when each person has access to a direct experience of reality, when everyone has at their disposal the practical and intellectual means needed to solve problems. In the past, these preconditions have sometimes been partially met: the ancient Greek *polis* and the Italian republics of the Middle Ages constitute the most highly developed examples, although only certain portions of the population were affected. But villages, neighborhoods, guilds - even local taverns - can also nourish forms of direct communication whereby each individual retains control over at least part of his own activity. Where the spectacle holds sway, by contrast, a *fragment* of the social totality, having detached itself from collective discussion and collective decision making, issues orders via *unilateral communication*. This occurs wherever subjects no longer gain access to the world through personal experience but instead by means of images, which are infinitely more manipulable and which in themselves imply passive consent. The Situationists were convinced that direct communication between subjects was sufficient in itself to banish social hierarchies and autonomous representations: “Wherever there is communication, there is no State” (IS 8/30; *SIA*, 115).

meaning outside this development. The proletariat and the bourgeoisie cannot be anything but the living instruments of variable capital and fixed capital: they have their roles to play, but they are in no sense the directors of economic and social life. Their conflicts, which is to say class struggles, pass of necessity via the mediation of an abstract *form* that is equal for all: money, commodity, state. Thenceforward such struggles are merely struggles over distribution within a system that nobody now seriously challenges. The logic of the commodity-form always decreed that social classes must become one category among others and that all categories must eventually be detached from their empirical bearers. This outcome is manifest today: the modern individual is truly a “man without qualities,” able to assume a multitude of interchangeable roles, all of which are in reality alien to him. One may be at one and the same time a worker and a co-owner of a firm; likewise one may be simultaneously pro-ecology qua resident and anti-ecology qua worried waged worker with a job at risk. Even the ruling classes have lost all mastery, and now the only thing at stake in economic competition is a more comfortable place within the general alienation. In the last reckoning, the development of society, which appears even to the most powerful as an inevitability to which they must adapt if they are to preserve their short-term interests, is a threat to all classes.

The existence of a powerful proletariat, united not only by working conditions but also by an entire culture and style of life, and more or less excluded from bourgeois society, was in reality nothing but a precapitalist relic, an “estate” in the feudal sense, and not a direct result of capitalist development at all. It was precisely class struggles that helped capitalism realize itself by allowing the laboring masses to be transformed into abstract and equal “monads” participating fully in the money system and in the state. The secret historic mission of the proletarian movement was to destroy remnants of precapitalism, to generalize abstract forms such as those of the law, money, value, and commodities, and thus to impose the pure logic of capital. These tasks often had to be carried out despite the resistance of the bourgeoisie itself, which was still determined to defend such actually pre-bourgeois forms as low wages and the barring of workers from the exercise of political rights - things the workers’ movement too identified incorrectly with the essential nature of capitalism. The Marxism of this movement was perforce a “sociologizing” one to the extent that it reduced the advances of capitalist society to the conscious activity of social groups treated as a *preexisting factor*. The workers’ movement therefore partook in a sense of the typical illusion of the bourgeois subject, which believes that it is making decisions when in reality the fetishistic system is the agent.

This is not to say that these results of capitalist development in any way mitigate the system’s contradictory character. They merely eliminate the illusion that the antagonistic portion of the system is one of the poles constituted by the logic of capitalism itself. Quite rightly, Debord had no truck with the propaganda put about in the fifties and sixties, at the height of the Fordist era, to the effect that harmony had now replaced social conflict and that the disappearance of the working class in the traditional sense was the proof of it. On the other hand, when Debord deems it possible, under present-day conditions, for a subject to exist that is by definition “outside” the spectacle, he seems to be forgetting what he had himself said regarding the unconscious character of the commodity economy; and he seems to forget it a second time when he identifies this subject with the proletariat. No doubt an

inverse proportion to the individual’s experience of real life, to the point where his most ordinary gestures are lived by someone else instead of by the subject himself. In this world, “the spectator feels at home nowhere” (*SS* §30). In the spectacle, as in religion, every moment of life, every idea, and every gesture achieves meaning only from without (*Prelims.*, 343-44; *SLA*, 307).

All of which implies neither a fatality nor the inevitable result of technological development. The split that has come about between real social activity and its representation is the consequence of splits within society itself. It is the most ancient of all separations, that of power, which has given rise to all the others. Beginning with the dissolution of primitive communities, every society has experienced the establishment within itself of an institutional power, a separate authority, and all such power has a “spectacular” dimension to it. Only with the advent of the modern era, however, has power been able to accumulate the adequate means, not only to extend its domination to every aspect of life, but also actively to mold society in accordance with its own requirements. It has achieved this thanks chiefly to a material production tending continually to re-create everything needed to promote isolation and separation, from automobiles to television.

This “spectacular” trend in capitalist development has imposed itself gradually, beginning in the 1920s and gaining enormously in strength after the Second World War. And it has continued to accelerate. In 1967, Debord described the spectacle as “the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (*SS* §24) and seemed to feel that an almost unsurpassable situation had been reached. In 1988, however, he acknowledged that the spectacle’s grip over society in 1967, as seen with the benefit of twenty years’ hindsight, had clearly not yet been perfected (*Comm.*, 18; *Eng.*, 7).

The foregoing remarks do not apply solely to Western capitalist societies, for all modern sociopolitical systems pay tribute to the regime of the commodity and the spectacle. Just as the spectacle is a totality within a society, so too it is a totality on a worldwide scale. A real antagonism, that between a proletariat demanding life and a system “where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making” (*SS* §53), is concealed by *spectacular* antagonisms between political systems that are in actuality mutually supportive. Such antagonisms, however, are not mere phantoms, for they reflect the uneven development of capitalism in different parts of the world.

Thus, alongside countries where the commodity has been able to develop freely, we have their pseudo-negation in the form of societies dominated by a state bureaucracy, such as the Soviet Union, China, or numerous third-world nations. In 1967, Debord classified such regimes, together with the fascist governments that arose in Western countries in periods of crisis, as instances of “concentrated spectacular power.” The relatively feeble economic development of these countries, as compared with that of societies ruled by “diffuse spectacular power,” is compensated for by *ideology*, which is the ultimate commodity; and the acme of ideology is the requirement that everyone identify with a leader - with a Stalin, a Mao, or a Sukarno. The spectacle in this concentrated form lacks flexibility, and its rule depends in the end on a police force. Its negative image nevertheless has a part to play in the “worldwide division of spectacular tasks” (*SS* §57), for the Soviet bureaucracy and its extensions in Western countries (i.e., the traditional Communist parties) stand in an illusory manner for resistance to diffuse spectacular power. Inasmuch as no

alternative to one or other of these forms appears to exist, real opponents within either spectacular system may often take the opposing system as their model - something that often happens, for example, in thirdworld revolutionary movements.

It was already clear to Debord when he wrote *The Society of the Spectacle* that whichever version of the spectacle could offer the wider choice of commodities must eventually prevail (SS §110). Each individual commodity promises access to an “already questionable satisfaction allegedly derived from the *consumption of the whole*” (SS §65), and as soon as the inevitable moment of disillusion occurs another commodity appears that makes the same promise. In the struggle waged among various objects, a struggle in respect of which man is a mere spectator, any given commodity is liable to wear itself out, yet the spectacle as a whole merely gets stronger. As Debord writes in one of the finest formulations in his book, “the spectacle is the epic poem of this strife - a strife that no fall of Ilium can bring to an end. Of arms and the man the spectacle does not sing, but rather of passions and the commodity” (SS §66). Exchange-value has come to dominate use-value (SS §46), and the detachment of the commodity from any genuine human need has succeeded, with the advent of patently useless objects, in attaining a quasi religious level: Debord evokes the collecting of promotional key chains, which he characterizes as “indulgences” of the commodity (SS §67). What such an instance demonstrates is that the commodity no longer contains so much as an “atom” of use-value but that it is henceforward consumable *qua commodity*.⁵

The spectacle is thus not bound to a particular economic system. Rather, it betokens the victory of the *category* of the economy as such within society. The class responsible for the establishment of the spectacle - the bourgeoisie - owes its position of dominance to this triumph of the economy and its laws over all other aspects of life. The spectacle is “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production,” “the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice” (SS §6). Not just work, but likewise other sorts of human activity - what is known as “free time” - are organized in such a way as to justify and perpetuate the reigning mode of production. Economic production has been transformed from a means into an end, and the spectacle is its form of expression: with its “essentially tautological” character (SS §13), the spectacle’s aim is simply the reproduction of the conditions of its own existence. Instead of serving human desires, the economy in its spectacular stage continually creates and manipulates needs that are all reducible to the single “pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue” (SS §51).

“The economy” should therefore be understood here as one portion of global human activity that holds sway over all the rest. The spectacle is nothing more than this autocratic reign of the commodity economy (see, for instance, *Comm.*, 114; Eng., 2). An economy become autonomous is in itself a form of alienation; economic production is founded on alienation; alienation has indeed become its chief product; and the economy’s domination of the whole of society entails that maximum diffusion of alienation which is precisely what constitutes the spectacle. “The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy” (SS §40).

Clearly the term “economy” is not being used here to mean simply material production - without which, of course, no society could exist. The economy in question is *an economy*

For Debord, the development of economic forces was necessary, for it was only thus that the economy could eventually cease being the *unconscious* basis of society. As the economy’s sway is extended to the whole of life, it is simultaneously revealed to be a creation of mankind, and mankind becomes conscious of this. The autonomous economy “breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a *social unconscious* that was dependent on it without knowing it... By the time society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society... Where economic id was, there ego shall be” (SS §51-52). The task of the proletariat is to become “the class of consciousness” (SS §88), consciousness meaning “direct possession by the workers of every moment of their activity” (SS §53) instead of subordination to what they have created in an unconscious manner.

History and Class Consciousness reminded all Marxists who had forgotten it that crises are not solely attributable to quantitative causes, to relationships based on the relative importance of economic factors, but also to a kind of revolt of use-value (HCC, 106-7). Debord likewise emphasizes the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of economic crises. He thus saw the recession of the seventies, when it arrived, as merely an exacerbation of the general crisis of the spectacular system, asserting that even the economic aspect was due to a sharpening of the class struggle in which wage demands were coupled with a rejection by the working class of such junk consumer goods as modern housing (VS, 28; Eng., 24-25).

Debord’s search for a subject or principle necessarily antagonistic to the spectacle led him to an explicit invocation of the proletariat, but also to a number of somewhat vague concepts, among them the Feuerbachian *Gattungswesen*, or “species-being,” mentioned above, which was also taken up by Lukács in his last period. The fact is that we are getting close here to one of the limits of Debord’s theory.

The logic of the value-form requires that in a society based on commodity production - defined by Marx as “a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite” (*Capital I*, 175) - social processes assume the character of blind forces. This is not a pure illusion, as is thought by those who look “behind” the “laws of the market” or “technical imperatives” for an acting subject. True, for individuals under capitalism “their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.”³⁴ This means that in capitalism - as in earlier types of society, characterized by other forms of fetishism, including fetishism in the strict sense - no subjects, whether individual or collective, are ever real actors in history; the blind process of value has created them, and they must follow its laws or be ruined. What is not implied here is that history is itself a process without a subject, as claimed by structuralism and systems theory: the absence of a subject, which is only too real in present society, does not constitute an ontological and immutable fact; rather, it represents capitalism’s chief defect. Debord clearly points up, if succinctly, the *unconscious* nature of a society ruled by value. At the same time, however, he bases himself on the aspect of Marx’s thought that assigns a central role to the concepts of “classes” and “class struggles” - concepts that were also primary for the workers’ movement. Overemphasis on the “class struggle,” however, can lead to a misapprehension of the nature of the classes that have been created by the development of value and that have no

them” (SS §157). Furthermore, whatever real experience the individual manages to achieve in his daily life is alien to official time and remains unintelligible to him, for he lacks the tools to relate his own lived experience to the lived experience of society at large and thus invest it with greater meaning.

It is interesting to observe how Debord applies Marxian economic categories to historical time considered as the main product of society. Thus in primitive societies power extracts “temporal surplus value” (SS §128); masters enjoy “the private ownership of history” (SS §132); “the main product that economic development transformed from a luxurious rarity to a commonly consumed item was thus history itself” - albeit only the history of *things* (SS §142); and time is “raw material for the production of a diversity of new products” (SS §151). According to Marx, the violent expropriation of the means of production of small independent producers, as well as those of peasants and craftsmen, was a prerequisite for the establishment of capitalism. Debord adds that the necessary precondition of the subjugation of workers to “time-as-commodity” is “the violent expropriation of their time” (SS §159).

The spectacle must deny history, because history proves that laws are nothing, whereas process and struggle are all. The spectacle is the reign of an eternal present that claims to be history’s last word. Under Stalinism, it took the form of a systematic manipulation and rewriting of the past. In countries where the diffuse spectacular system holds sway, by contrast, the mechanism is subtler. To begin with, it eliminates all opportunities for people to share experiences or projects without intermediaries or to recognize themselves in their own actions and in the effects of those actions. The complete disappearance of historical intelligence creates socially atomized individuals with no choice but to contemplate the seemingly unalterable progression of blind forces. All those faculties that might allow such individuals to perceive the contrast between the falsification wrought by the spectacle and earlier forms are likewise eradicated.

The antagonism between human life and the economy is emphasized even more strongly by Debord than by Marx and Lukács. Lukács underlines the fact that even in earlier societies divided into estates the economy was already the basis of all social relations, although that economy had not “objectively reached the stage of being-for-itself” (HCC, 57). In the modern period, by contrast, “economic factors are not concealed ‘behind’ consciousness but are present *in* consciousness itself (albeit unconscious or repressed)” (HCC, 59). In another passage, Lukács evokes “the first time [that] mankind consciously takes its history into its own hands - thanks to the class consciousness of a proletariat summoned to power” (HCC, 250), thus bringing to an end the necessity merely to interpret and follow along behind the objective course of the economic process.³³ This is the point where the proletariat’s conscious will makes its entrance, a will that Lukács calls “violence,” in the sense that it means a rupture with the self-regulation of the system. From the moment when the real possibility of the “realm of freedom” arises, “the blind forces really will hurtle blindly towards the abyss, with ever-increasing and apparently irresistible violence, and only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe” (HCC, 70). Material production in the society of the future will be “the servant of a consciously directed society; it [will] lose its self-contained autonomy (which was what made it an economy, properly speaking); as an economy it [will] be annulled” (HCC, 261).

that has become independent and in so doing subjugated human life. This is a consequence of the triumph of the *commodity* within the prevailing mode of production.

In the second chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord examines the steps whereby “the entire economy then became what the commodity, throughout this campaign of conquest, had shown itself to be - namely, a process of quantitative development” (SS §40). Debord’s account of the predominance of exchange-value over use-value does not depart significantly from Marx’s, though his phraseology can be colorful: “Starting out as the condottiere of use-value, exchange-value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own” (SS §46).⁶ And whereas Marx evokes the law of the falling rate of profit, Debord speaks of a “falling rate of use-value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy” (SS §47): an increasing subordination of all use, even the most banal, to the requirements of the growth of the economy - to a sheerly quantitative criterion. For even though the progress of the economy may have solved the immediate problem of survival in part of the world, the question of survival in the larger sense continues to rear its head, because an abundance of commodities is nothing more than a shortage for which material provision has been made.

In conceiving of alienation, of the spectacle, as a process of abstraction, and accounting for it in terms of the commodity and the *structure* of the commodity, Debord is elaborating upon some fundamental ideas of Marx’s that, not surprisingly, have met with little success in the history of “Marxism.” For Hegel, alienation is constituted by the objective and sensible world inasmuch as the subject fails to recognize this world as his own creation. The “young Hegelians” - Feuerbach, Moses Hess, or the early Marx-likewise see alienation as an inversion of subject and attribute, of concrete and abstract, but their conception is the exact opposite of Hegel’s in that the true subject for them is man in his sensual and material existence. Man is alienated when he becomes the attribute of an abstraction that he has himself posited but that he no longer recognizes as such and that thus appears to him to be a subject in its own right. Man therefore comes to be determined by a now autonomous creation of his own. Feuerbach discerns alienation in the projection of human powers into the heaven of religion, leaving earthbound man powerless; but he also recognizes it in the abstractions of idealist philosophy, for which man in his material existence is merely a phenomenal form of the universal Spirit. Hess and the young Marx identify the state and money as two other fundamental alienations, as two abstractions in which man alienates himself in his capacities as a member of a collectivity and as a worker. This means by extension that the phenomenon of alienation does not affect all “humanity” to the same degree but that a specific alienation weighs down on one part of it, namely that part which is obliged to work without possessing the means of production. The worker’s product does not belong to him and thus appears to him as an alien and hostile force. In all forms of alienation, the concrete individual has value only inasmuch as he partakes of the abstract, inasmuch as he possesses wealth, is a citizen of a state, a man before God, or a “self” in the philosophical sense. In this context, human action has no end of its own and serves the sole purpose of permitting man to attain what he has already himself created, which, though conceived exclusively as a means, has been transformed into an end. Money is the most obvious example here.

The spectacle is in effect the most highly developed form of this tendency toward abstraction, as witness Debord’s observation that its “very manner of being concrete is,

precisely, abstraction” (SS §29). The devaluing of life to the benefit of hypostasized abstractions now affects all aspects of existence; and these abstractions, which have now assumed the role of subject, no longer appear as things but, even more abstractly, as *images*. The spectacle may be said to incorporate all older forms of alienation: Debord describes it variously as “the material reconstruction of the religious illusion” (SS §20), as “money for contemplation only” (SS §49), as “inseparable from the modern State” (SS §24), and as “ideology in material form” (the title of the last chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*).⁷

The notion of alienation as the inversion of subject and attribute, and as the subordination of the “essence of man” to what that essence produced, was superseded in Marx’s thinking after a few years on the grounds that it was still too philosophical in character. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels poked fun at the “German *literati*” because, “beneath the French criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote ‘alienation of the essence of man’” (PWI, 91). But the concept of alienation, in the sense of abstraction, comes back into play in Marx’s later work on the critique of political economy, which in addition reveals the *historical origins* of the process of abstraction. In the first chapter of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx analyses the *form of the commodity* as the core of all capitalist production and shows that the process of abstraction is at the heart of the modern economy, not simply an unpleasant side effect of it. It should be borne in mind that Marx is not yet speaking here of surplus-value, or of the selling of labor-power, or of capital. He thus sees all the most highly developed forms of the capitalist economy as deriving from this primal structure of the commodity, which he compares to the “cell-form” of the body,⁸ and from the antagonisms between concrete and abstract, between quantity and quality, between production and consumption, and between the social relationship and what that relationship produces.⁹

Marx stresses the *dual character* of the commodity: aside from its utility (its use-value), it also possesses a value that determines the relationship whereby it is exchanged for other commodities (its exchange-value). The material qualities of each commodity are necessarily distinct from those of all others, so that in this sense commodities have no common measure. But at the same time all commodities have a common substance which makes them exchangeable in that each possesses a different quantity thereof. This “substance of value” is identified by Marx as the *quantity of abstract labor-time* needed to produce a particular commodity. Qua exchange-value, commodities have no specific qualities, and diverse commodities may be distinguished from one another only in a quantitative way. The value of a product is thus constituted not by the specific concrete labor that has created it but rather by *abstract labor*: “With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract.”¹⁰ Thus the qualitative character of the different forms of labor that produce different products is lost. The value of a commodity is nothing more than a “crystal” of a “substance” - of “homogeneous human labour,” which is merely “an expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.,” and the only measure of which is the *time* it takes to perform.¹¹ The time in question is always that which is needed on average to manufacture a

from the “democracy of society’s masters” characteristic of the Greek *polis* (SS §134). Within that community of free citizens, at least, the problems of society could be debated openly, and in this context the conclusion was reached that the resolution of such problems depended on the power of the community, not on that of some divinity, destiny, or holy king. The material basis of society remained nonetheless bound to cyclical time. This contradiction gave rise, over another long period, to the compromise of semihistorical religions, in other words to the monotheistic religions, for which irreversible time, in the shape of a time of waiting for final redemption, is combined with a devaluation of concrete history, deemed a mere preparation for that final event (SS §136).

The democratization of historical time was unable to progress until the moment when the bourgeois class, with the coming of the Renaissance, began to transform work itself (SS §140). In contradistinction to earlier modes of production, capitalism *accumulates*, and never returns to the same point; it is continually transforming the processes of production and above all the most fundamental of those processes, namely labor itself. Thus for the first time in history the very foundations of society were set in motion and could therefore be expected to accede to linear and historical time. At precisely the same moment, however, society as a whole lost its historicity (if by historicity we mean a sequence of qualitative events), for the new irreversible time was that of “the mass production of objects,” and hence the “*time of things*” (SS §142). The leveling out of all quality by the commodity system was also manifested in the end of all traditional freedoms and privileges, as too in the complete loss of autonomy of different places.

In cyclical societies, dependence on the blind forces of nature obliged submission to the decisions of those in power, whether these were based on real considerations, such as irrigation in the ancient Orient, or on imaginary ones, as with the seasonal rites of priest-kings (SS §132). The commodity economy presented itself as the heir of nature, and the bourgeoisie presented itself as that economy’s manager. The fact that the true basis of history was the economy, that is, a product of man, was meant to remain in the unconscious; the very possibility of a history that was conscious and lived by all had to be confined to the shadows. It is in this sense that Debord interprets Marx’s famous remark in *The Poverty of Philosophy* according to which the bourgeoisie, having taken power, felt that there once was history but “there is no longer any history” (SS §143).

Time under the rule of the commodity differs radically from time in earlier periods. It is a time all of whose moments are abstractly equivalent, varying only in a quantitative sense: such moments function, in fact, exactly like exchange-value. The importance for modern production of “exactly measurable,” spatialized time was analyzed as early as *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC, 90). Debord notes that the cyclical aspect has been reinstated in daily experience, in the temporality of consumption: “Day and night, weekly work and weekly rest, the cycle of vacations” (SS §150). In the capitalist economy, time has become a commodity that, just like all the others, has lost its use-value in favor of exchange-value. The organization of pseudo-events and the creation of seemingly interesting “units of time” have become one of society’s chief industries, as witness the marketing of vacations.³² By contrast, irreversible and historical time can only be *contemplated* in the actions of others - never experienced directly in one’s own life. “The pseudoevents that vie for attention in the spectacle’s dramatizations have not been lived by those who are thus informed about

another, or trusting to the unfolding of what appears to be a natural process, what is really required is the organization of the “practical conditions of consciousness” of proletarian action (SS §90).

History and Community as the Essence of Man

We have already noted that the existence of a subject whose activity can be reified obviously implies the existence of a “human essence” that can serve as a yardstick by which to determine what is “healthy” and what is “alienated.” When, in 1967, Lukács criticizes his own failure to distinguish in *History and Class Consciousness* between alienation and reification, he states that in reality alienation exists only when “the essence of man [comes] into conflict with his existence” (HCC, xxiv), and from this he deduces the need for a “Marxist ontology.”

Debord nowhere considers constructing an “ontology,” but this does not necessarily rule out his having any conception of a “human essence.” Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, conceives of such an essence in terms of man’s belonging to his natural species, his *Gattungswesen*. He sees human history as part of natural history, and the natural history of man is, precisely, the production of human nature, which has occurred within history: “The eye has become a *human eye*, just as its *object* has become a social, *human object*,” for “the *cultivation* of the five senses is the work of all previous history” (EW, 355, 352, 353). This humanization of nature, whereby man produces himself and becomes human himself, is understood by Marx as an organic exchange with nature and as a development of productive capabilities in the broadest sense.

In Debord, likewise, we find the conception of a human essence that is not fixed, not given, but rather identical with the historical process, understood as man’s self-creation in time: “Man... is one with time” (SS §125). To appropriate one’s own nature means first and foremost to appropriate the fact of being a historical being. In the fifth and sixth chapters of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which are the least often read, Debord offers a brief interpretation of history. He considers this historical life of man and the consciousness that he has of it to be the chief results of man’s increasing domination of nature.

So long as agricultural production predominated, life remained tied to natural cycles and took on the aspect of an eternal return; historical events, such as invasions by enemies, seemed like problems of completely external origin. Time had a purely natural and “given” quality. It began to acquire a social dimension only with the accession of the first ruling classes to power. Not only did these classes appropriate whatever material surplus their society contrived to produce but, inasmuch as they were not obliged to spend all their time working, they were also able to give themselves over to adventures and wars (SS §128). Historical time came into existence at the pinnacle of society even as, at the bottom, things remained unchanging from generation to generation (SS §132). Historical time meant a time that was irreversible, a time in which events were unique and never repeated themselves. Out of this time came a wish to remember such events and to transmit that memory; this was the earliest form of historical consciousness. For a small number of people, history was already taking on a direction, a sense, a meaning. The first attempts to understand it emerged

particular product in a given society under given working conditions; more complicated jobs have a value that is simply a multiple of that of simpler ones (i.e., of a greater quantity of simpler labor). In the seemingly trite formula “10 lb. of tea = 20 yards of linen,” Marx recognized the most general formula for all capitalist production: two concrete things take the form of something else that connects them, namely abstract labor, whose ultimate form is money.

A commodity must nevertheless always have a use-value, and answer a need, whether real or artificial. A commodity’s value always appears as a use-value, which, in the exchange process, is simply the “bearer” of exchange-value. To be realized, use-value must “become the form of appearance of its opposite, value.”¹² The process whereby the concrete becomes abstract is here understood by Marx not in an anthropological sense but as the consequence of a determinate *historical* phenomenon. The spread of the commodity is indeed a phenomenon of the modern period. The subordination of quality to quantity and of concrete to abstract is implicit in the structure of the commodity, but not all human activity is founded on exchange and hence on the commodity.

So long as different human communities, villages for instance, continue to produce what they need for themselves, restricting exchange to the role of an occasional way for dealing with surpluses, use-value will determine production. Each particular job is part of a division of tasks within the community with which it is directly associated, and it thus retains its qualitative character. This is why Marx says that the social relation here is produced *along with* material production. Relations between men may be brutal in such circumstances, but they continue to be clearly recognizable for what they are, as for instance when serfs of the glebe or slaves realize that they are relieved of part of what they produce by their masters. Only when a certain threshold is passed in the development and volume of exchange does production itself come to be defined essentially in terms of the creation of exchange-value. The use-value of each product will thenceforward reside in its exchange-value, and other use-values will be reachable only through exchange-value serving as intermediary. Labor itself becomes labor-power to be sold for the purpose of performing abstract labor. Access to use-value, which is to say access to the concrete, is possible only via the mediation of exchange-value, or, more specifically, of money.

In modern society, individuals are isolated within a production system where everyone produces according to their self-interest. The social links between such individuals are established only a posteriori, thanks to the exchange of commodities. Their concrete being or subjectivity is perforce alienated in the mediation of abstract labor, which erases all differences. The capitalist mode of production entails the extension of the characteristics of the commodity to the entirety of material production and to the entirety of social relations. Men merely exchange units of abstract labor, objectified as exchange-value, which can then be reconverted into use-value.

The value of products is created by men, but unbeknownst to them. The fact that value always appears in the shape of a use-value, of a concrete object, gives rise to the illusion that a product’s concrete characteristics are what determine its fate.¹³ Herein lies the famous “fetishism of the commodity and its secret” in discussing which Marx makes an explicit comparison to the religious illusion, where the products of human fancy appear to take on a life of their own.¹⁴ In a society where individuals encounter one another solely through

exchange, the transformation of the products of human labor and of the relations that preside over it into something apparently “natural” further implies that the whole of social life seems to be independent of human volition and that it manifests itself as a seemingly autonomous and “given” entity that is subject to no rules but its own. Indeed, in Marx’s view, such social relations do not merely *appear* but actually *are* “material [*sachlich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.”¹⁵

On those rare occasions when the Marxist tradition has addressed the issue of “commodity fetishism,” it has almost always treated it as a phenomenon strictly confined to the sphere of consciousness, that is to say, as a false idea of the “real” economic situation. But this is but one aspect of the matter. As Marx himself cautions, “the belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind’s development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour.”¹⁶ In point of fact, the concept of “fetishism” implies that the whole of human life is subordinated to the laws dictated by the nature of value and in the first place to the necessity for value to increase continually. The abstract labor embodied in commodities is utterly indifferent to whatever effects it may have on the plane of use. Its aim is purely and simply to have produced a greater quantity of value, in the form of money, by the end of its cycle than it had at the beginning.¹⁷ This means that in the dual character of the commodity it is already possible to discern capitalism’s most fundamental trait, namely, the necessity for the system to be in a permanent state of crisis. Far from being a “neutral” factor (as the Marxists of the workers’ movement tended to believe), which only becomes problematic in the context of the extraction of “surplus-value” (i.e., exploitation), value leads on the contrary to an ineluctable clash between “economic” rationality on the one hand, entailing the creation of more and more value irrespective of concrete content, and real human needs on the other. From the point of view of value, the trafficking of plutonium or contaminated blood is worth more than French agriculture. There is nothing aberrant about this: it is simply the working of the logic of value.¹⁸ Clearly value is in no sense an “economic” category; rather, it is a complete social form that itself causes the splitting of society into different sectors. Nor, therefore, is the “economy” an imperialist sector that has subjugated the other areas of society to its will, as Debord’s phrasing might at times lead one to think, for the economy is itself constituted by value.

There are in fact two competing views to be found in Marx, the one envisaging liberation *from* the economy, the other liberation by means of the economy; nor may the two be simply assigned to different phases of his thought, as some would like to do. In his critique of value, Marx thoroughly exposed the “pure form” of the society of the commodity. At the time, this critique constituted a bold piece of anticipation; only today is it able truly to apprehend the essence of social reality. Marx himself was not aware, and his Marxist successors even less aware, of the gap that existed between his critique of value and the content of the greater part of his work, in which he scrutinized the empirical forms of the capitalist society of his era. He could not have perceived how laden that era still was with precapitalist features, and consequently many of the characteristics he described were still very different from, even sometimes opposed to, what was to emerge later from the gradual victory of the commodity-form over all the relics of precapitalist times. Marx thus treated as

for-itself, not yet arrived at a consciousness of its true being, on account of its illusions and through the fault of those with an interest in manipulating those illusions. The question is not to determine what the workers *are* at present but rather what they *can become* - for only thus is it possible to grasp what in truth they *already are* (*VS*, 122; Eng., 1 r 1). Such an account is clearly very general, and a far cry from Marx’s, according to which the proletariat is the revolutionary class not just because it has the most serious reasons for dissatisfaction but also because its place in the production process, its cohesion, and its massive concentration in particular areas together give it the means to overthrow the existing order.

For Debord, the concrete form assumed by the proletariat qua identical subject-object is that of *workers’ councils*, thanks to which proletarians can first conduct the struggle and later organize a future free society. Around 1920, Lukács too sympathized with the idea of workers’ councils, having participated in the Hungarian Council Republic (or Commune) of 1919. In workers’ councils, activity in the first person is supposed to replace mere contemplation of the actions of a party or leader: “in the power of workers’ councils... the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself” (*SS* §117). Here all separation and all specialization are abolished, for revolutionary workers’ councils vest “all decision-making and executive powers in themselves” (*SS* §116). The power of such councils will “transform the totality of existing conditions,” for it aspires to “recognize itself in a world of its own design” (*SS* §179).

In the historical process, according to *The Society of the Spectacle*, subject and object are already identical *in themselves*; historical struggle is the struggle to make them coincide *for themselves*. Modern history “has no goal aside from what effects it works upon itself... As for the *subject* of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world - that is, of history” (*SS* §74). This “becoming master” must emphatically not be taken as implying that the development of the forces of production brings first the bourgeoisie and then the proletariat to power. The most serious reproach directed at Marx in *The Society of the Spectacle* is that he capitulated, “as early as the *Manifesto*,” to a linear view of history that “identifies the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.” The fact is that “the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class ever to have been victorious” and that its victory in the political sphere was a consequence of its prior victory in the sphere of material production (*SS* §86-87). Given that its economy and its state are nothing but alienations, and the negation of all conscious life, the task of the proletariat can in no sense be to seize hold of those same instruments, the result of which could only be a new enslavement like that already established in Russia and other countries. Debord joins Lukács in opposition to a purely *scientific explanation* of history: the motor of history for both authors is the class struggle, but this struggle is not a pure reflection of economic processes. Debord expresses his approval of Marx’s assertion that “it is the struggle - and by no means the law - that must be understood” (a formulation that would be equally at home in *History and Class Consciousness*); and in the same context he immediately quotes Marx and Engels’s well-known statement in *The German Ideology*: “We know only a single science, the science of history” (*SS* §31).³¹ In Debord’s view, the Marxian attempt to draw lessons with a scientific value from failed revolutions of the past merely opened the door to the later degeneration represented by working-class bureaucracies. Instead of placing itself under the leadership of one chief or

process; hence “his consciousness is the *self-consciousness of the commodity*” (HCC, 168). Thus reification is destined to be transcended precisely when it reaches its highest level: once every human element has been taken away from the life of the proletariat, that class will by the same token be able to see clearly that every “objectification” embodies a relationship between men that is mediated by things (HCC, 176). Starting from the most obvious form of reification, the relationship between wage-labor and capital, the proletariat will eventually discover all its other forms. And it will find itself unable to abandon this path until it has reconstituted the totality - that “total process... uncontaminated by any trace of reification... which allows the process-like essence to prevail *in all its purity* [and which represents] the authentic, higher reality” (HCC, 184).

Almost alone among observers in the nineteen-sixties, Debord insists that the proletariat continues to exist, and he describes it as “the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives” (SS §114). Proletarians are “people who have no possibility of altering the social space-time that society allots for their consumption” (IS 8/13; SLA, 108). Both Lukács and Debord emphasize that in modern society the *condition* of the proletarian, so long as this is not defined solely in terms of wages, is in the process of becoming the condition of the entire society. The subordination of all aspects of life to the exigencies of the commodity, to the laws of calculation and quantification, means that “the fate of the worker” - that is to say reification - “becomes the fate of society as a whole” (HCC 91). Debord for his part writes that “the triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the *proletarianization of the world*” (SS §26); thus a good portion of the work of the middle classes is now carried out under proletarian conditions (SS §114), and the proletariat is de facto larger than ever.³⁰ Even assuming that purely economic demands could be met, the spectacle can never offer a qualitatively rich life, for its very foundation is quantity and banality. The proletariat is deprived not only of material wealth but also of all the possibilities of human enrichment that it likewise creates. The spectacle excludes it by definition from access to the entire range of humanity’s products, thus prohibiting it from putting into *free play* what the economy of the spectacle uses to foster the unrelenting growth of its alienated and alienating production system. This is why the proletariat turns out to be the enemy of what exists, and the “negative at work,” regardless of any quantitative increase that might be made in the doling out of survival. In face of the totality of the spectacle, the project of the proletariat cannot but be total itself, nor can it be confined to some “redistribution of wealth” or some “democratization” of society.

The real social contradiction is therefore that between those who want, or rather those who are obliged to maintain alienation, and those who would abolish it; between those who cannot, either in thought or in action, transcend the subject-object split, and those whose thought and action tend on the contrary toward such a transcendence. The great importance assigned by the Situationists to “subjective” factors led them to place significantly more stress on the manifestations of false consciousness - on the bureaucratic character of workers’ parties, for instance. It also allowed them to play down the significance of facts that seemed to contradict their theory. It made it easy, notably, to assume that the proletariat is revolutionary in its essence, or *in itself*: if it does not demonstrate its revolutionary character in any flagrant way, even if almost all of its concrete actions have to be viewed as “reformist,” the reason can be said to be that the class has simply not yet attained its *being-*

essential traits of capitalism features that were in reality expressions of a still unfinished form of the system. Among such features, for example, was the creation of a class that had of necessity to be excluded from bourgeois society and its “benefits.” The Marxism of the workers’ movement, from social democracy to Stalinism, and including all the more or less highly elaborated variants produced by the intellectuals, retained only this side of Marx’s thought. And even if the movement often distorted it still more, it nevertheless had good reason to refer to this view of things, which was valid as applied to capitalism’s ascendant phase, when the issue was still the imposition of capitalist forms upon pre-bourgeois ones.¹⁹ The high point of this phase was the period epitomized by the names of Ford and Keynes - a time when the Marxism of the workers’ movement enjoyed its greatest triumphs. The crisis that erupted in the nineteen-sixties, by contrast, arose not as before from shortcomings of the commodity system but instead from that system’s total victory. And it was now that its most fundamental contradiction came to the fore, a contradiction grounded in the structure of the commodity itself. As we shall see, the relevance of Debord’s thought lies in his having been among the first to interpret the present situation in the light of the Marxian theory of value, whereas his shakier contentions are made at points where his thinking is still under the influence of the Marxism of the workers’ movement. One of the last voices of an old kind of social criticism, Debord was at the same time one of the first voices of a new stage.

There are two implications of the critique of commodity fetishism that Debord had the great foresight to grasp. The first is that economic exploitation is not the sole evil of capitalism, for capitalism necessarily entails the rejection of life itself in *all* its concrete manifestations. Second, none of the many variant arrangements *within* the commodity economy can ever bring about decisive change. It is therefore quite fruitless to expect any good outcome to flow from the development of the economy and an adequate distribution of its benefits. Alienation and dispossession are the very essence of the commodity economy, nor could that economy ever function on any other basis, so that whenever the economy progresses, alienation and dispossession must likewise progress. Debord made a genuine rediscovery here, for it must be remembered that “Marxism” was no more inclined than bourgeois science to practice the “*critique* of political economy”; instead it practiced political economy *tout court*, considering the abstract and quantitative sides of labor while ignoring the contradiction with its *concrete* side.²⁰ This brand of Marxism failed to see that the subordination of the whole of life to economic requirements was one of the most contemptible results of capitalist development; it treated this result instead as an ontological fact and judged that bringing it to the fore was in itself a revolutionary act.

Debord’s use of the terms “image” and “spectacle” should be understood as an extension of Marx’s idea of the commodity-form. All these concepts reduce the multiplicity of the real to a unique, abstract, and equal form. And indeed the image and the spectacle occupy the same position in Debord’s thought as the commodity and its derivatives do in Marx’s. The first sentence of *The Society of the Spectacle* is a *détournement* of the first sentence of *Capital*: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.” Likewise, Debord substitutes the word “spectacle” for the word “capital” in another sentence borrowed from Marx: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it it’s a social relationship between

people that is mediated by images” (SS §4).²¹ According to Marx, money accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into capital; according to Debord, capital accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into images (SS §34). The spectacle is the equivalent not merely of goods, as is money, but also of all possible forms of activity, the reason being, precisely, that “whatever society as a whole can be and do” has been commodified (SS §49). The “essentially tautological” character of the spectacle (SS §13) perfectly echoes the tautological and self-referential character of abstract labor, of which the only goal is to increase the mass of objectified dead labor and which in effect treats the production of use-values merely as a means of reaching that goal.²² The spectacle is conceived of by Debord as a visualization of the abstract link that exchange establishes between individuals, just as, for Marx, money was the materialization of that link. And images in their turn assume material form and exert a real influence on society: this is why Debord insists that “ideological entities have never been mere fictions” (SS §212).

Debord and Lukács

Marxian thought is thus at once a *record* and a *critique* of the reduction of all human life to value, that is to say, to the economy and its laws. Nevertheless, generations of Marx’s adversaries and followers have interpreted his testimony as an *apology* for this reduction. It must seem surprising, from their point of view, that Debord should invoke Marx and at the same time deem the economic sphere antagonistic to the totality of life. Debord, however, can legitimately lay claim to illustrious predecessors in his interpretation of Marx. One of these is Georg Lukács, who writes: “It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality” (HCC, 27). This “point of view” is for Lukács closely bound up with the rediscovery of the “fetishism of the commodity.” The return of this concept, at least as a modish term, began in the nineteen-fifties, but this should not be allowed to obscure the poor treatment it has received in general from “Marxists.” From Marx’s death until the nineteen-twenties, it fell into almost total oblivion: Engels in his last period paid it no attention, nor did Luxemburg, Lenin, or Kautsky; all founded their condemnation of capitalism on growing pauperization, on difficulties of accumulation, or on the falling rate of profit. The first to revive the “fetishism” concept in any serious way was Lukács, in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923),²³ and only after the Second World War did the notion begin to find a slightly larger following in the Marxist camp.

On its first publication, Lukács’s book created an uproar in which praise and condemnation were intermingled. In 1924, it was damned by the Third International, and a parallel anathema was issued by German social democracy. A few years later Lukács too distanced himself from his own book, which quickly became at once legendary and impossible to come by, so that few people were able to be influenced by it. But the official demise of Stalinism stimulated the search for a different kind of Marxism, and eventually, in 1957 and 1958, a few chapters of this *livre maudit* were published in the French journal *Arguments*; in 1960 a French translation of the entire work appeared over the author’s own objections. Lukács, since he manifestly could not prevent the rediscovery of his book, proceeded to authorize a new

this as a genuinely human phenomenon - the complete opposite of the alienation that confronts the subject with hypostasized abstractions that are absolutely *other*. “As Hegel showed, time is a *necessary* alienation, the medium in which the subject realizes itself while losing itself... The opposite obtains in the case of the alienation that now holds sway... This is a *spatial alienation*, whereby a society which radically severs the subject from the activity that it steals from it separates it in the first place from its own time. Social alienation, though in principle surmountable, is nevertheless the alienation that has forbidden and petrified the possibilities and risks of a *living* alienation within time” (SS §161). For Debord, as for Lukács before him, one of the fundamental modes of reification is the *spatialization of time*.²⁸ Using Hegelian terms, as he acknowledges, Debord contrasts “restless becoming in the progression of time” (i.e., “*necessary* alienation”) with a space characterized by the absence of movement (SS §170). On several occasions, Debord observed that the Situationist attitude consisted in identifying oneself with the passage of time.

Like the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, Debord was led to assume that reification clashes with a subject that is in its essence immune to it. Such a subject, even one existing here and now, must be at least in part the bearer of demands and desires different from those created by reification. What seems to be entirely absent from either *History and Class Consciousness* or *The Society of the Spectacle* is any hint that the subject might be under attack, within itself, from forces of alienation capable of conditioning its unconscious in such a way as to cause it to identify actively with the system in which it finds itself. According to the Situationists (no doubt Debord was the least naive in this regard), it would suffice for empirical subjects to reach understanding amongst themselves without intermediaries in order for them to arrive at revolutionary positions. Debord seems to conceive of the spectacle as a force exerted *from without* upon “life.” Indeed he asserts that the spectacle is the society itself and at the same time just a part of that society (SS §3). Although the spectacle tends to invade “lived reality” (SS §8), the latter remains distinct from it, even the opposite of it. There must after all be such a thing as a substantially “healthy” subject, otherwise it would make no sense to speak of the “falsification” of a subject’s activity. Inasmuch as Debord describes the subject’s world as a distorted reflection of the subject (SS §16), then it is not the subject that is alienated but that world. Yet the objective world would have no independent existence if it were merely a “faithful reflection” of its producer. We seem to be back in the presence of Lukács’s “identical subject-object.”

Debord identifies the reification-resisting subject with the *proletariat*,²⁹ just as Lukács did in *History and Class Consciousness*. Both authors locate the essence of the proletariat not in economic conditions but in its opposition to reification. For Lukács, class consciousness is not an empirical datum that may be found immediately in the class as a whole or even in each proletarian; instead it is a datum *in itself* that is assigned de jure to the proletarian class. Although reification affects all classes, the bourgeoisie is not uncomfortable with this situation for the simple reason that the rule of the commodity is also its rule. The only class with an interest in the transcendence of reification is the proletariat, because the worker always finds himself, no matter what, to be the *object* of events: inasmuch as he is obliged to sell his labor-power as a commodity, he himself is inevitably capitalism’s main commodity. At the same time, inasmuch as he is aware of being reduced to a mere object of the labor process, he may eventually realize that he is in reality the author, or subject, of that

§43). Even dissatisfaction and rebellion are liable to become cogs in the machinery of the spectacle (SS §59).

No genuine mending of splits can occur solely at the level of thought: only activity can transcend contemplation, and mankind truly knows only what it has *done*. For Lukács, proletarian theory thus has no value save as a “theory of praxis” in the process of self-transformation into a “*practical theory* that overturns the whole world” (HCC, 205). Debord likewise asserts that it is “within the historical struggle itself “ that “the theory of praxis [must be] verified by virtue of its transformation into theory-in-practice” (SS §90); with Marx, says Debord, the negation of the existing order passed from the theoretical plane to that of “revolutionary practice - the only true agent of [that] negation” (SS §84). And when Debord warns that “no *idea* could transcend the spectacle that exists - it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle” (SS §203), he is merely summing up one of the favorite themes of *Internationale Situationniste*, which was continually rebuking all proprietors of more or less exact truths for failing to test them practically.

The real philosophical pivot of *History and Class Consciousness* is the demand that the subject countenance no independent object apart from itself; in other words, Lukács’s work theorizes an identity of subject and object. This is also one of the main reasons why the later Lukács rejected his own work. In his preface of 1967, he denounced the notion of an identical subject-object as hopelessly idealist in character, since it sought to abolish all objectivity along with alienation. The conception of alienation proposed in *History and Class Consciousness* unknowingly implied an acceptance of the Hegelian identification of subject and object and failed to take into account the Marxian definition of objectification: “a natural means by which man masters the world and as such it can be either a positive or a negative fact. By contrast, alienation is a special variant of that activity which becomes operative in definite social conditions” (HCC, xxxvi). All work involves objectification, and so too does language; alienation, on the other hand, occurs only when “the essence of man [comes] into conflict with his existence” (HCC, xxiv). By identifying the two notions, *History and Class Consciousness* unintentionally defined alienation as “an eternal ‘*condition humaine*’” - a “fundamental and crude error,” according to the later Lukács, which “certainly contributed greatly” to the book’s success (ibid.), as likewise to the rise of German and French existentialism.

In point of fact, the critique of capitalist alienation and that of simple objectivity coexist in *History and Class Consciousness*, and it is very difficult to disentangle them. It is reasonable to enquire, therefore, to what extent a similar unintended confusion is to be found in Debord’s work. The need to draw a distinction between alienation and objectification was of course clearly felt well before 1967; suffice it to recall the publication in 1932 of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, where Marx argues that for Hegel alienation was identical to the objectification of the Spirit, and hence as necessary as it was transient.

Debord was in fact at pains to avoid Lukács’s “fundamental and crude error,” and he reminds us that Marx emancipated himself from “the unfolding of the Hegelian Spirit on its way to its rendezvous with itself in time, its objectification being indistinguishable from its alienation” (SS §80). Debord certainly does not define objectification as something necessarily bad; so far from rejecting the loss of the subject in the shifting objectifications which time brings, and from which that subject is liable to emerge enriched, Debord hails

German edition (1967), adding a preface that incorporated very significant self-criticism.

History and Class Consciousness attained an almost cultlike status in the nineteen-sixties, and it exerted a profound influence on Debord; clearly it supplied the initial orientation for his development of Marxian themes. Debord himself does not refer overmuch to this connection, however: his direct quotation of Lukács is confined to two sentences serving as epigraph for the second chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*; elsewhere he quotes a few lines from the young Hegel’s “The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling” that would seem to have been taken from Lukács’s book (HCC, 139). As for Lukács’s theories, Debord explicitly evokes only his conception of the party as that “mediation between theory and practice” whereby proletarians cease to be “mere ‘spectators’”; and he adds that what Lukács is really describing here is “everything that the [Bolshevik] Party was not” (SS §112).²⁴

The entire run of the journal *Internationale Situationniste* contains just one reference to Lukács, but the choice of matter quoted is characteristic: “The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science” (IS 4/31; HCC, 27). That category is indeed as central for Lukács - whose reiteration of this is one of the very few points where he continues, in his 1967 preface, to see validity in his book (HCC, xx-xxi) - as it is for Debord.

We have seen that in Debord’s view the spectacle is at once economic and ideological in nature, at once a mode of production and a type of everyday life, and so on. The Situationists deemed it necessary to pass a *global* judgment here, one that could not be dazzled by the variety of choices seemingly on offer within the spectacle; they consequently rejected all change of a partial kind. According to *The Society of the Spectacle*, the degree of alienation now imposed on them puts workers “in the position of having either to reject [their impoverishment] in its totality or do nothing at all” (SS §122). At least in its “diffuse” variant, the spectacle always appears in a variety of guises: different political tendencies, contrasting life styles, antagonistic artistic attitudes. The spectator is urged to express an opinion, or to choose one such false alternative or another, so that he never questions the whole. The Situationists stressed the necessity of rejecting existing conditions *en bloc*, in fact they made this attitude into an epistemological principle: “The only possible basis for understanding this world is to oppose it; and such opposition will be neither genuine nor realistic unless it contests the totality” (SI 7/9-10; SIA, 81).

Lukács²⁵ for his part explained that the more bourgeois thought succeeded in understanding particular “facts” about social life, the less it was able to apprehend it in its totality. This incapacity corresponded perfectly to the actual fragmentation of social activity and in particular to the growing compartmentalization of work. Bourgeois science, along with the kind of “vulgar” Marxism it influenced, so typical of the Second International, allowed itself to be misled by such alleged contradictions as that between the economic and the political spheres. Only authentic Marxism - and Lukács states explicitly that the method of authentic Marxism was derived from Hegel - was able to identify isolated facts as mere *moments* of an overarching *process*.

Bourgeois science takes the apparent independence of “things” and “facts” for the truth and strives to discover the “laws” that govern them. It looks upon economic crises or wars not as the more or less distorted outcome of human actions but rather as events

obeying their own laws. This science remains prisoner to the commodity fetishism which it is the task of a genuine critique to dispel. This is why, according to Lukács, it may legitimately be said that “the chapter [of *Capital*] dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism” (*HCC* 179) - a truly unheard-of assertion in 1923. Lukács uses the term “reification” to refer to the operation whereby fetishism transforms processes into things.

Apropos of the commodity, Lukács maintains that “at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure” (*HCC*, 83). “Our intention here,” he announces, “is to *base* ourselves on Marx’s economic analyses” (*HCC*, 84), and he sees his personal contribution as an analysis of the commodity as the “universal category” of total social being (*HCC*, 86). The transition from a society in which the commodity appears only in occasional acts of exchange to one in which commodities are produced systematically was not a purely quantitative change, as bourgeois economists like to believe. It was also a qualitative transition whereby the commodity was transformed from a simple mediation between productive processes into a central factor in a mode of production whose very character it came to determine (*HCC*, 83ff.).

Lukács lays far more emphasis than Marx on the “contemplative” aspect of capitalism. In his view, each individual is capable of recognizing no more than the tiniest portion of the world as of his own making, while the vast remainder lies beyond the range of conscious activity and may only be contemplated from afar. This is not to say that “activity” of a sort - even frenzied and harrowing activity - is impossible; the decisive fact, however, is that the worker’s function in the productive process is reduced to a passive role circumscribed by a pre-established plan that unfolds as automatically as a conveyor belt.

In contrast to other times, there is but a difference of degree in the reification undergone by the various classes of society. Whoever works must sell his labor-power as a *thing*; and in the case of the bureaucrat this sale includes brain-power. But the entrepreneur contemplating the progress of the economy or the advance of technology is likewise reified, as is the technician “faced with the state of science and the profitability of its application to technology” (*HCC*, 98). Under capitalism every individual is restricted to wresting whatever advantage he can from a system “the ‘laws’ of which he finds ‘ready-made’” (*HCC*, 98). Taking issue directly with Engels, Lukács asserts that industry and scientific experimentation are based on a contemplative attitude toward “facts” whose actual motion appears as coagulated (*HCC*, 132).²⁶ More and more, man becomes a mere passive observer or spectator (*HCC*, 90, 100, 166) of the independent movement of commodities, which to him seems like a kind of “second nature” (*HCC*, 128) - a phrase also used by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (§24). Likewise enveloped in this false consciousness is the “economistic” version of Marxism, which sees all social change as governed by economic laws.

Contemplation is obviously related to *separation*, since the subject can contemplate only that which is opposed to him inasmuch as it is separate from him. Lukács, far more than Marx, associates reification with the division of labor, a phenomenon that had made great “progress” in the half-century that had intervened between Marx’s day and the Lukács of 1923. Whereas for the medieval artisan the productive process constituted an “organic, irrational [. . .] unity” (*HCC*, 88), modern productive activities are part of an extended

calculation in accordance with which individual tasks that are in themselves meaningless are reassembled by “specialists.” Such fragmented labor is less capable than ever of producing a social bond whereby human beings can encounter one another on an individual and concrete basis.

What Debord and Lukács have in common in a specific sense is their unswerving rejection of every form of contemplation, which they see as an alienation of the subject. They both identify subject and activity, and for Debord contemplation, or “non-intervention,” is the diametrical opposite of life. “There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned” (*SS* §27).

Lukács broadens the critique of the contemplative nature of capitalist society with a stiff harangue against “the contemplative duality of subject and object” (*HCC*, 148). Pre-Hegelian philosophy looked upon the object - whether conceived in idealist fashion as a ‘thing-in-itself’ or in the manner of eighteenth-century materialism - as an entity separate from and independent of the activity of the subject. It took the Hegelian dialectic to discover that the duality is resolved in the *process*, and Marx then proceeded to identify this process with the concrete historical process that “truly eliminates the-actual-autonomy of the objects and the concepts of things with their resulting rigidity” (*HCC*, 144). Indeed “the nature of history is precisely that every definition degenerates into an illusion: *history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man*” (*HCC*, 186). Whereas science can only search for “those ‘laws’ which function in-objective reality *without the intervention of the subject*” (*HCC*, 128), thus perpetuating the split between subject and object, theory and praxis, the class struggle, by reconstituting the unity of subject and object, will thereby reconstruct the *total man*.

In the spectacle, a fragmented society is *illusorily restored to wholeness*; and Debord’s analysis of this process is the point at which he goes beyond *History and Class Consciousness*. It is instructive in this regard to compare statements by the two authors. Thus Lukács writes that “mechanization makes of them [the workers] isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly and organically; it becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them” (*HCC*, 90). And here is Debord: “The generalized separation of worker and product has spelled the end of any comprehensive view of the job done, as well as the end of direct personal communication between producers... Consistency and communication become the exclusive assets of the system’s managers” (*SS* §26). Clearly for Debord “abstract laws” are no longer a pure mediation and have been reorganized into a coherent system. In 1923, Lukács recorded the passing of all totality and implicitly adopted Max Weber’s notion of the “disenchantment of the world”; Debord similarly evokes continued global domination by “a *banalizing trend*” (*SS* §59), but he sees this as arising from a spurious reconstruction of the totality, from a *totalitarian* dictatorship of the fragmentary.

This development is particularly striking when Debord extends reification to realms beyond that of work. The young Marx found fault with political economy because it saw, not the man, but merely the worker, leaving all other aspects to be seen only by “the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc.”²⁷ In contrast, the spectacle “attends to” the whole man and appears to lavish on him, in the spheres of consumption and free time, all the attention that in reality is refused him both in the sphere of work and everywhere else (*SS*