Love of Labour? Love of Labour Lost…

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A historical failure: 154 years after Marx's and Engels' *Manifesto*, that could be a blunt but not too unfair summary of the communist movement.

One interpretation of such a miscarriage centres on the importance or prevalence given to work. From the 1960s onwards, a more and more visible resistance to work, sometimes to the point of open rebellion, has led quite a few revolutionaries to revisit the past from the point of view of the acceptance or rejection of work. Former social movements are said to have failed because the labourers tried to have labour rule society, i.e. tried to liberate themselves by using the very medium of their enslavement: work. In contrast, true emancipation would be based on the refusal of work, seen as the only effective subversion of bourgeois and bureaucratic domination alike. Only work refusal would have a universal dimension able to transcend quantitative claims, and to put forward a qualitative demand for an altogether different life.

The Situationists were among the most articulate proponents of this view: "Never work!"[1] Later, in Italy particularly, a number of formal and informal groups, often called *autonomous*, attempted to develop and systematise spontaneous anti-work activities.[2]

The refusal of work has become the underlying theme of many a theory on past and present struggles. Defeats are explained by the acceptance of work, partial successes by active shop-floor insubordination, and a revolution to come is equated with a complete rejection of work. According to this analysis, in the past, workers shared the cult of production. Now they can free themselves of the delusion of work, because capitalism is depriving it of interest or human content, while making hundreds of millions of people jobless.

In Germany, Krisis recently gave an excellent illustration of the transformation of the anti-work stand into the philosopher's stone of revolution.[3]

But since the 70s, mainly in France, the role of work has also been reinterpreted in a different light: up to now the labouring classes have only tried to assert themselves as the class of labour and to socialise work, not to do away with it, *because* up to now capitalist development prevented communist prospects from emerging. Whatever the proletarians (or radical minorities) may have thought, they were fighting for a capitalism without capitalists, for a worker led capitalism. A real critique of work was impossible in the 60s-70s, and the '68 period is analysed as the last possible effort of labour to pose itself as the dominant pole *within* the capital/wage labour couple. Now things are completely different, because a restructured capital no longer leaves any scope for a workers' capitalism. *Théorie Communiste* has been the main exponent of this perspective.[4]

We're not lumping together people as different from each other as the SI and *Théorie Communiste*. We're only dealing with one important point they have in common: the belief that asserting the importance of labour was a

major obstacle to revolution, and that this obstacle has been removed more by capitalist development than by the proletarians themselves. It seems to us that these views are false in regard to the facts, and even more so in regard to the method, the attitude in relation to the world to be transformed. However, their defenders clearly uphold revolution as communisation, destruction of the State and abolition of classes. So this essay will be less of a refutation than an attempt to think twice about work.

Before 1914

A profusion of data shows that for centuries the workers used their professional ability and dignity as justifications for what they regarded as their due. They acted as if their right to a fair wage (and to fair prices, in the "moral economy" described by E.P. Thompson) derived from their toil and competence.

But, if they claimed and rebelled *in the name of* work, were they fighting *for* a world where they would take their masters' place? Answering the question implies distinguishing between workers' practice and workers' ideology.

Old time social movements are depicted as endeavours to achieve a utopia where labour would be king. This certainly was one of their dimensions, but not the only one, nor the one that gave coherence to all the others. Otherwise, how do we account for the frequent demand to work *less*? In 1539, in Lyons, printing workers went on a four months strike for shorter hours and longer public holidays. In the 18th century, French paper-makers used to take "illegal" holidays. Marx mentions how English bourgeois were shocked by workers who, chose to work (and earn) less, by only coming to the factory four days a week instead of six.

"To live as a worker, or die as a fighter." The famous Lyons silk-workers' motto of the 1830s of course signifies a claim for work, but less for work as a positive reality than as a means of resisting deteriorating pay. The 1834 silk-workers' insurrection was not prompted by machines that would have deprived them of their jobs — the machines were already there. The workers actually fought the power of the merchants who allocated work at their own discretion and paid very little. When the silk-worker spoke highly of the quality of his silk, he was not talking like a medieval master craftsman — his *life* was the subject-matter.

In June 1848, it is true that the closure of the National Workshops by the government led to the Paris insurrection. But these workshops were no social model, only a means to keep the jobless busy. The actual work done was socially unprofitable, and of no interest to the recipients. The insurgents rose to survive, not to defend a guaranteed nationalised or socialised form of work that they would have regarded as an embryo of socialism.

At the time, many strikes and riots took place against mechanization. They expressed the resistance of craftsmen anxious to save the (real and imagined) rich human content of their skills, but equally they tried to curb further exploitation. When Rouen textile workers managed to prevent more efficient machinery being installed, they were not fighting *for* a trade, they were putting a (temporary) stop to worsening living conditions. Meanwhile, other Normandy textile hands were asking for a 10-hour day, and construction workers for the end of overtime, which they regarded as a cause of accidents and unemployment.

As for the Paris Commune, when it took over a few firms, imposed a wage rate or forced owners to re-open the plants, its main purpose was to provide these wage-earners with an income. Taking charge of production was no priority for the Communards.

This short survey of the 19th century points to a juxtaposition of struggles. Some could be labelled *modern*. In that they aimed at higher wages and sometimes rejected work (in a nutshell, less working hours and more pay). Others aimed through producer and consumer cooperatives at a working class take over of industrialisation by which the working classes would put an end to capital and become a sort of total capital. *Association* was then a keyword that summed up the ambiguity of the time: it conveyed the ideas both of mercantile links and of fraternal unity. Many workers hoped that co-ops would be more competitive than private business, would

eliminate capitalists from the market and from their social function, and maybe force them to join the associated workers. United labour would have beaten the bourgeois at their own game.

1848 tolled the death knell of the utopia of a wage-labour capital, of a working class that would become the ruling class and then the unique or *universal* class through the absorption of capital in associated labour. From then on, via a growing union movement, the workers will only be concerned with *their* share of the wage system, they won't try to compete with the monopoly of capital owned by the bourgeoisie, but to constitute themselves as a monopoly of labour power. The programme of a popular capitalism was on the wane. At the same time, the ruling classes gave up any attempt at the "different" capitalism imagined and sometimes practised by innovative and generous industrialists like Owen. At both ends of the wage system, capital and labour knew their place.

This explains the paradox of a social movement that was so keen on separating labour from capital, but which finally created so few producers' cooperatives. The ones that existed were born out of the will of enlightened bourgeois, or, if they had a worker origin, soon turned into business as usual.

The Albi Workers' Glassworks in the south of France illustrates this tendency. The highly skilled glass workers, still organised on a pre-1789 guild model, had kept their control over apprenticeship. It took 15 years to be a fully-fledged glass-blower. Those labour aristocrats were paid twice as much as miners. In 1891, a strike of several months against the introduction of new technology only resulted in the creation of a union, which the management then tried to smash, thereby provoking another strike. The bosses locked-out and refused to reintegrate the most militant strikers. Out of this deadlock rose the idea of a co-op. This came into existence in 1892, after a national subscription with some bourgeois help, and the labour force contributing by investing 50% of their wages (and 5% more in 1912). To be profitable, a cooperative had to combine high skills and income, popular support and outside financing. Self-management soon lost any reality. The plant went through a series of industrial disputes *directly* against the *CGT*, which stood in the dual position of the single union and the boss (it was the biggest shareholder): a several months' strike in 1912, 4 months in 1921, stoppages for 7 months in 1924, and so on. The co-op still existed in 1968.

Since the mid-19th century, cooperatives have lost their social impetus and all ambition for historical change. When today the Welsh miners of Towers Colliery buy out a workplace that the owners wanted to get rid of, and then manage it collectively, even those who support and praise them do not consider their market and human success as a solution that could be generalised.

Russia: 1917–21

Between February and October 1917, "workers' control" did little to restart production.5 Later, though they were stimulated by a political power that owed to them its existence and strength, the proletarians hardly manifested any productive enthusiasm. They often lacked respect for what was supposed to be theirs: Victor Serge recalls how Petrograd workers would take machines apart and cut the belts to make slippers or soles that they sold on the market.

Lenin's party did not get to (and stay in) power through bureaucratic intrigues. It was built on proletarian struggles. But, for lack of social change, the Bolsheviks who'd become the new State remained at its head like any power does, promising a lot, promoting some and repressing others. The mass of the workers, who initially had not been able or willing to run the factories in their own interests, were faced with new bosses who told them they now worked for themselves and for world socialism. They reacted as they usually do, by individual and collective resistance, active and passive. Even before 1921 and Kronstadt, some strikes, at the famous workers' bastion of the huge Putilov plant for instance, were suppressed in a bloodbath (as documented in the now available Cheka archives).

The inversion we are describing did not take place in a month or a year. A contradictory process, it allowed for the coexistence (often in the same person) of a revolutionary dynamic and a crystalisation of power looking to

maintain itself at any price. The historical tragedy was that one part of the working class, organised in a party and in State power, forced the other part to work for a revolution… that by this very situation ceased to exist. That contradiction was perceived at once by the anarchists, soon by the German-Dutch Communist Left, and much later — if ever — by the Italian Left. In any case, it surely closed the door on any workers' capitalism.

The recurrent opposition to the Bolshevik majority – the Left Communists, the Makhnovchina (which included industrial collectives), the Workers' Opposition, the Workers' Group – was an expression of that impossibility. It's no accident the debate on who should run the factories reached its climax in 1920, at the backward surge of the revolutionary wave. Then everything had been said and done, and the split between the masses and the party was complete: but it was only a negative split, as the proletarians didn't come up with an alternative to Bolshevik policy. If Miasnikov's Workers' Group was a small but genuine emanation of the rank and file, Kollontai's Workers' Opposition was the unions' voice — one bureaucracy against another.

But the party had the merit of coherence. As early as 1917, Lozovsky stated: "The workers must not figure the factories belong to them." Still, at that time, the decree on workers' control expressed a balance of power — shop-floor militancy maintained some collective rank and file management, directly or through union channels. But the leaders had made no secret of their objectives. Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* defined man as a "lazy animal" that must be forced to work. For the Bolsheviks, workers' control only served to curb bourgeois power, help wage-earners to discipline themselves, and teach management to a handful of future executives.

The oppositions' platforms (even the radical one by the Miasnikov group) might appear as an attempt to assert the value of work and socialise it, but after 1920 with a world balance of power that was unfavourable to wage labour such an attempt was even less feasible. Those proletarian expropriations and re-organisations of production that took place were emergency measures. It would have been impossible to turn these partial spontaneous efforts into something systematic, and the proletarians did not bother to. Labour kept away from the programmes that wished to make it (and not the Bolshevik party) the real ruler.

In 1921, the toiling masses stood outside such a debate. The Workers' Opposition's proposals, like those of Lenin's and Trotsky's, dealt with the best way to put people to work in a society the workers had lost control of. The Russian proletarians weren't keen to discuss the ways and means of their own exploitation. The debate that ensued did not oppose socialisation of labour unbound, to labour under constraint, it was about a rearrangement of power at the top.

The Russian revolutionary crisis shows that as long as capital reigns, labour can't be liberated and must be imposed upon the wage-earners, and that its persistence in one form or another is an unmistakable sign of a failed revolution. In 1917-21, the alternative was between abolishing wage labour or perpetuating exploitation, with no possible third option.

Russia was to experience the charms of material incentives, elite workers, hard and forced labour camps, and "communist Sundays". But let's not turn history upside down. The Russian proles did not fail because of a misguided belief in the myth of liberation through work: it's their failure that gave a free rein to an unprecedented glorification of work. Who truly believed in a "communist Sunday", except those who could expect some symbolic or material reward out of it? Stakhanovism was to be the ultimate argument in that debate, and caused quite a few reactions, including the murder of some elite workers by their mates. As for Alexei Stakhanov, he died more addicted to vodka than to coal.

Italy: 1920

Reading Gramsci and the *Ordine Nuovo* on the Italian workers that took over the factories in 1920 is like going through the impressive yet contradictory saga of a movement that was both formidable and tame. Violent means (including the use of guns to guard the plants) mixed with a definite moderation in the actual demands. The Fiat proletarian is described thus: "intelligent, human, proud of his professional dignity"; "he doesn't bow before the boss"; "He is the socialist worker, the protagonist of a new mankind…"; "The Italian workers…

have never opposed the innovations that bring about lower costs, work rationalisation and the introduction of a more sophisticated automatism". (Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli*)

At the metalworkers' union conference (November, 1919), Tasca, one of the editors of *Ordine Nuovo*, called for the shop stewards to study, *the bourgeois system of production and work processes to achieve the maximum technical capacities necessary to manage the factory in a communist society*. One last quote from *Ordine Nuovo* in September 1920: "The workers wish … to prove that they can do without the boss. Today the working class is moving forward with discipline and obeying its organisation. Tomorrow, in a system that it will have created itself, it will achieve everything."

Reality proved different. The workers showed no desire to increase the quantity or quality of work. The absence of significant production during the occupation movement reveals the weakness of the ideology of a producer proud of his labour, and the impossibility of liberated and socialised work. Buozzi, general secretary of the Metalworkers' union, admitted it: "Everyone knew that the workers interrupted work on the most futile pretext." In a week, between August 21st and 28th, 1920, the 15,000 workers of Fiat-Centre decreased production by 60%.

At Fiat-Rome, a banner proclaimed: "The man who will not work shall not eat" (a statement borrowed from Saint-Paul). Other banners at Fiat-Centre repeated: "Work elevates man". Yet the succession of stoppages at Fiat-Brevetti led the workers' council to force the personnel back to work, and to create a "workers' prison" to deal with theft and laziness. Because of "the extravagant number of people taking days off", Fiat's central council threatened to fire all those who'd been away for more than two days.

Caught up between the desire of union and party activists to reorganise work in a socialist manner, and their own reluctance to work, the workers had not hesitated long.

No Right to be Lazy

Let's rewind the course of history a little. We'd be mistaken to think no-one cared about a theoretical critique of work before the 1960s. In the 1840s, Marx and others (Stirner for example) defined communism as the abolition of classes, of the State *and of work*.[6]

Later, in his *Right to be Lazy* (1880), Lafargue was thinking ahead of his time when he attacked the 1848 "Right to Work": work degrades, he says, and industrial civilisation is inferior to so-called primitive societies. A "strange folly " pushed the modern masses into a life of work. But Marx's son-in-law also belonged to his time because he partook of the myth of technical liberation: "the machine is the redeemer of mankind". He did not advocate the suppression of work, but its reduction to 3 hours daily. Though pressing a few buttons is usually less destructive than sweating from morning till night, it does not put an end to the *separation* between the productive act and the *rest of life*. (It's this separation which defines work. It was unknown in primitive communities, uncommon or incomplete in the pre-industrial world, and it took centuries to turn it into a habit and norm in Western Europe.) Lafargue's provocative insight was a critique of work within work. Interestingly, this pamphlet (with the *Manifesto*) long remained among the most popular classics of the *SFIO*, the old French socialist party. *The Right to be Lazy* helped present work as a boon and an evil, as a blessing and a curse, but in any case as an inescapable reality, as unavoidable as *the economy*.

The labour movement wished (in opposing ways, of course, according to its organisations being reformist or revolutionary) the workers to prove their ability to manage the economy and the whole society. But there's a discrepancy between these sets of ideas and the behaviour of wage-earners who did their best to get away from the "implacable imposition of work" (point 8 of the *KAPD* programme). That phrase isn't trivial. It's significant it should come from the *KAPD*, a party whose programme included the generalisation of grassroots workers' democracy, but came up against the reality of work and its role in a socialist society. The *KAPD* did not deny the alienation inherent to work, *yet* wanted it imposed on everyone for a transition period to develop the bases of communism to come. That contradiction calls for an explanation.

Workers' Management as a Utopia of Skilled Labour

The aspiration to set up the workers as the ruling class and to build a workers' world was at its highest in the heyday of the labour movement, when the Second and Third Internationals were more than big parties and unions: they were a way of life, a counter-society. That aspiration was carried by *Marxism* as well as by *anarchism* (particularly in its revolutionary syndicalist form). It coincided with the growth of large scale industry (as opposed to manufacture earlier, and Scientific Management later).7

"Let the miners run the mine, the workers run the factory…" — this only makes sense when the people involved can identify with what they do, and when they collectively produce what they are. Although railwaymen do not manufacture train engines, they are entitled to say: *We* run the railway lines, *we* are the railway system. This was not the case of the craftsmen pushed together in the manufacture: they could dream of an industrialisation that would turn its back on the big factory and return to the small workshop, and to a private independent property freed of money fetters (for example, thanks to free credit *à la* Proudhon, or to Louis Blanc's People's Bank).

In contrast, for the skilled electricity or metal worker, for the miner, railwayman or docker, there was no going back. His Golden Age was not to be found in the past, but in a future based on giant factories… without bosses. His experience in a relatively autonomous work team made it logical for him to think he could collectively manage the factory, and on the same model the whole society, which was conceived of as an inter-connection of firms that had to be democratically re — unified to do away with bourgeois anarchy. The workers perform tasks that the boss merely organises — so the boss could be dispensed with. Workers' or "industrial" democracy was an extension of a community (both myth and reality) that existed in the union meeting, in the strike, in the workers' district, in the pub or the café, in a specific language, and in a powerful network of institutions that shaped working class life from the aftermath of the Paris Commune to the 1950s or 60s.

This was no longer the case for the industrial or service sector unskilled worker. One cannot envisage managing a labour process that has been as fragmented inside the plant as between geographically separate production units. When a car or a toothbrush comprises components from two or three continents, no collective worker is able to regard it as his own. Totality is split. Work loses its unity. Workers are no longer unified by the content of tasks, nor by the globality of production. One can only wish to (self-)manage what one masters.

Taylorised workers (like those in the *US* in the 1930s) did not form councils. The collective organ of struggle was not at the same time a potential collective management organ. The strike and occupation committee was only an aggregate instrument of solidarity, and provided the leadership of that *specific* movement: it was not a body that would represent or incarnate labour for *other* tasks (particularly the running of the firm). The Taylorised workplace leaves little room for managerial aspirations.

It's interesting to observe that after 1945, workers' councils re-emerged in State capitalist countries that remained mainly in the large scale mechanised industry stage, and were hardly penetrated by Scientific Management: East Germany, 1953; Poland, 1955 and 1971; Hungary, 1956; Czechoslovakia, 1968.

"The future world must be a workers' world", as a Chinese communist put it around 1920. This was the dreamland of skilled labour. However, after 1914–18, even where in Europe the movement was at its most radical, in Germany, where a sizeable minority attacked unions and parliamentary democracy, and where groups like the *KAPD* would implement a *workers*' programme, there were hardly any attempts to take over production in order to manage it. Whatever plans they may have nurtured, in practice neither the Essen and Berlin workers nor those in Turin put work at the centre of society, even of a socialist one. Factories were used as strongholds in which the proletarians would entrench themselves, not as levers of social reorganisation. Even in Italy, the plant was not a bastion to be defended at all costs. Many Turin workers would occupy their workplace in the daytime, leave at night and come back in the morning. (Such behaviour will re-occur in Italy's Hot Autumn, 1969.) This is no sign of extreme radicality. Those proletarians abstained from changing the world as much as from promoting work, and "only" snatched from capital what they could get. That

unformulated refusal of work contrasted with thousands of pro-work posters and speeches. It just showed that these proletarians weren't totally caught in the framework where they'd been trapped, and where they'd trapped themselves.

France: June 19368

Much has been written about the transformation of factories into closed-in workers' fortresses. But the June '36 sit-downs never aimed to re-start production. Their objective was less to *protect* the machinery (which no saboteur threatened) than to use it to put pressure on the boss and to have a good time. The conscious festive dimension was far more important than an alleged will to prove productive abilities superior to those of the bourgeois. Very few even contemplated worker management of the occupied plants. A harsh and alienating place was turned into liberated space, if only for a few weeks. It certainly was no revolution, nor its dawning, but a transgression, a place and time to enjoy a somewhat illegal yet fully legitimate holiday, while winning substantial reforms. The striker was proud to show his family round the premises, but his long collective meals, his dancing and singing signalled his joy *not* to be at work. As in the *US* a little later, the sit-down was a re-appropriation of the present, a (short) capture of time for oneself.

The vast majority of the strikers understood the situation better than Trotsky ("The French revolution has begun") or Marceau Pivert ("Everything's possible now").9 They realised that 1936 did not herald social upheaval, and they were neither ready nor willing to make it happen. They grabbed what they could, especially in terms of labour time: the 40-hour week and paid holiday stand as symbols of that period. They also preserved the possibility of selling their labour power to capital as it existed, not to a collective capitalism that would have been run by the labour movement. The *CGT* kept a low profile on a possible new society based on socialised work. June '36 had a more humble and more realistic purpose — to enable the worker to sell himself without being treated as an animated thing. This was also the period when recreational and educational activities organised for and sometimes by the masses became popular: culture brought to the factories, "quality" theatre for the common people, youth hostels, etc.

Resistance to work went on for a long while after the sit-downs, in a more and more hostile environment. Bosses and Popular Front spokesmen kept insisting on a "pause" in demands, and on the necessity to rearm France. But the proletarians took advantage of the slackening of the military style factory discipline that had been enforced since the 1929 crash. In the Spring of 1936, they'd got into the habit of coming in late, leaving early, not coming at all, slowing down work and disobeying orders. Some would walk in drunk. Many refused piece rates. At Renault, stoppages and go-slows resulted in a productivity that was lower in 1938 than two years before. In the aircraft industry, piece rates were virtually abandoned. That trend did not prevail only in big factories, but also in construction work and plumbing. It's after the failure of the November '38 general strike (which aimed to defend the 40 hour week), and after the government had called in the police and army to intimidate and beat up strikers (Paris lived in an undeclared state of siege for 24 hours) that discipline was restored and working hours greatly extended, with a resulting increase in production and productivity. The centre-right leader Daladier (formerly one of the leaders of the Popular Front) rightly boasted he was "putting France back to work".

Spain: 193610

Apart from farming estates, many companies were collectivised and production re-started by the personnel. This was often because the boss had fled, but sometimes to "punish" one who'd stayed but sabotaged production to harm the Popular Front. That period gave birth to a multitude of meaningful experiences, like waiters refusing tips on the basis that they weren't servants. Other endeavours tried to suppress money circulation and develop non-mercantile relationships between production and between people.

Another future was in search of itself, and it carried with it the superseding of work as a separate activity. The main objective was to organise social life without the ruling classes, or "outside" them. The Spanish proletarians, in the factories as well as in the fields, did not aim at developing production, but at living free.

They weren't liberating production from bourgeois fetters, they were more plainly doing their best to liberate themselves from bourgeois domination.11

In practice, the democratic management of the company usually meant its union management by *CNT* and *UGT* (the socialist union) activists or officials. It's they who described self-governance of production as the road to socialism, but it does not seem that the rank and file identified itself with such a prospect.

Loathing work had long been a permanent feature of Spanish working class life. It continued under the Popular Front. This resistance was in contradiction with the programme (particularly upheld by the anarcho-syndicalists) calling the proles to get fully involved in the running of the workplace. The workers showed little interest in factory meetings which discussed the organising of production. Some collectivised companies had to change the meeting day from Sunday (when nobody cared to turn up) to Thursday. Workers also rejected piece rates, neglected working schedules, or deserted the place. When piecework was legally abolished, productivity fell. In February 1937, the *CNT* metalworkers' union regretted that too many workers took advantage of industrial injuries. In November, some railwaymen refused to come on Saturday afternoon.

Union officials, trying to bridge the gap between government and shop-floor, retaliated by reintroducing piece rates and keeping a careful eye on working hours, in order to fight absenteeism and theft. Some went as far as forbidding singing at work. Unauthorized leaving of one's work station could lead to a 3-day dismissal, with a 3 to 5 day wage cut. To get rid of the *immorality* adverse to maximum efficiency, the *CNT* suggested closing bars, concert and dance halls at 10 p.m. There was talk of putting prostitutes back on the straight and narrow path thanks to the therapy of work. Laziness was stigmatised as individualistic, bourgeois and (needless to say) fascist. In January 1938, the *CNT* daily, *Solidaridad Obrera*, published an article — 'We Impose Strict Discipline in the Workplace' — that was to be reproduced several times in the *CNT* and *UGT* press, pressing the workers not to behave as they used to, i.e. not to sabotage production, and not to work as little as possible. "Now everything (was) completely different" because industry was laying "the foundations of a communist society".

With the exception of the anarchist rank and file (and dissidents like the Friends of Durruti) and the *POUM*, the parties and unions who stood for a reign of labour were the same who did everything to prevent that ideology from becoming a reality, and to make work remain nothing but work. In 1937, the debate was over, and the contradiction soon brought to a close — by force.

France: 1945

As early as 1944, a number of French companies went under union control, sometimes under union management, as in the Berliet heavy vehicle plant. Throughout the country, several hundred factories were supervised by workers' committees. With assistance from the administrative staff, they took care of production, pay, canteens and some social benefits, and asked for a say over hiring and firing. As a *CGT* official declared in 1944: "The workers are human beings, they want to know who they're working for… The worker must feel at home in the factory … and through the union get involved in the management of the economy".

But the haze of self-management assertions could not cloud a capitalist functioning that soon reappeared in its down-to-earth banality. Let's just take the example of the miner. Much has been made of his pride and his eagerness to mine coal. We've seen newsreels of Thorez (the *CP* leader) exhorting thousands of miners in their work clothes to do what he called their class and national duty — to produce… and produce more and more.

There's no point in denying the miner's pride, but we have to assess its scope and limits. Every social group develops an image of itself and feels proud of what it does and of what it thinks it is. The colliers' self-esteem was socially conditioned. The official Miner's Status (which dates back to that period) granted quite a few advantages, like free medical care and heating, but also put the mining areas under a paternalistic supervision. The *CGT* controlled labour and daily life. Being regarded as a loafer was close to being treated as a saboteur, or

even as a pro-Nazi. It was up to the foreman to decide how much coal was to be mined. Piecework ruled. To put it mildly, what productive eagerness there was lacked spontaneity.

Real miners' pride had more to do with the community of labour (festivals, rituals, solidarity…) than with the content of work, and even less with its alleged purpose (to produce for the renaissance of France). In the 30s and 40s, the diary of a radical miner like Constant Malva never mentions the beauty or the greatness of his craft. To him, work was work and nothing else.12

Productivist practices and speeches also filled a gap. Everyone, including the common man, claimed to be a patriot and accused the bourgeoisie as a whole of collaboration with the Germans. Coal was also the prime energy source, and a precious one in a devastated economy. Let's add a direct political cause to this near fusion between patriotism and productivism: it helped people forget the support given to the Hitler-Stalin pact by the French *CP*, its denunciation of the war in 1939-41 as "imperialist", and its late involvement in the anti-German Resistance.

Putting the proletarians back to work meant reintegrating them into the national community, and punishing those bosses who'd been overtly collaborationist. This is why Renault was nationalised in 1945.

Branding the bourgeoisie as anti-labour and un-French was one and the same thing, and it went along with self-managerial appearances. But this was all the more possible because in France the *CP* did not really aspire to power. Wherever it did (in Eastern Europe for instance), it did not bother with such slogans. In fact, the average French (or Italian, or American…) Stalinist was convinced that socialist countries did their best for the welfare of the masses, but certainly not that the Russian or Polish workers ran the factories – everything for the people's good, nothing by the people themselves…

The whole post-war story looks like a shadow theatre. No more than the bosses, did unions and workers' parties ever try to promote labour as a class, or develop a wage-earners' democracy (even a superficial one) inside the firms. After the troubled 1920s, after the persistent rejection of work of the 1930s, the prime objective was now to force the proletarians into reconstructing the economy. The workers were too preoccupied with bread and butter demands to put their minds and energy into a "reign of labour" nobody really cared for, nor sought to establish. The 1947-48 strikes offer an excellent illustration of this: they proved the ability of the French *CP* (and of its Italian neighbour) to recuperate and streamline the class struggle potentials it had been repressing since the end of the war.

Italy: 1945

As early as 1942, Italy was shaken by a strike wave that culminated in the April 25, 1943 insurrection that drove the Germans out of Turin after five days of street fighting. A national union of all parties was set up, dominated by the Stalinists (at Fiat-Mirafiori, 7,000 workers out of 17,000 belonged to the *CP*). Economic recovery was given top priority. In September 1945, the Metalworkers' union stated that "the toiling masses are willing to accept more sacrifices [lower wages, transfers, firing of those who have other incomes, partial redundancy] so that Italy can be born again … We must increase production and develop labour: there lies the unique road to salvation."

In December, the National Liberation Committees turned into Company Management Committees, or rather they took over those bodies created under Mussolini's corporatism. The main role of every *CMC* was to help put people back to work and enhance hierarchy. Its method was a mixture of Taylorism and Stakhanovism: youth brigades, volunteers' groups, material incentives, bonuses for cleaning and maintaining machines… The idea was to arouse "the enthusiasm of the working classes for the productive effort".

Reality stood in stark contrast to propaganda. The struggle for better work conditions remained strong, and enthusiasm for production quite low. A *CMC* official admitted that the party had to resort to much persuasion because people took a nap in the afternoon. According to a Mirafiori shop steward, the union activists were

labelled “fascists” when they tried to convince the workers that it was their duty as comrades to work: “they interpreted freedom as the right to do nothing”. The workers would come in at 8.30 in the morning and have breakfast. An ex-partisan then employed at Mirafiori sadly told how the workers misused their own freedom, how they loitered in the toilets. They weren’t suitable material for building socialism, he regretted, they went on strike to play games — “we were more serious”. The personnel kept resisting anything that came close to a control over time, to the reintroduction of material incentives. On factory walls, writings like “Down with timing” were a rejection of the pro-Taylor quotes by Lenin which the Stalinists were most fond of.

If the *CMC*s eventually proved relatively efficient in restoring discipline and hierarchy, they failed to raise productivity: in 1946, it only increased by 10%, which wasn’t much, owing to its low level at the end of the war. Above all, they failed to create a “new” proletarian — the one that would manage his own exploitation. The *CMC*s composed only of workers never got off the ground. The proles had more trust in their direct delegates, the shop-floor commissars, who were more inclined to go on strike than to produce.

This multiform unrest went on until 1948, which was the last outburst against a worsening repression and deteriorating living conditions. A partial wage freeze was imposed in April 1947, and maintained until 1954. For about 15 years, the Fiat workers underwent unrestrained exploitation and were nearly deprived of union protection. In other words, in 1944-47, the Italian proletarians were not defeated because they had tried to establish a domination of labour over capital while remaining within capital. They got crushed by the bourgeoisie in a more conventional way — with the help of union and party bureaucracies.

France and Elsewhere: 1968

This time, the festive element that characterised the June 36 sit-downs was fairly absent in France, but quite widespread in Italy. In many French factories dominated by the *CGT*, the place was practically locked up, for fear restless workers and “outsiders” would upset the orderly running of the strike by the union. ’68 was in many respects harsher than ’36, as a small but determined proletarian minority challenged the hegemony of the Stalinists over the industrial workers.

The festive dimension moved from the factory to the street, which indicated that demands were breaking the workplace barrier and that the heart of the matter was encompassing the whole of daily life. In France, the most radical wage-earners would often leave the factory. There was no Chinese Wall between “workers” and “students” (a lot of whom were not students at all). Many workers, often young ones, would share their time between their work mates inside the factory, and discussion (and sometimes action) groups outside, where they met with minority workers from other factories.13 Moreover, during the Italian Hot Autumn of 69, it was quite common for workers to occupy the premises in the daytime, leave at night and be back the following morning, even after they’d been violently fighting the police and company guards to occupy the plant. They felt that the essential was not happening just within the confines of the workplace. As passive reaction (absenteeism) turned active (collective sabotage, permanent meeting and wild partying on the assembly line, etc.), it burst outside the factory walls.

The aftermath of ‘68 brought forth an experience that set itself up (and that many people accepted) as exemplary, but which remained on the fringe of the movement: in 1973, *LIP*, a watchmaker company that went bankrupt, was taken over by the personnel and became a symbol of self-managed capitalism. But its principles (“We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves”) were little more than an ingenious yet desperate attempt to avoid unemployment and to continue to get an income. *LIP*’s wage-earners self-managed distribution more than production (they sold a lot of watches and manufactured few), until they had to close down. In the mid-1970s, radicals were perfectly justified to analyse the *LIP* adventure as an experiment in self-exploitation, but quite wrong to interpret it as a feasible form of counter-revolution. Clearly, this was neither a viable option for the capitalists, nor a popular one among workers.

Similar attempts with a partial restarting of manufacturing and some selling of stock were to follow, particularly in the engineering industry, However, these were more a way to react to a programmed closure,

than a blueprint for the future. Whatever theories may have been elaborated by leftists, these self-management embryos were grounded on nothing solid, nothing able to mobilise the workers. Such practices appeared at the crossroads of an endemic critique of work that led to nothing else, and the beginning of a capitalist restructuring about to dispose of excess labour.

Portugal: 197414

The "Revolution of the Carnations" set in motion factory sit-ins and self-management practices. These occurred generally in small or medium size firms, mostly in *poor* industries, employing simple technology and unskilled labour such as textiles, furniture-making and agro-industry.

These occupations were usually in response to (real or fraudulent) bankruptcy, or to a closure of the plant by the owner. Sometimes, they got rid of a boss who had been too visibly supporting the Salazar regime. One of the objectives was to counter economic sabotage by the opponents of the Revolution of the Carnations. It was also a means to impose specific demands such as the reintegration of fired militant workers, to apply government decisions regarding wages and work conditions, or to prevent planned redundancies.

This social surge (*élan*) never questioned the circulation of money, nor the existence and function of the State. Self-managers would turn to the State for capital, and more often than not Stalinist — influenced agencies would logically reserve investment funds for their political friends or allies. They also asked the State to impose exchanges between self-managed firms and those that weren't. Wages were still being paid, often with a narrowed wage differential, or none. Hierarchy was frequently dismantled, and the rank and file had a democratic say in most decisions. Still, the movement did not go beyond workers' control over production, wage scales, and hiring and firing. It was a kind of *LIP* extended to an entire relatively poor capitalist country. The Portuguese experience was a replay of all the dead-ends revived by the 60s-70s era: populism, syndicalism, Leninism, Stalinism, self-management…

Critique of Work / Critique of Capital

Short as it is, our historical scan casts the shadow of doubt on the thesis that the (undeniable) self-identification of the proletarian as producer has been the decisive cause of our defeats. When did the workers really try to shoulder economic growth? When did they compete with old time bourgeois owners or modern directors for the management of the companies? In that matter at least, there's no coincidence between political platforms and proletarian practices. Workers' movements don't boil down to an affirmation of labour. The attempts to resume production were often enough a makeshift solution, an effort to fill a gap caused by the absence or incompetence of the boss. In that case, occupying the premises and restarting the work process did not mean an affirmation of the workers as workers — as in other circumstances when a bankrupt company is bought out of by its personnel, it was a means of survival. When, in Argentina at the end of 2001, the workers took over the Bruckman textile factory which was threatened with closure, and kept it going, they did so with no prospect of transforming capitalism into socialism, even within the limits of a single firm. This then became the case with dozens of Argentinian companies. Such behaviour occurs when proletarians think they have no chance of changing the world.

An essential point here is how far we are determined by history. If the "being" of the proletariat theorised by Marx is not just a metaphysics, its content is independent of the forms taken by capitalist domination. The tension between the submission to work and the critique of work has been active since the dawn of capitalism. Of course the realisation of communism depends on the historical moment, but its deep content remains invariant in 1796 and in 2002. Otherwise, we would not understand how, as early as the 1840's, some people were able to define communism as the abolition of wage-labour, classes, the State *and work*. If everything is determined by a historical necessity that was logically immature in 1845, how could we explain the genesis of communist theory at that time?

In the 20th century it was *the failure* of the rich post-1917 revolutionary process that gave full scope to the social-democratic and Stalinist cult of the productive forces.15 To afterwards interpret that process as the cause of the cult, is tantamount to analysing something from its contrary. Marx and Stalin both talked of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but Stalin does not explain Marx. To say that the *KPD* programme in 1930 (or the *SPD* programme in 1945) would reveal the true nature of the *KAPD* programme in 1920, is to turn history upside down.

Once the counter-revolution was there to stay, work (in the *US* as in the *USSR*) could only exist under constraint: the workers weren't put to work as a pseudo ruling class, but as a really ruled one, and according to proven capitalist methods. The ideology of workers' management was flatly denied by unions and labour parties of all kinds. Now they had a share in power (in corporate boardrooms as in ministries) they could only promote the economy by resorting to the good old devices that had been beneficial to the bourgeois for centuries.

In the most acute social crises, whatever they may have thought or said, the proletarians did not try to assert themselves through asserting the value of work. Since the origins of the class struggle, they have kept fighting for less working hours and more pay. Let's also bear in mind the stuff daily workshop or office life is made of: absenteeism, petty thefts, go-slows, non-genuine illness or faked injuries, even sabotage or assault on supervisors, all of which only decrease in times of severe unemployment. If *freebie* strikes (for instance, when transportation workers permit free rides, or postal employees allow free postage and phone calls) are so rare, it's a sign that strikes offer a pleasant opportunity to dodge work.

We're not suggesting that proletarian reality is a permanent underground rebellion. The contradictory role of the wage-earner in the productive process entails a contradictory attitude to work. The proletarian puts a lot into work, among other reasons because no-one can stand a job for hours and years without a minimum of interest, and because work both stultifies our ability and know-how *and* allows us to at least partially express them – the anthropological dimension of work has been sufficiently exposed elsewhere that we don't have to go into it here.16

In periods of social turmoil, either the workers show a deep indifference to work (sometimes running away from it); or work is re-imposed on them. During such periods, proletarians initiate a critique of their condition, because refusing work is a first move toward negating oneself as a proletarian.

It's true, however, that so far they have not gone past that critique, or its early steps. There lies the problem.

It's not the critique of work that's been lacking, like an essential dimension up to now neglected. How many men and women are happy to wear themselves out for the sake of churning out alarm clocks or pencils, or of processing files for the *NHS*? The worker is well aware that work stands as his enemy and, as far as he can, he does his best to get away from it. What is more difficult for him to imagine (and even more to put into deeds) is that he could do away with both work *and* capital. Isn't it the critique of capital that's been lacking, and still is? People are prone to lay the blame on the reign of money, and they also denounce the alienation of work: what is much less common is the understanding of the unity that binds the two, the critique of selling one's activity in exchange for an income, i.e. the critique of wage-labour, of capital.

The failure of the proletarian movement up to now is to be related to its own activity, not to its specific formatting by capital at specific historical moments. Formatting provides the conditions: it does not give nor ever will give the means to use them. And we'll only have a true answer once the transformation of the world is achieved.

In any case, a revolutionary period weakens (rather than strengthens) the ideology of emancipating labour through labour. Then the ebb of the radical wave brings about self-managerial practices that leave bourgeois power intact, and which this power sooner or later will sweep away.

The ideal of a wage-labour capitalism, and the attempt to realise it, are not remains from the past that a real domination of capital (or some form of it *more* real than previously) would at last be able to undermine.17 The adhesion to work is neither (as Situationists tend to think) a delusion which the proles should or now can grow out of, nor (as *Théorie Communiste* tends to think) a historical phase formerly inevitable but now gone. It is neither an ideology nor a stage in history (though both aspects play their part). Wage-labour is not a phenomenon imposed from outside, but the social relationship that structures our society: practical and collective adherence to work is built into the framework of that relationship.

What's New About Capitalism

Some have interpreted contemporary capitalism as a production of value without work, of a value so diffused that its productive agents and moments would be scattered throughout the whole social fabric.

Neither theory (Marx's *Grundrisse*, in particular18) nor hard facts validate this thesis. It's true that today valorisation depends much less on the direct intervention of every single producer than on a collective effort. It is a lot more difficult to isolate each productive wage-earner's contribution to value than in 1867. Nevertheless, it is not an undifferentiated social whole that valorises capital. The assembler, the lorry-driver, the computer expert, the firm researcher… do not add value to the company to the same extent. The "social factory" theory is relevant as far as it takes into account unpaid productive labour (e.g., that of housewives). It gets irrelevant when it regards value as the result of a uniform totality. Managers know their Marx better than Toni Negri — they keep tracing and measuring productive places and moments to try and rationalise them more and more. They even locate and develop "profit centres" within the company. Work is not diffuse, it is separated from the rest. If manual labour is evidently not the unique or main source of value, if *immaterial* labour is on the increase, work remains vital to our societies. It is strange to speak of an "end of work" when temp agencies are among the largest employers in the *US*.

In a country like France, though sociologists and statisticians tell us that there are more office than factory workers (now reduced to 1⁄4 of the working population), the latter — 80% of whom are male — are often married to the former. As a consequence, 40% of kids are living in a household where one of their parents is a "blue collar" worker, often employed in the service sector. Instead of walking through factory gates every morning, he is in charge of maintenance, drives a heavy vehicle, moves goods in a warehouse, etc. Half of French workers aren't "industrial" any more. Still, thus defined, workers are the most numerous groups. Whether they're old style factory operatives, service sector manual wage-earners, Taylorised clerks, cashiers, etc., underling wage-earners compose over half of the French working population. (It would be interesting to have the exact figures for a would-be *city of the future* like Los Angeles.) These facts do not change anything in the validity or vanity of a communist perspective, their only merit is precisely to show that nothing fundamental has changed since the 19th century. According to Marx's own figures in *Capital* volume I, there were more servants than industrial workers in mid-Victorian England. Should the theory of the proletariat be wrong, it was already so in 1867, and it isn't wrong in 2002 because there aren't enough workers left.

Capitalism is the first universal exploitation system. Surplus-labour is no longer extorted from someone who organises and therefore controls his production to a large extent, as was the case of the peasant under Asiatic despotism, the serf pressurized by his lord and by the taxman, or the craftsman dominated by the merchant. These weren't exploited *within* their work: part of the fruit of their labour was taken away from them from *outside* and after it had been produced. Buying and selling labour power introduces exploitation, not on the edge of human activity, but in its heart.

But, because of that very process — because the wage-earner sells his labour power — he makes capital as much as he is made by it, he lives *inside* capital to a far higher degree than the peasant depended on his master and the craftsman on the merchant. Because he lives (and resists, and fights) inside capital, he produces and shares its essentials, including consumption and democracy. Because selling his life force is necessary to him, he can only despise and reject his work, in reality and in his mind, by rejecting what makes him exist as a wage-

earner, i.e. by rejecting capital. In other words, if it's got to be more than everyday resistance, refusal of work is only possible through an acute social crisis.

In pre-industrial times, the Peasants' wars in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Tai-Ping in 19th century China, and many others, managed to build up self-sufficient liberated areas that sometimes survived for over ten years. In the West Indies, Black slaves could take to the hills and live on their own outside "civilisation". The industrial world leaves no such space for an alternative. If the 1919 Petrograd worker fled to the countryside, capitalism caught up with him within a few years. The Spanish collectivities of 1936-38 never "liberated" large areas. More recently, Bolivian miners self-managed their villages, with armed militia, radio stations, co-ops, etc. But it stopped when the mines were closed down. Their social dynamism depended on the function that international capital gave them. Only peasant communities, in so much as they stood outside the world economy, could go on living on their own for a long while. Modern workers have been unable to set up any reorganised social life that would rival normal or purely *capitalist* capitalism for a durable length of time. No room for a Third Way any more.

The Contradiction May Not Be Where We Think

Every reader of Marx knows that he never completed what he regarded as his master work, and that he rewrote the beginning several times. Why does Marx linger on the commodity, why does he start with the way capitalism *presents itself*, instead of giving its definition right away? If he insists first on representation and not on capital's nature, it may well be that he thinks its nature is related to its representation, which is no psychological process, but has to do with social representation at its deepest.

The author of *Das Kapital* keeps talking about a mystery, a secret to penetrate. Which one? It is hard to believe Marx is only concerned with proving to the worker that he is exploited… It's more logical Marx would be circling the various facets of capital to focus on a contradiction more crucial to the communist movement than the mechanics of surplus-value.19 He is targeting the amazing dynamics of a social system that is based more than any other on those it enslaves and provides them with weapons to dismantle it, but — because of that — manages to integrate them into its triumphant and destructive march, and (at least until now) uses social crises to regenerate itself. The contradiction of the proletarian is to be the bearer of a commodity that contains the possibility of all others, and can transform everything, while having to sell this commodity, and therefore to *act* and *picture himself* as a valorizer. The potential gravedigger of the system is the same one who feeds it.

Only with commodity exchange do relationships between humans appear as relations between things. The 19th century worker tended to see in capital only the capitalist. The 21st century wage-earner often perceives capital as just… capital, and not his own activity that (re)produces it. Fetishism still rules, albeit depersonalised, but it still veils the social relations producing capital. The denunciation of exploitation usually misses what economy is — the domination of everything and everyone by production for value. Actually, what's at stake from a communist point of view is not what capital hides and what most proletarians have the intuition of: the extraction of surplus-value. What's at stake is what capitalism imposes daily in real life and impresses on our minds: the economy as something obvious and inevitable, the necessity of exchanging commodities, of buying and selling labour, if we wish to avoid want, misery and dictatorship.

True, contemporary work does not socialise well because it tends to become a pure means of earning a living. Still, that socialisation does not vanish. (The emergence of radical reformism has to do with its persistence.) As a Moulinex laid-off worker said in 2001: "The hardest thing now is to be alone." The ideology of labour power is the necessary ideology of the proletarian within capital. That commodity is the prime reality of billions of men and women. The proletarian is never reduced to what capital turns him into, yet he feels a need to be recognised and socially enhanced, and that need is based on his only asset: work. He has to have this positive image of himself, if only to be able to sell himself on good terms. In an interview, the job seeker will not devalue himself. If he did, he would submit to the common prejudice that debases the competence of a simple order-taker.

On the other hand, non-adherence to work is not enough to guarantee the possibility of revolution, let alone its success. A proletarian who regards himself as nothing will never question anything. The unskilled worker of 1970 was convinced he was doing a stupid job, not that he was stupid himself: his critique addressed precisely the emptiness of an activity unworthy of what he claimed to be. A purely negative vision of the world and of oneself is synonymous with resignation or acceptance of anything. The proletarian only starts acting as a revolutionary when he goes beyond the negative of his condition and begins to create something positive out of it, i.e. something that subverts the existing order. It's not for lack of a critique of work that the proletarians have not *made the revolution*, but because they stayed within a negative critique of work.

The affirmation of labour has not been the principal factor of counter-revolution, only (and this is important!) one of its main expressions. But unions conveyed this ideology through what remains their *essential* function: the bargaining of labour power. Organisations like the Knights of Labour at the end of the 19th century played a minor part, and withered with the generalisation of large scale industry.

If the promotion of labour was as central as we're sometimes told, Fordism would have taken it up. But Scientific Management did not defeat the skilled workers by bestowing more professional dignity on the shop-floor, but by deskilling and breaking down trades. Generous schemes for job enrichment and re-empowerment are only implemented to disrupt the autonomy of the work team — then these reforms gradually fade away because the rank and file does not really care.

The ideas that rule are those of the ruling class. The ideology of work, whatever form it takes, is the capitalist ideology of work. There can't be any other. When the social consensus is shattered, that representation goes down with the others. It would be paradoxical that a severe crisis, instead of shaking it, should develop it even further.

Revolution is No Exact Science

The first part of this essay was mainly historical. What follows could be called methodological. Our critique of determinism focuses on a general tendency among revolutionaries to treat capitalist civilisation as if it were a one-way street to revolution.

From the omnipresence of capital, one can conclude with the possibility — or even necessity — of revolution. One could also deduct from it the impossibility of a revolution. That type of reasoning may be repeated indefinitely, and still be used in a hundred years if capitalism is still here. A theoretical model explains nothing but itself. Yesterday and tomorrow, as many reasons point to the continuity of capitalism as to its abolition. (As we wrote earlier, only when accomplished will the destruction of the old world throw a full light on past failures.)

Some comrades postulate the coming of an ultimate stage when the inner working of the system won't just upset it, but destroy it. They believe that whatever has happened before that final stage has been necessary, because up to now the workers have only been able to reform capitalism. Now there comes a threshold when reform becomes utterly pointless, a threshold that leaves no other option except revolution. Past radical proletarian activity has only contributed to bring about the historical moment that makes revolution possible — or necessary, rather. Until then, the class struggle has provided the required sequence of phases preparing the final phase.

By the way, this would justify what has been called Marx's and Engels' *revolutionary reformism* — urging the bourgeoisie to develop capitalism and create the conditions of communism. Among other things, Marx supported the German national bourgeoisie, praised Lincoln, sided with quite a few reformist parties and unions while relentlessly targeting anarchists…20 Shall we also have to agree with Lenin (because he acted like a new *revolutionary bourgeois*) against Gorter and Bordiga? And was Roosevelt a better (though unconscious) contributor to human emancipation than Rosa Luxemburg?

Anyway, from now on, all ambiguity is said to have been cleared up. We should be entering the final stage in the history of wage-labour: work is said to be now less and less available, more and more deskilled, devoid of any other meaning but to provide an income, thereby preventing the wage-earner from adhering to capital, and to the plan of a capitalism without capitalists. Reaching this threshold has made it impossible once and for all for labour to assert itself as labour within capital.

The underlying logic to this approach is to search for an un-mediated class relationship that would leave no other solution for the proletariat but a direct (class against class) confrontation with capital.

Determinism revisits history to locate the obstacle to revolution, and discovers it in the form of the social space that the workers supposedly wished to occupy inside capitalism. Then that option is said to be now closed — such a social space does not exist any more because in fully real domination capitalism is everywhere. The reasons for past failures give the reasons for tomorrow's success, and provide the inevitability of communist revolution, as the obstacle is cleared away by the completion of what is described as capital's quasi natural life cycle.

In other words, the revolutionary crisis is no longer perceived as a breaking up and superseding of the social conditions that create it. It is only conceived of as the conclusion of a pre-ordained evolution.

The methodological flaw is to believe in a privileged vantage point that enables the observer to grasp the totality (and the whole meaning) of past, present and near future human history.

In short, the causes of our previous shortcomings are not sought in the practical deeds of the proletarians. Instead of a labour-power overcoming its condition and rising to its historic task of freeing itself from its chains, and thus freeing humanity, the dynamic element is no longer proletarian action, but the movement of capital. The mutual involvement of capital and labour is reduced to a one-way relation of cause and effect. History gets frozen.

We would prefer to say that there is no other limit to the life-span of capital than the conscious activity of the proletarians. Otherwise, no crisis, however deep it might be, will be enough to produce such a result. And any deep crisis (a crisis *of* the system, not just *in* it) could be the last if the proletarians took advantage of it. But there'll never be a day of reckoning, a final un-mediated showdown, as if at long last the proletarians were directly facing capital and therefore attacking it.

"The self-emancipation of the proletariat is the breakdown of capitalism", as Pannekoek wrote in the last sentence of his essay on *The Theory of the Breakdown of Capitalism* (1934). It is significant this should come as the conclusion of a discussion on capital's cycles and reproduction models (Marx's, Luxemburg's and Henrik Grossmann's). The communist movement cannot be understood through models similar to those of the reproduction of capital — unless we regard communism as the last logical (= as inevitable as any previous crisis) step in the course of capital. If this were the case, the communist revolution would be as "natural" as the growing up and ageing of living beings, the succession of seasons and the gravitation of planets, and just like them scientifically predictable.

1789 might have happened forty years later or sooner, without a Robespierre and a Bonaparte, but a bourgeois revolution was bound to happen in France in the 18th or 19th century.

Who could argue that communism is bound to happen? The communist revolution is not the ultimate stage of capitalism.

"With the psychology of a trade unionist who will not stay off his work on May Day unless he is assured in advance of a definite amount of support in the event of his being victimised, neither revolution nor mass strike can be made. But in the storm of the revolutionary period even the proletarian is transformed from a provident *pater familas* demanding support, into a 'revolutionary romanticist', for whom even the highest good, life itself, to say nothing of material well-being, possesses but little in comparison with the ideals of the struggle."[21]

Finally, whoever believes that 1848, 1917, 1968… were compelled to end up as they ended up, should be requested to prophesy the future — for once. No-one had foreseen May ‘68. Those who explain that its failure was inevitable only *knew* this afterwards. Determinism would gain credibility if it gave us useful forecasts.22

Never Ask Theory for What It Can’t Give

Revolution is not a problem, and no theory is the solution of that problem. (Two centuries of modern revolutionary movement demonstrate that communist theory does not anticipate the doings of the proletarians.)

History does not prove any direct causal link between a degree of capitalist development, and specific proletarian behaviour. It is improvable that at a given historical moment the essential contradiction of a whole system would bear upon the reproduction of its fundamental classes and therefore of the system itself. The error does not lie in the answer but in the question. Looking for what would *force* the proletarian, in his confrontation with capital, to attack his own existence as a wage-earner, is tantamount to trying to solve in advance and through theory a problem which can only be solved — if it ever is — in practice. We cannot exclude the possibility of a new project of social reorganisation similar to that which had workers’ identity as its core. The rail-worker of 2002 can’t live like his predecessor of 1950. This is not enough for us to conclude that he would only be left with the alternative of resignation or revolution.

When the proletariat seems absent from the scene, it is quite logical to wonder about its reality and its ability to change the world. Each counter-revolutionary period has the dual singularity of dragging along while never looking like the previous ones. That causes either a renunciation of critical activity, or the rejection of a revolutionary “subject”, or its replacement by other solutions, or a theoretical elaboration supposed to account for past defeats *in order to* guarantee future success. This is asking for unobtainable certainties, which only serve to reassure. On the basis of historical experience, it seems more to the point to state that the proletariat remains the only subject of a revolution (otherwise there won’t be any), that communist revolution is a possibility but not a certainty, and that nothing ensures its coming and success but proletarian activity.

The fundamental contradiction of our society (proletariat-capital) is only potentially deadly to capitalism if the worker confronts his work, and therefore takes on not just the capitalist, but what capital makes of him, i.e. if he takes on *what he does* and *is*. It’s no use hoping for a time when capital, like a worn out mechanism, would find it impossible to function, because of declining profits, market saturation, exclusion of too many proletarians from work, or the inability of the class structure to reproduce itself.

A current subtext runs through much of revolutionary thinking: the more capitalism we have, the nearer we get to communism. To which people like Jacques Camatte retort: *no, the more capitalism we have, the more capitalist we become*. At the risk of shocking some readers, we’d say that the evolution of capital does not take us closer to or farther from communism. From a communist point of view, nothing is positive in itself in the march of capital, as is shown by the fate of classism.

The Rise and Fall of Classism

In practice, “classism” was the forward drive of the working class as a class within capitalist society, where its organisations came to occupy as much social space as possible. Labour set up collective bodies that rivalled with those of the bourgeoisie, and conquered positions inside the State. That took — and still takes — many forms (social-democracy, *CP*s, the *AFL-CIO*…), and also existed in South America, in Asia and parts of Africa.

In theory, classism is the vindication of class difference (and opposition) as an end in itself, as if class war was the same as the emancipation of the workers and of mankind. So it’s based exactly on what has to be criticised, as classes are basic constituents of capitalist society. Whether it’s peaceful or violent, the mere opposition of one class to the other leaves both facing each other. Naturally any ruling class denies the existence of class antagonisms. Still, in the early 19th century, the first to emphasise class confrontation weren’t socialists, but

bourgeois historians of the French revolution. What is revolutionary is not to uphold class struggle, but to affirm that such a struggle can end through a communist revolution.

Nowadays, the decay of classism and of the labour movement is visible and documented enough for us not to dwell upon it. Some revolutionaries have rejoiced over the demise of worker's identity and of the glorification of the working class as the class of labour, and they've interpreted that demise as the elimination of a major obstacle to revolution — which the labour institutions and that ideology no doubt were. But what has the critique of the world really gained by their withering away? We'd be tempted to say — not much, because of the rise of even softer practices and ideas. Just being freed of their workers' role and hopes didn't turn wage-earners into radical proletarians. So far, the crisis of the working class and of classism has not favoured subversion. The past twenty years have brought about neo-liberal, neo-social-democratic, neo-reactionary, neo-everything ideologies, the emergence of which has coincided with the symbolic annihilation of the working class. This wiping out is a product of capital class recomposition (unemployment, de-industrialisation, proletarianisation of office work, casualisation, etc.). It also results from the rejection by the wage-earners themselves of the most rigid forms of worker identity. But this rejection remains mainly negative. The proletarians have shattered the control of parties and unions over labour. (In 1960, anyone handing out an anti-union leaflet at a French factory gate risked being beaten up by the Stalinists.) But they haven't gone much further. The decline of workerism was accompanied by the loss of a point of view allowing a perspective on the whole of this society, gauging and judging it *from the outside* in order to conceive and propose another. Proletarian autonomy has not taken advantage of bureaucratic decline.

We are experiencing a dislocation of class struggle. In the 60s-70s, the unskilled workers stood at the centre of the reproduction of the whole system, and other categories recognised themselves in the "mass worker". No social symbolical figure plays such a pivotal role — yet.

Work as a Fallen Idol

19th century and early 20th century communists often shared the progressivism of their time, and believed that a new industry and a new labour would emancipate humankind.23 A hundred years later, we'd be naive to espouse the exact opposite views just because they happen to be fashionable. In fifty years, the praise of toil and sacrifice has become as outdated as the belief in the liberating Horn of Plenty of the economy.24 This evolution is as much the result of the radical critique of the 1960s-70s, as of a deepening of capital — making labour productive today is achieved more through the work process itself than by outright discipline. The computer screen is now the immediate supervisor of millions of industrial and service sector wage-earners. In its most advanced sectors, capital has already gone beyond authoritarian hierarchy and work as a curse. "Autonomy" and "bottom-up" are the in words. The macho, muscle-bound, national (= white) worker image is giving way to a more open, multi-ethnic, male and female figure.

In 1900, you had to produce before consuming, and labour parties told the worker he had to develop the productive forces first, in order to enjoy the fruits of socialism later. Instead of a single Redeemer dying on a cross, millions of sufferers ("the salt of the earth") would create the conditions of a better world. The consumer and credit society has done away with that: painful self-exertion is no longer said to come before pleasure. True, this goes together with the multiplication of sweatshops, of forced, unpaid or ill-paid labour, and of a renaissance of slavery. Such forms complement but do not contradict the general trend toward a de-consecration of work. (In 1965, unskilled mass workers weren't the majority of wage-earners either.)

Work is an idol, albeit a fallen one. Its imposition is no longer of a moral or religious kind ("You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow"), but profane and down-to-earth. In some Asian countries, labour is now being disciplined better by the pressure of consumerism than by an appeal to Confucianism. In Tai-Peh as in Berlin, public concern is about creating and getting jobs, not suffering to enter some earthly or heavenly paradise. So work now calls for a critique different from the time when an aura of self-inflicted pain surrounded it. Mobility and self-empowerment are the present slogans of capital. We cannot be content with anti-work statements such as the ones that the surrealists were *rightly* making eighty years ago.25

In 2002, work rules, but the work ethic is no longer sacrificial: it calls upon us to realise our potentials as human beings. Nowadays, we don't work for a transcendent goal (our salvation, a sacred duty, progress, a better future, etc.). The consecration of work was two-sided: any object of worship is a taboo to be broken. But our age is one of universal de-consecration. Transcendence is out. The pragmatic *pursuit of happiness* is today's motive: we are Americans.

This, however, does not lead to a growing subterranean rejection of work. A de-Christianized society substitutes the desire to feel good for the fear of sin. Religion gives way to a body and health cult: the "me generation" is more concerned with keeping fit than saving souls. So work is no longer worshipped because it does not need to be: it's enough for it to simply be there. It's more an overwhelming reality than an ideology. Its pressure is more direct and open, close to what Marx described as the American attitude: "total indifference to the specific content of work and easily moving from one job to another".26 In a modern and "purer" capitalism, de-consecrated work still structures our lives and minds. And the current moral backlash in the *US* is proof of how reactionary attitudes complement permissiveness.

Not much revolutionary clarification has grown out of these changes, because not everything has the same value in capitalist evolution. The critical potential completely differs if it's the workers that attack worker identity and the worship of work, or if capital is sweeping them aside. For the last thirty years, as work identification was being disrupted, the possibility of an utterly different world has also vanished from individual and collective thinking. In the past, Stalinist and bureaucratic shackles did not prevent such a utopia, and minorities debated the content of communism. If a working class entangled in its identification with work did not make a revolution, nothing yet proves that the proletarians now liberated from it will act in a revolutionary way.

"We Are Not of This World" (Babeuf, 1795)

We find it hard to share the optimism of those who see the present period as entirely dissimilar from the 60s-70s or from any previous period, with a capitalism that would systematically downgrade the living conditions of wage-earners, thereby creating a situation that would soon enough be intolerable and lead to a revolutionary crisis. The limits of proletarian upsurges from Algeria to Argentina, and the rise of radical reformism in Europe and the *US*, rather suggest that it's reform — not revolution — that is becoming topical again.27

The eagerness to celebrate the twilight of worker identity has led some comrades to forget that this identity also expressed an understanding of the irreconcilable antagonism between labour and capital. The proletarians had at least grasped that they lived in a world that was not theirs and could never be. We're not calling for a return to a Golden Age. We're saying that the disappearance of this identification owes as much to counter-revolution as to radical critique. Revolution will only be possible when the proletarians act as if they were strangers to this world, its outsiders, and will relate to a universal dimension, that of a classless society, of a human community.

This implies the social subjectivity indispensable to any real critique. We are well aware of the interrogations raised by the word *subjectivity*, and we surely do not wish to invent a new magical recipe. For the moment, let us just say that we're not bestowing any privilege on subjectivity against objective conditions which would then be secondary or negligible.

We've often emphasised that there's no point in trying to arouse a consciousness *prior to* action: but any real breakthrough implies some minimal belief in the ability of the people involved to change the world. This is a big difference with the 60s-70s. Thirty years ago, many proletarians were not just dissatisfied with this society: they thought of themselves as agents of historical change, and acted accordingly, or at least tried to.

The subject/object couple is one of those philosophical expressions that a human community would supersede. The declared definitive opposition between individual and society, soul and body, spirit and matter, theory and praxis, art and economy, ideals and reality, morals and politics… all relate to the dissolution of communities into classes through the combined action of property, money and State power. Though not synonymous with

perfect harmony, communism would try and live beyond such tragic splits in human life.28 "Subject" and "object" don't exist separate from each other. A crisis is not something exterior to us, that happens and forces us to react. Historical situations (and opportunities) are also made of beliefs and initiatives, of our actions — or inaction.

Vaneigem's "radical subjectivity"29 had its qualities (and its purpose at the time) and one major weakness: it appealed to the free will, to the self-awareness of an *individual* rising against his social role and conditioning. This is clearly not what we suggest. Capitalism is not based on necessity, and communism (or a communist revolution) on liberty. The abolition of their condition by the proletarians cannot be separated from concrete struggles against capital. And capital exists through social groups and institutions. Objective realities, notably the succession of "systems of production" rooted in and dependent on the class struggle, are the inevitable framework of the communist movement. What we do and will do with it remains to be seen.

1. "*Ne travaillez jamais*": writing on a Paris wall, photographed in the *IS* no. 8, 1963. That same issue defined "the centre of the revolutionary project" as "nothing less than the suppression of work in the usual sense (as well as the suppression of the proletariat) and of all justifications of old style work".
2. "Autonomy" is a misleading term, because it mixes activities and theories that vastly differed, though they were often present within the same groups. A large part of the "autonomous" movement was involved in grassroots anti-work action. On the other hand, *Operaismo* was using the critique of work as a unifying theme on which some organisation (sometimes genuinely democratic, sometimes similar to a party) could be built. *Operaismo* found the common element to all categories of proletarians in the fact that they were *all at work*, whether formal or unofficial, waged or un-waged, permanent or casual. So, even when it did promote shop-floor rebellion, *Operaismo*'s purpose was to have everyone's work acknowledged, through the supposedly unifying slogan of the "political wage". Instead of contributing to a dissolution of work into the whole of human activity, it wanted everyone to be treated as a worker (women, the jobless, immigrants, students, etc.). The critique of work was used as a tool to claim the generalisation of paid productive activity, i.e. of… wage-labour. *Operaismo* was fighting for the recognition of the centrality of labour, that is for something which is the opposite of the abolition of work. See for example *Zerowork* no. 1, 1975. This contradiction was expressed in *Potere Operaio*'s slogan: "From the fight for the wage to the abolition of wage-labour". Lack of space prevents us from going into details. Cf. the two very informative collections of articles and documents by Red Notes in the 70's: *Italy 1977-78. Living with an Earthquake, and Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis*. Just to show that the critique of work exceeds the borders of so-called rich countries: *A Ballad Against Work*, A Publication for Collectivities, 1997, Majdoor Library, Autopin Jhuggi, NIT, Faridabad 121001, India.
3. Krisis, *Manifesto Against Work* (1999), now translated into French and English.
4. *Théorie Communiste*, BP 17, 84300. Les Vignères. Also the two books by Roland Simon published by Senonevero.
5. Stephen Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories 1917-18* (Cambridge *UP*, 1983)
6. "'Labour' by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceived as the abolition of 'labour'." Marx, *Notes on Frederich List*, 1845 (*MECW 4*), p. 279.
7. Though Marx does not speak of "systems of production", the concept is clearly in his writings. cf. Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (*MECW 35*), pp. 341-509.
8. On France and Spain, see Micheal Seidman's well-researched *Workers Against Work during the Popular Front* (UCLA, 1991).
9. Pivert was the leader of a left opposition in the socialist party (which later formed the *psop* in 1938).
10. See note 8 above.
11. Similar experiences took place in other countries and continents. In 1945, in the north of Vietnam, 30,000 miners elected councils, ran the mines for a while, controlled the public services, the railways, the post office, imposed equal pay for all, and taught people to read, until the Vietminh put its foot down. As a Vietnamese revolutionary recalled later, they wished to live "without bosses, without cops". Promoting work was far from being their prime motive or concern.
12. Constant Malva, *Ma nuit au jour le jour* (Labour, 2001). At the same time, Belgium had to import thousands of Italians because the local workers were reluctant to go down the mine.

13. Richard Grégoire & Freddy Perlman, *Worker-Student Action Committees* (Black & Red, 1969). Also Francois Martin, 'The Class Struggle and Its Most Characteristics Aspects in Recent Years…' in *Eclipse and Re-Emergence*… (Antagonism Press, 1998).
14. Phil Mailer, *Portugal: The Impossible Revolution* (Solidarity, 1977). A lively account and thorough analysis.
15. On how both Stalinism and Nazism glorified work and social egalitarianism, see *Communism*, ICG, no. 13, 2002, 'On the Praise of Work'.
16. La Banquise 'Sous le travail: l'activité' (*La Banquise* no. 4, 1986)
17. On formal and real domination see: Marx, *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* (*MECW 34*), pp. 355, 471.
18. Also the beginning of *Capital* vol. 1, chap.16 (*MECW* 35), p. 509ff.
19. At the time, various people had the intuition of the origin of surplus-value, and some came close to formulating it, for example Flora Tristan in 1843.
20. Any good biography of Marx describes his political activity, for instance Franz Mehring's and more recently Francis Wheen's. In his introduction to *Capital* volume I, Marx paid tribute to his time when he compared himself to a scientist who discovers "natural" laws. Fortunately, and in contradiction to Engels's funeral speech on his friend's grave, Marx was not the Darwin of the proletariat. Nor did he think history was foretold. To him, only a teleological mind would have the course of human history move to a pre-ordained end. There was no *single* line of evolution, as shown by the "late" Marx. See note 22 below.
21. Rosa Luxemburg *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906)
22. The reader will understand that we're not preaching indeterminism. By and large, the 19th century was the epic of a conquering bourgeoisie with a faith in the iron logic of progress that left no alternative but final abundance and peace. 1914 opened an era of doubt and anti-determinism, as is evident in the popular appeal of the "uncertainty principle". There is no need for us to swap the scientific fashion of one age for another.
23. Marx's progressivism is both real and contradictory. He certainly worked out a linear sequence: primitive community — slavery — feudalism — capitalism — communism, with the side option of the "Asiatic mode of production". But his deep, longstanding interest in the Russian *mir* and in so-called primitive societies (cf. his notebooks published in 1972) prove that he thought it possible for some (vast) areas to avoid the capitalist phase. If Marx had been the herald of industrialisation he is often depicted as, he would have completed the six volumes he'd planned for *Das Kapital*, instead of accumulating notes on Russia, the East, etc. See 'Karl Marx & the Iroquois', *Arsenal/Surrealist Subversion*, no. 4 (Black Swan Press 1989) and our *Re-Visiting the East and Popping in at Marx's Grave*, available on the Troploin site.
24. Similarly, in 1900, it was "obvious" to ask for more technology. A hundred years later, it's the opposite that goes without saying: we "obviously" need less…
25. The cover of the 4th issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1925) proclaimed: "*and war on work*". See also Breton's article "The Last Strike" in no. 2 (1925), and Aragon's *Cahier Noir* (1926).
26. *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* (*MECW 34*), pp. 419-424.… See also the *General Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1857 (*MECW 28*), p. 41.
27. On the difficulty for capital to fully achieve a new (post-Fordist) system of production, and the consequences of this situation for the proletarians, see our 2nd Newsletter in English, *Whither the World?*, 2002.
28. Rigorous Marxists often dismiss notions like "subjectivity", "mankind", "freedom", "aspiration"… because of their association with idealism and psychology. Strangely enough, the same rigor does not apply to set of concepts borrowed from economics, philosophy or sociology. (Primitivists would prefer anthropology.) All those vocabularies (and the visions of the world they convey) belong to specialised fields of knowledge, all of them inadequate for human emancipation, and therefore to be superseded. Until then, we have to compose a "unitary" critique from them and against them.
29. *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967).