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A reply to 'Normative History and the Communist Essence of the Proletariat' by Théorie Communiste. Originally published as 'Humain, Trop Humain?', appendix to *Quand Meurent Les Insurrections* (*When Insurrections Die*), (La Sociale, Montreal 2000), pp. 69–77. Translated by *Endnotes*.

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Human, All Too Human?

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It is for the reader to judge whether, as Théorie Communiste think, *When Insurrections Die* explains what happened by what didn't happen. We believe that in that article we set out first what proletarians actually did, and then what they weren't able or didn't want to do. "Yet no lessons but negative ones can be drawn from all these undertakings [the struggles of the German proletariat from 1919 to 1923]… The lesson learned was how not to proceed."[1] To jump back and forth between yesterday and tomorrow has its dangers, but is more illuminating than the explanation according to which every social movement ineluctably ends up where it is driven by its epoch.

> "Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation."[2]

[1] Paul Mattick, 'Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement', 1935, in Anti-Bolshevik Communism (Merlin Press, 1978).

[2] Marx, Preface, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, 1859 (MECW 29), p. 263.

So be it. It remains for us to determine these conditions, and which goal they correspond to. Otherwise we limit ourselves to demonstrating how what had to happen happened. To reconstruct two hundred years of class struggles from the knowledge which we now have of them is not without interest. But what privilege permits the observer in the year 2000 to know that his standpoint is ultimately the right one? Nothing can guarantee that in 2050, after 50 more years of capitalism, an even more broad-ranging overview won't establish for x + y reasons the ways in which the proletarians of the year 2000 (and with them TC along with G. Dauvé) remained historically constrained by the limits of their times, and thus that communism wasn't actually in the offing in the year 2000 any more than it was in 1970 or 1919, but that now a new period is ushering itself in, allowing us to genuinely grasp the past from the new, proper viewpoint. Nothing guarantees it, except the certainty of the opening of a totally different historical epoch towards the end of the 20th century. To be sure, the conviction of TC is well buttressed and argued. Despite everything, however, it is not a caricature to read a new version of the "final crisis" in this vision of a phase in which proletariat and capital are supposedly from now on face to face, enabling proletarians to call into question their own existence as class, thus posing the question of communism in all its nakedness.

More than a mere theoretical position, it is this way of situating oneself in relation to the world, this *ultimatism*, which is questionable.[3]

Capitalism will only be non-reproducible the day when proletarians cease producing it. There is no objective limit to a social system. Proletarians only give themselves tasks that they are able to and *want* to resolve.

[3]TN: Ultimatism — the confidence that one is in a position to grasp the ultimate truth.

Théorie Communiste steers clear of the conditional and subjunctive modes. However, just as one of the traits of language is projection into the future, man is also characterised by his capacity to think what could be, to reinterpret the past on the basis of the collective *choices* made by social groups, and thus to consider what could have been. History is a conjunction of possibilities and wills. Freedom consists not in being able to do anything one wants, but in wanting what one can do. Which is another way of saying "Men make their own history … but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past"[4], circumstances which they don't invent, but which it is within their power to modify.

"Will", "freedom", "Man": these are all words which disturb the theoretical rigour of TC. Unfortunately, to refuse all concepts which are exterior to capitalism is to condemn oneself to thinking nothing but capitalism. The fate of capitalism is not intelligible on the basis of capitalism alone. To reject all concepts which refer to an outside of the capital/wage-labour structure amounts to building a model that is irrefutable because it refers only to itself. What would be the use in a proletarian structuralism?

We don't postulate an irreducible, ahistorical human nature which ends up bursting the capitalist fetter.

"Underneath labour lies activity", stated an article in *La Banquise*.[5] Idealism? Everything depends on the *underneath*. It is false to conceive of capitalism as a prison from which, one glorious dawn, will emerge a virtuality which today is enclosed. That would presuppose an always already existing positivity, constrained by capital and waiting to escape.

What exists, on the contrary, neither anterior nor exterior to capital, but consubstantial with it, and as indispensable condition of its

[4] Marx, 18th Brumaire (MECW 11), p. 103.

[5] 'Sous Le Travail: l'Activité', La Banquise no. 4, 1986.

functioning, is the universal scope of living labour, from which it feeds every day.

Not in the sense in which labour is presumed as the essential characteristic of Man defined as *homo faber*.

More simply, proletarians are not bovines. A man is not put to work like an animal is. The most manual occupation demands more than mere expenditure of muscle: a grasp, an anticipation of the gesture, a *savoir-faire* not eliminated by Taylorism, an acquired skill which the worker can then transmit. This faculty includes the representation of what other workers do and are, including if they live 10,000km away. The horse can refuse the work demanded of it, kill its master, escape and finish its days free, but it cannot initiate another form of life which reorganises the life of the former master as well. Capital is only capital because it exploits not only the product of labour but that which is human: a power to work, an energy which is always collective, which capital manages but can never completely dominate, which it depends on and which can put it into crisis — or even a revolution.

Proletarianisation is not the loss of some prior existing thing, but the exploitation of a human capacity. *Alienation* is only transhistorical to the extent that capitalism recapitulates a multi-millenarian past. Something becomes *other*: this is certainly one of the characteristics of wage-labour. The latter effects a dispossession, not of an undefinable humanity, but of time constrained, energy used, acts forced by capital which is thereby valorised. What the proletarian loses every day is not a strip of some eternal nature, but a force of life, a social capacity which the beast of burden does not have at its disposal, and which is thus a reality internal to the wage relation. It's not a question of introducing a human dimension into the analysis, but of seeing that it is to be found there.

A fundamental contribution of the German-Dutch Left, and its descendents, is to have emphasised this.

terminations have become a matter of contingency, and it is this situation in itself which is posed as revolutionary."[18] However this proletarian evoked by Marx is more than an individual, as he shares (in his head and his actions) his fate with millions of others. Is he so individual, this individual who is weighed down by a historical constraint, this being who is endlessly "excluded" from production then coercively re-included, and by the same token who, because his condition doesn't enclose him in a factory, an occupation or a particular place, is able to do what the *CGT* metalworker proved himself to be incapable of: to pass from one category to another, not to think of himself one-sidedly as "worker" *or* "out of work", to manifest a certain fluidity, a freedom…

Proletarians can fight exploitation, either to merely impose some limits upon it, or to bring an end to it by producing communist social relations. How does the link between the two operate? Even the most resolved and most autonomous movement will only challenge society if it manifests the practical demand for another life, in a word if its acts contain or acquire a universal dimension. The communist revolution is precisely the moment of fusion between the struggle against exploitation and the struggle against alienation. No historical dialectic can deliver the key to this in advance.

[18]Théorie Communiste no. 14, 1997 p. 19.

> "If the worker is, even from the economic point of view, more than a machine, it is because he produces for the capitalist more than he costs him, and above all because in the course of his labour he manifests the creativity, the capacity to produce ever more and ever better, than any productive class of previous periods ever possessed. When the capitalist treats the proletariat as livestock, he learns quickly to his expense that livestock cannot fulfil the function of the worker, because the productivity of over-exploited workers decreases rapidly. This is the deep root of the contradictions of the modern system of exploitation and the historical reason of its failure, of its incapacity to stabilise itself."[6]

Socialisme ou Barbarie, like councilism, reduced the generic character which is the foundation of wage-labour to the dimension of its management. This fact, however, cannot blind us to that which these currents, which reflect the struggles for self-activity and autonomy against the bosses, bureaucracy and the State, brought to light: it is the proletariat which capitalism places in a situation of universality.

The important thing is not that proletarians produce riches (which for the most part impoverish us), but that they themselves are the ever more totalising but never total commodification of activity and life. Since the proletarian is the commodity which produces all the others, he contains them all, holds the key to his own exploitation, and in negating himself as commodified-being, can revolutionise the world of the commodity. No previous exploited class lived a similar potentiality.

In fact, even if they died from overwork, the slave, the serf, the peasant under the yoke of the *corvée* and tax, the artisan and the

[6]Socialisme ou Barbarie no. 1, 1949.

worker before the industrial revolution, were only ferociously exploited in one part of their existence, a large portion of which remained outside the control of the dominant class. The serf's vegetable garden wasn't of interest to the lord. Modern proletarians produce the totality of material life, they lose it, then they receive it back in the form of the commodity and the spectacle, and this takes the form of the global circulation of goods and labour. It's for this reason that capitalism was theorised a hundred and fifty years ago as the realisation, if not the completion, of a double tendency of the universalisation of humanity and its alienation.

Between 1830 and 1848, a minority perceived society at a limit-point: proletarians can only reappropriate the totality of the conditions of life, "not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence."[7] The announced revolution will use productive forces, but won't be a revolution of the *producers*. Technology is only valid as a flowering of individuals, with the supersession of professional capacities: "now the isolation of individuals and each person's particular way of gaining his livelihood have themselves become accidental."[8]

> "Thus, while the fugitive serfs only wished to have full scope to develop and assert those conditions of existence which were already there, and hence, in the end, only arrived at free labour, the proletarians, if they are to assert themselves as individuals, have to abolish hitherto prevailing condition of their existence (which has, moreover, been that of all society up to then), namely, labour. Thus they find themselves directly opposed to the form in which, hitherto, the individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective expression, that is, the state; in order, therefore,

[7] Marx & Engels, The German Ideology (MECW 5), p. 87.
[8] ibid. p. 88

> "...standing over against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, but who are, however, only by this fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another as individuals."[16]

> "...the communal relationship into which the individuals of a class entered, and which was determined by their common interests over against a third party, was always a community to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only insofar as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class — a relationship in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class. With the community of revolutionary proletarians, on the other hand, who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control, it is just the reverse; it is as individuals that the individuals participate in it. It is just this combination of individuals (assuming the advanced stage of modern productive forces, of course) which puts the conditions of the free development and movement of individuals under their control — conditions which were previously abandoned to chance and had won an independent existence over against the separate individuals just because of their separation as individuals, and because of the necessity of their combination."[17]

According to Théorie Communiste, "the proletarian of the young Marx is the personal individual for whom the previous social de-

[16] ibid. p. 87.
[17] ibid. p. 80.

fusal of this world and its labour by proletarians (particularly lots of young ones)? What will be done by these "masses resulting from the drastic dissolution of society, mainly of the middle estate, that form the proletariat…"

> "… By proclaiming the dissolution of the hereto existing world order, the proletariat merely proclaims the secret of its own existence, for it is in fact the dissolution of that world order. By demanding the negation of private property, the proletariat merely raises to the rank of a principle of society what society has made the principle of the proletariat, what without its own co-operation, is already incorporated in it as the negative result of society."[14]

On the basis of what he had in front of his eyes — i.e. nascent industrialisation, Marx theorised a period (to come) of dislocation of classes, which was simultaneously the effect of a profound social crisis and the conscious action of proletarians. For him, the proletariat of 1844, but also one hundred or two hundred years later, is the ensemble of categories having in common that they live only from the sale of their labour-power, whether they are in work or without it, partially employed, precarious or protected by a statute but susceptible (if not, a brother, or a daughter…) to falling into a fragile category. The proletariat exists as dissolution of classes in the sense that it is and effects this dissolution. It is both the product and the process of this dissolution, by a revolution "in which, further, the proletariat rids itself of everything that still clings to it from its previous position in society."[15] It is not a question of it forming a bloc like an army against another, but that it puts into practice the negation which it is already, going beyond individualism as well as massification.

[14]Marx, Introduction, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 1843 (MECW 3), p. 187.

[15]Marx, The German Ideology (MECW 5), p. 88.

> to assert themselves as individuals, they must overthrow the State."[9]

Beyond the glaring contradiction between an increasing production of wealth which impoverishes its producers, the more radical perceived a historic opening, through the contradiction of *labour*, "which is now the only possible but, as we see, negative form of self-activity."[10]

From the clash between artisans a new figure could emerge beyond the creator-artist and the proletarian-servant of the machine. Thanks to commodified labour, which was unattached and indifferent to its content, but collective, it became possible to envisage association, and the supersession of the wage form (still too recent to appear "natural").

The "Proletariat" is thus conceived as that which will compose another society. It already configures a kind of society, since classes dissolve themselves in it. It sucks in artisans and peasants, attracts a proportion of "intellectuals", and doesn't form a bloc or entity, but expresses a social decomposition (or a recomposition as revolutionaries hope). Proletarians experience unemployment, poverty, uprooting, the breakdown of the family, of customs, of identities, of values, and at the same time act collectively (as seen in insurrections, chartism, trade-unions, Tristan's *Union Ouvrière*, Luddism too, of which the later trade unions gave the falsified image of a brute force, spontaneous but limited). The proletariat of before 1848 is an ensemble disaggregated enough to criticise itself, but still communitarian enough to want to struggle, and by the breaking-down of barriers between worker/non-worker, artisan/labourer, manual/intellectual… accede to a free association. The organised workers' movement subsequently both took on and denied this heritage, and the communist horizon has been fixed on sociology for more than a century.

[9]ibid. p. 80

[10]ibid. p. 87

Under the weight of the epoch, Marx himself, although aiming for "a description of the characteristics of communist society"[11] considered it increasingly *on the basis of capitalism*, and by dint of criticising political economy became enclosed within it. What is the interest in scientifically "proving" exploitation, instead of exposing how exploitation exploits that which can produce communism?

It's not a case of opting for the "young" Marx against the "old" Marx, but of understanding that the "young" Marx contains the "old" Marx a lot more than the "old" Marx contains the "young" Marx. Thus the intellectual involution echoes a historical stabilisation. The perspective is impoverished in the International Workingmen's Association or the Commune when compared to that of the middle of the century, which the author of the *1844 Manuscripts* synthesised the best, but which others had also expressed.[12]

The revolution didn't occur around 1848, and it would be vain to expect that computerisation will finally render "historically necessary" in the year 2000 that which large-scale mechanised industry was supposed to achieve before 1914 or nascent automation after 1960.

What is true is that every profound reorganisation of the productive system materially impoverishes the workers, but also dispossesses them of a relative mastery over their work, and unleashes resistance and revolts, often conservative, but revolutionary perhaps. The calling into question by capitalism of the forms of wage-labour opens up a path of rupture with the wage condition. Each time, nothing guarantees that a communist movement will be able

[11] Amadeo Bordiga, 'Trajectoire et catastrophe de la forme capitaliste dans la classique et monolithique construction marxiste', Réunion de Piombino, September 1957. (French translation of the article which appeared in Il Programma Communista in 1957).

[12] cf. Alain Maillard, La Communauté des égaux (éd. Kimé, 1999).

or want to take advantage of it, but the possibility is there, which makes of the proletariat the "overthrowing class".[13]

A hypothesis: we are living in a new charnel-epoch in which capitalism is able to create poles of profit for itself, technically innovate and multiply consumer goods, create employment and/or income, calm riots, but not unify the global society of generalised labour at the very moment in which the latter becomes inessential. From the fetid cellars of Lille or Manchester in 1840 to the living-rooms of council tower-blocks where the *VCR* has pride of place, the problem remains: how to put wage-earners to work if they are profitable, and what to do with them when they are not? At one extreme, in China, 100 million uprooted ex-rurals which the capitalist city won't be able to integrate. At the other end of the chain, in Seine-Saint-Denis (*TN*: Parisian suburb): school until 22 years old; training schemes; insignificant, precarious jobs; benefits. Between the two, the United States. For Emmanuel Todd (*L'illusion économique*), "the biggest success of the American system of production is anti-economic". The question isn't whether there is no way out of the situation for capital, but whether it reopens a way out for the proletariat as a class not of workers, but of the *critique of work*.

The limit of capital is that it is unable to do without labour, which it indeed generalises, making millions of beings enter into wage labour, at the same time as it reduces labour to a negligible role. To remedy this, thinkers such as Andre Gorz propose the delinking of money from labour, in order to accord to everybody a share in consumption, whether they have participated in production or not. Such a society is impossible: even if it were ten times more automated, our world would still rest upon labour. Proletarians will remain the necessary evil of capitalism.

A question: is it possible to pass from the moment where capital refuses many proletarians (in particular young ones) to the re-

[13] Marx, The German Ideology (MECW 5), p. 53.