

# Getting Rid Of Work

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What follows is a long essay by the French communization theorist, Gilles Dauvé. It is a long read, a read which varies in content and tone but a text which masterfully summarizes the *communist* critique of work. The original can be found here at Troploin. He also dutifully notes that without the abolition of work there can be no communist revolution or communism. We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we enjoyed translating it. ¡A la chingada con el trabajo!

## **False construction sites**

In 1997, in the French department of Sarthe, some 20 workers were constructing a section of highway under the direction of an engineer employed by a large company, BTP. After two months the engineer was arrested: no one had ordered the work that was partially done, which with an initial financing, the false construction site manager had successfully hoodwinked both banks and public organizations. Between 1983 and 1996, Philippe Berre had been convicted 14 times for ordering false construction sites. In 2009, “The Beginning,” a film inspired by this whole adventure was released, displaying a population struck by unemployment which briefly found work and hope. Phillippe Berre was not motivated by personal gain, but rather by the need *to do*, to be of use, to reanimate a group of workers. In 2010, once again, he took on this role while helping those affected by Cyclone Xynthia.

We all know “rogue bosses.” Philippe Berre is a fictitious boss, an anti-hero for our times; at once a “manipulator of symbols,” an agile manager of human resources, at a crossroads between the automobile and the BTP (presented as the two principal employers within modern countries), wandering as a nomad on the highways, as mobile as the activities which he preyed upon, living on the ephemeral dreams that his dynamism created around him, an illustration of a fluidity without markers or attachments, where money flows but is not wasted, where success has no future, where one builds worthless things, where all appears as communication and virtuality. But is not a sense of reality which Philippe Berre is lacking, rather he lacks respect.

When a crook brings work, revenue, and thus some “meaning” to a community in perdition, even if it is a provisional and false meaning, this raises the question – what does production and work mean? The unemployed at Sarthe trusted Philippe Berre because he brought them some socializing, a role, a status, a sense of being recognized. What is useful? Useless? Fictitious? Real? What is profitable or not? Was this piece of highway more or less absurd than any “real” highway? What work is worthy of being qualified as “a waste”? Beyond the hard reality of work (it creates objects, creates profit and is generally onerous), what is the truth?

## **1. Rereading Marx: from Marx to Marxism**

Marx has left us the most powerful synthesis of communism, one with the deepest theoretical breakthroughs and also the most acute contradictions. *Capital* and the *The Critique of the Gotha Program* notably, along with the *Grundrisse*, manuscripts from 1857-58, which have since renewed our approach towards capitalism and communism, and whose first publication in French almost coincided with May 1968. Though we have personally cited these pages more than a few times, we now find reason to bear a critique.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A curious destiny was set for these reading notes commonly called the *Grundrisse* which were only published in Moscow in German during the maelstrom that was World War II. There were almost unknown until their second

Marx is particularly necessary to return to since his analysis of work places front and center the question of time.

## 1.1 The commodity and work

*Capital* does not begin with a definition of capitalism, but rather the way in which it “presents itself”: “an immense accumulation of commodities.” This point of departure relays a certain choice of perspective. If work is at the heart of the problem, why not begin with the the division of labor? While not writing a history book, why would Marx start with the encounter between private producers exchanging on the market and not with the meeting of the wage laborer and the capitalist? The first chapter of *Capital* considers work (not *waged* labor, but work, whatever kind it may be) as being both abstract **and** concrete: in other words, use-value and exchange-value are presented as arising with the dawn of humanity and within almost every society.

To naturalize work is to eternalize it.

Section 1.4 will return to Marx and his definitions of work. That which *Capital* affirms, at any rate, is that work, in the past, before value (or value-less, as it would be under communism), work without a labor market, is both positive and necessary. *Capital* considers productive activity and work as one in the same.

Here Marx announces an essential trait which Marxism would embody: the worker ceases to be proletarian (= a wage laborer exploited by a boss) when everyone becomes a proletarian, since bosses would have been replaced by a community of laborers. The solution to this social problem would be to generalize labor. But which kind? Waged labor? Marx reasons as though the answer were self-evident: as soon as we all join in on a community working without capitalists, the question of the wage-laborer will be resolved. The overcoming of capitalism will not consist of the abolishment of the Capital-labor relation but rather to rescue work from Capital.

## 1.2 Working in a world without money

For Marx it is the arrival of use-value on the market (a “natural” product of labor) which gives use-value its character as an exchange-value. When Marx talks about *labor* time, it is squarely about production, but at that point value only has a potential existence, before finding its reality on the market. It would be as though value is not born of production, but, *after* the productive moment, it comes to impose itself on labor as a constraint, which would thus need to be liberated from the worker. In reading Marx, as long as there is no sale/purchase, labor time acts as a neutral given, which capitalism in its own way takes advantage of, and which communism would also use but in a totally different way.

The filigree-legible communism in *Capital* looks like a world without money based on communitarian labor. However, work is more than the meeting of cooperative humans within a workshop making objects. To work is to count the time, to economize, which implies that we quantify the socially-necessary labor time to produce this or that: exactly what Marx rightly calls *value*.

Marx’s distrust of any utopian description for a post-revolutionary future is well-known. Thus it is even more meaningful that one of the rare appearances on this subject seems to propose labor

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edition in German in 1953, the text was not available in French until 1967-68, and it was even later when they were published in other European languages (English in 1973).

vouchers for the “lower phase” of communism (*Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875), because, such as he makes them out to be, what are these labor vouchers but *value without money*?

### 1.3 The Map

“Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community (...) The total product of our community is a social product. One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence (...) We will assume, but merely for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour time. Labour time would, in that case, play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the proper proportion between the different kinds of work to be done and the various wants of the community. On the other hand, it also serves as a measure of the portion of the common labour borne by each individual, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, with regard not only to production but also to distribution.” (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Chp. 1, iv)

If Marx *assumes* a regulation of production by labor time “to put this state of affairs in parallel with commodity production,” it is because the *opposite* supposition for him is almost unthinkable. His perspective lies in replacing the separation between producers, great and small, with a production-commune, and replacing capitalist disorder with planification done by all.

Further, politically the State will no longer be a State when everyone will take on its functions: shared by everyone, political power will lose its oppressive character; so writes Engels: “Insofar as the anarchy of social production disappears, the political authority of the State goes to sleep. Men, finally masters of their own way of life in society, thereby become masters of nature, masters of themselves, and thus are free.”<sup>2</sup>

Such as Marx sketches it out, communism is marked by transparency and self-understanding: men become at last conscious of whom they are. Associated producers are naturally assumed to be the best people to know the socially-necessary labor time of what they produce.

### 1.4 Which definition of work?

In 1845, Marx defined it as such:

“ ‘Labor’ is the living base of private property, as it is the only source of private property. Private property is nothing more than materialized labor. If you would want to deal it a lethal blow, we would need to attack private property not only as an objective state; we must also attack it as an activity, as labor. To speak of free, human, social labor, of labor without private property, is one of the greatest misunderstandings that exist. ‘Labor’ is by nature an enslaved activity, inhumane, antisocial, determined by private property and created by private property.

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<sup>2</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 1873, Section 3, Chp. 2 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>

Consequently, the abolition of private property only becomes a reality if we conceive of it as the abolition of 'labor'; an abolition which naturally is only possible when done by labor itself, which is a way of saying the by the material activity of society and not just the substitution of one category for another."<sup>3</sup>

In 1846, in *The German Ideology* speaks of "the division of labor" : This is what is impossible without a community. (...) Up until now, all revolutions have left intact this mode of activity; what changed was only the distribution of this activity, a new apportionment of labor between persons. On the other hand, communist revolution, standing up against this traditional *mode* of activity, gets rid of *labor* and abolishes the domination of all classes by abolishing classes themselves; this revolution being the work of the class who, within society, no longer has any ranking as a class and is no longer recognized as such: from then on out, communist revolution marks the dissolution of all classes, of all nationalities, etc. at the very heart of present society."<sup>4</sup>

Communist theory does not equate man with *homo faber*, nor as a "maker of tools," as Benjamin Franklin thought of man.

On the other hand, in 1867, work is defined as "the existential and indispensable condition of man, the mediator of organic exchanges between nature and man."<sup>5</sup>

From a radical position that was unacceptable at the time (and remains so to this day), Marx was moving toward a definition of work that is practically applicable to any society.

Let's quote then *The Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875): "At a higher phase of communist society, when enslaved subordination of individuals to the division of labor would have been disappeared, and with it, the opposition between the intellectual and the manual labor; when work will not only be a means to live, but will become the primary vital need; when along with the manifold development of individuals, the productive forces will have been so developed and when all sources of collective wealth abundantly overflow – and only then (...) society will be able to write on its banners: *From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!*"<sup>6</sup>

## 1.5 Measuring by time (re-reading the *Grundrisse*)

According to *Capital*, "In all social states, the time necessary to produce the means of consumption have interested mankind, albeit unequally, in accordance with their diverse degrees of civilization."<sup>7</sup>

The 1857-58 manuscripts (*Grundrisse*) have an exceptionally visionary force. What they express does not however contradict *Capital* as much on *labor* as on *labor time*, two themes which complement each other.

"The real economy, savings, consists of economizing labor time (as well as reducing the costs of production). But, inseparable from the development of the productive forces, this economy is in no way a renunciation of joy. Growth in strength and in the means of production condition the faculties which render the individual apt to enjoy their existence, an aptitude which goes hand in hand with productive power. The economy of labor time means the augmentation of free time for

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<sup>3</sup> *Notes sur F. List*, (Œuvres, Gallimard, III, 1982, pp. 1418-1451.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1111 et 1123.

<sup>5</sup> *Capital*, Vol. I, Œuvres, Gallimard, I, 1963, p.570.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1420

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 605.

the full blossoming of the individual (...)" (For the *Grundrisse* we use the edition by Maximilien Rubel, *Œuvres*, Gallimard, II, 1968. p. 310)

"(...) it is clear that immediate labor time cannot always be abstractly opposed to free time, as is the case in the bourgeois economic system. Work cannot become a game, as Fourier wants, whom had the great merit of having proclaimed the ultimate goal of transcendence, in a superior form, not of distribution but of production." (p. 311)

That life, particularly a productive one, "demands practical manipulation and free movement," (p. 311) and implies *effort*, is self-evident and it is useful to recall that against the myth of a liberating automation; but it does not follow that we must then reason with the opposition of work/play, categories which themselves are historical and open to critique. Across the same pages, Marx prolongs his critique of political economy.

Of course not everything is play. But just because one has to exert *effort* does not mean that what you are doing must be *work*. And it is not necessarily less enjoyable to cook as it is to eat. And what about the dishes? It only becomes a chore through the routine of household chores (which are still 80% done by housewives) performed under the dual constraint of time saving and the pressure of family life. The reappropriation of our living conditions, and along with it its upheaval, involves other relations such as man/woman, parents/children, adults/children, which implies another kind of living situation, another kind of education, etc.

The perspective set forth in the *Grundrisse* is as profound as it is ambiguous:

"Adopting labor time as the standard for wealth, is to found this wealth on poverty; it is reduction of all time to labor time and to degrade the individual to the exclusive role of being a worker, an instrument of work." (p. 308)

"Capital is contradiction in action: it tends to reduce to a minimum labor time, all the while making it the sole source and measure of wealth." (p. 306)

"The reduction of socially-necessary labor time, and not solely diminished in favor of surplus labor, will allow us to free up the blossoming of the individual. In fact, thanks to free time and the means opened up to all, the reduction of labor time to the minimum socially-necessary will favor the artistic, scientific, etc. development of everyone." (p. 306)

"True wealth being the full productive power of all individuals, the yardstick employed will not be labor time, but rather the time available." (p. 308)

By definition, *available* time being not employed (or at least not yet), and thus representing but a potentiality, is then impossible to measure: there thus seems to be a rupture with value and capitalism. But does this available time become the totality of time, or *is it added to an ever-present labor time*, which is essential albeit reduced to a few hours a day?

Marx posed the question of the accounting of time (crucial in understanding labor), but could not resolve this problem because he treated time as a given, not as a category also open to critique.

## 1.6 Communism and labor time (the councilist project)

In 1930, Dutch council communists of the GIC [Group of International Communists] had the enormous merit of having concretely posed the question of communism based on the question of value, but had done so, in our opinion, based on a bad premise.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Groupe des Communistes Internationalistes de Hollande (GICH), Principes fondamentaux de la production et de la distribution communistes : <http://www.mondialisme.org/spip.php?article1308>

In 1966, the principal editor of the project, Jan Appel (1890-1985) summed up this premise: workers' councils will make of "the hourly unit of average labor time [the] measure of production time and of all the needs and services at once found within production and distribution."<sup>9</sup>

The error here is in wanting to place Marxian theory of value at the service of the management of communism. The notion of socially-average labor time, and further its whole calculus, are not useful instruments at the same level as a wheelbarrow or a milling machine: they are the substance of capitalism and their use is inseparable from their function which they demand. A society cannot be organized on the direct calculus of average labor time without sooner or later a general equivalence materializing, giving birth to some variant of money. Everyone knows that despite some of its friendly aspects, barter is based on an implicit accounting, an exchange of invisible money (nobody swaps a motorcycle in running condition for some random swimsuit). For as long as a product has a double existence, one as a determined object and another as an exchange value serving as a base for comparison and exchange, we will have not left behind the world of the commodity-society and capitalism. A direct accounting of labor time will create an invisible general equivalency: it will bring about measured products just like commodities, though they will not circulate like commodities, and there will be workers that will consume based on their work without receiving a wage. One would soon see the re-emergence of the classic forms of capitalism whose foundations never disappeared, since only a market where businesses clash is able to sanction this calculus of production time.

It is obvious that there is nothing intrinsically in common between a head of lettuce and a skirt, except the quantity of primary materials and energy necessary to obtain one or the other. But is within commodity exchange, and further within capitalism, which find the need to synthesize all the components of production so as to reduce lettuce and skirts as commensurable: the necessary labor time.

That which escaped the G.I.C. was that the evaluation of resources (both human and otherwise) necessary for all activity take on different meanings depending on the society. Sewing clothes and planting salad greens do not require the same effort or the same material elements, and communism will take this into account: but it will not need to start from abstraction (even calculated directly without money) of comparable energy expenditure contained in these two activities. Communism will count and compare quantities and any eventual losses and waste will be much lower than those imposed by the calculus of a kind of universal production time.

"The theory of measuring goods or forecasting investments [in communism] by the amount of work done is incorrect. (...) This not a question regarding a quarrel of method but a fundamental problem which concerns the very nature of communism. The measurement of work remains economist. This sort of measurement desires the end of the law of value but does not see all that it implies. (...) The mistake is not in continuing to take into account need, sacrifice or production in the new society. The mistake is in packaging all this and to stick on it a label that reads "labor time" in an effort to reduce labor time and to globally oppose it to free time."<sup>10</sup>

No matter the goal of this calculus or its method, a society founded on labor time supposes that work remains distinct from non-work, and thus separated from the rest of all activities: if not then how or why would you measure it?

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<sup>9</sup> Short biography of J. Appel (in French) : [http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id\\_article=676collectif-smilny.org](http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id_article=676collectif-smilny.org).

<sup>10</sup> OJTR, Un Monde sans argent : le communisme, Chap. V, Ed. du Sandre, 2013.



On the other hand, if Marx implicitly kept the *firm* as a value-chain led by the collective worker, the G.I.C. puts it explicitly at the center as an economic unit. The partisans of this project did not ignore that certain firms, and certain workers within such firms, would inevitably be more productive than others: they foresaw a way of a way of correcting this inequality with a complex weighing method. We have rarely gone so far in a program that preserves *the foundations* of capitalism while placing them *under the complete control of workers*.

Bordiga was a bit off when he saw here an “entrepreneurial socialism,” but his councilist error arose from an essential preoccupation which he misunderstood: the desire for the emancipation of workers is a task set aside for the workers themselves. As Jan Appel noted, the real reason behind this plan was not so much a question of technics but rather of politics: to make it so that every worker participates in their management.

The G.I.C.’s plan owes a lot to the era after the crisis of 1929 where capitalism was seen as on the way towards concentration, nationalization and planification: this was an opinion shared by different people such as Otto Rühle, Bruno Rizzi, the Trotskyist dissidents Burhnam and Schactman, the councilists, Socialism or Barbarism, Karl Kosch in 1950 and even held by non-Marxists like A. Berle, G. Means and Schumpeter (Bordiga was one of rare few who did not share in this opinion.)<sup>11</sup>

Russia served as a counter-model: it was necessary to avoid repeating what happened after October 1917. The calculation of labor time would allow them to maintain control over firms and of the economy. The accounting of labor time is at once a condition and a guarantor of real and efficacious worker management: no one could know better than workers’ collectives how much time was exactly necessary to produce this or that and to thus determine the contribution of each within the common effort.

With their desire to present communism as a superior mode of production and to provide supporting figures that “this could work,” the Dutch comrades left behind a critique of work (let us remember that 1930 was the most favorable time to bring the question of work into the light... ).

If we raise the project of the G.I.C. along side our commentary of the *Grundrisse* in the last paragraph, we see that the councilists are faithful to Marx, as well (unbeknown to them) as faithful to the *Grundrisse*, which they could have not have known of in the 1930s: communism for them was collective administration made possible by the experienced gained through a phase of transition, which would finally serve as a school for rational management.

## 1.7 Does value abolish itself?

This question may surprise. Nonetheless, if the *Grundrisse* has had such a grand influence the past 40 years, it is because its reading allows for diverse interpretations and among those interpretations includes the notion of a capitalism forced to overcome itself.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1932, Berle and Means were among the first to theorize a capitalism of managers in *Property and control within the large enterprise*. Bruno Rizzi (1901-1977) publie en 1939 *La bureaucratisation du monde*. Pour un compte-rendu par Pierre Souyri de la réédition du livre chez Champ Libre en 1976 : [http://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess\\_03952649\\_1979\\_num\\_34\\_4\\_294092\\_t1\\_0894\\_0000\\_002](http://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess_03952649_1979_num_34_4_294092_t1_0894_0000_002) Sur la critique de la thèse d’un capitalisme « bureaucratique » ou « d’Etat » par Bordiga, voir entre autres : *La Doctrine du diable au corps*, 1951 : [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bordiga\\_amedeo/doctrine\\_diable\\_au\\_corps/doctrine\\_diable\\_au\\_corps.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bordiga_amedeo/doctrine_diable_au_corps/doctrine_diable_au_corps.html) Et ses *Thèses sur la Russie*, 1952 : <https://bataille-socialiste.wordpress.com/documents-historiques/1952-theses-sur-la-russie-bordiga/>

In 1857-58, anticipating the future of capitalism, and commenting on the first automated machines by Charles Babbage, forerunner of the computer, Marx wrote:

“(…) immediate work ceases to be as such the base for production; since on one hand work is transformed from an activity under surveillance and management, and on the other hand, the product [of work] ceases to be the result of isolated and direct work: it is the *combination* of social activity which appears as such as the producer.” (p. 308)

“While in its immediate form, labor ceases to be the grand source of wealth, labor time will cease to be, and should cease to be, the measure of labor, just as exchange-value will cease to be the measure of use-value. The surplus-labor of masses of humans will cease to be the condition of development of general wealth. (..) From then, production founded on exchange-value will collapse (..)” (p. 306)

In other terms, from this moment on it will be impossible to identify what the individual worker brings into the creation of wealth, value (by which we mean the regulation of production and the redistribution of goods by the measure of socially-necessary labor time) would become incompatible with the expansion of production and absurd within capitalism itself.

Let’s think about what Marx thought around the same time:

“At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of a society enter into contradiction with the existing productive relations. (..) So then opens up an era of social revolution.” (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859).

Although this preface later affirms that it is the proletariat which forms the principal of the productive forces, Marx did not share in the confidence of historical “progress” common to his time: for him capitalist development leads to communism. In the same way that merchant power had shattered the feudal framework and replaced it with aristocratic domination, he saw that economic socialization, the concentration of the masses of workers would prove incompatible with private property and bourgeois management of society. Suffice to say that proletarian revolution was conceived in much the same way as the model for bourgeois democratic revolution.

Marx cannot be reduced to this position, but it there is enough within his work to justify such a program, since capitalism ends up negating itself:

“In the same way that the bourgeois economic system develops bit by bit, likewise, so the ultimate result of this system gradually develops its own negation.” (*Grundrisse*, p. 311)

Many theorists (their names are legion) then applied themselves in the demonstration of how the “law of value” tends towards its own abolition (the word *law* demonstrates the transformation of critique into a science, that is to say it became a knowledge independent of proletarian practice).

Said in another way, capitalism will set into motion change at a revolutionary scale...but without revolution. For the social question resolves itself if there is a threshold where the wage laborer finds themselves obsolete, socially-average labor time becomes an inadequate measure and the inoperative regulator of a very socialized production will not last long before tearing apart wage laborers like a seam sown too tight.

## 1.8 Marxist Marx

To underline what separates communist Marx from his non-revolutionary posterity, many, us included, have tried to make it so that Marx would be the best critic of Marxism.<sup>12</sup> The intention is laudable but the argument is flawed.

How does Marx conclude *Capital*?

“The transformation of scattered private property, arising from individual labor, into capitalist private property is, naturally, a process, incomparably more protracted, violent, and difficult, than the transformation of capitalistic private property, already practically resting on socialised production, into socialised property. In the former case, we had the expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers; in the latter, we have the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people.”<sup>13</sup>

Is capitalism already a “collective mode of production”? Since the end of the 19th c., the socialist movement has exploited these lines (and others in the same way) to explain why a capitalism organized into firms ever more globally-interdependent would sooner or later escape both private property and the anarchy of production: it would therefore be enough to replace bourgeois bosses with worker representatives and socialism would come along on its own, without revolution, its arrival being a quasi-natural phenomenon.

It is not unreasonable for Marxists to seek in Marx a theory of capitalist socialization that would ultimately prevent capitalism from perpetuating itself. Here’s a good definition of “Marxism”: the replacement of proletarian action for gradual evolution, or with a beneficial catastrophe, which in both cases would appear to be comparable to the process of mutation among natural species. At the end of the 19th c. the manuscripts for *Capital* Vol. 2 and 3, published after the death of Marx, were read as the theory of the inexorable contradiction between bourgeois private property and the huge growth in the productive forces which even trusts and cartels would be unable to control.

100 years later, the 1857-58 manuscripts now available were interpreted as theorizing [Capital’s] unparalleled and yet irresistible structural limit. It is the very sources and forms of contemporary wealth which would call for a supersession [of Capital] which we need only put into effect. Toni Negri would not be the last to read into these lines of the *Grundrisse* that value (the regulation of production by labor-time and by finding the minimum production cost) has already ceased to govern contemporary society: it would thus only be a question of realizing this and to draw its consequences so that society radically changes. The world now resting on a collective intelligence, if this general intellect were to become aware of itself, would lead to us liberating ourselves. Briefly, in 1900 as in the 21st c., the production forces are presented as evading the control of those who control them and further, evading the logic of valorization and of wage laborers. With a difference only in size: the historical subject is no longer labor, definitely not the worker, but rather it is all of us, since the lecturer, just as the *mingong*, contributes to the world’s wealth.

Such an interpretation is partial and biased but can claim the letter and the spirit of Marxian works.

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<sup>12</sup> Maximilien Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme* (1974 et 1983), Entremonde, 2011 : <http://entremonde.net/IMG/pdf/CAHIERS04-Livre.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> *Œuvres*, I, Gallimard, p. 1240.

We need not oppose a young Marx to an old Marx, since these contradictions traverse and animate his texts from 1840 until the end of his life.<sup>14</sup>

Marx led a continuous and discontinuous project, from his first unpublished texts to his manuscripts written late in age (which are not yet all published). From the moment he showed his intuitions in the *Grundrisse*, he was in preparation for a grand voyage never fulfilled, *Capital*, a title revealing its priority: to go into the depths of capitalism to thus understand its possible overthrow. The means became the end: to comprehend that which was historically novel in the proletariat he sunk 20 years of study into capitalism. Moreover, in the later volumes of *Capital* foreseen by Marx – economic theories, the world market, classes, the State – none were to be devoted to the proletariat. Communism was thought of as coming from capitalism.

Undoubtedly, it is thanks to Marx that we can critique him and one of the most illuminating commentaries of him was that by Bordiga, writing more than a half century later, that we must read the ensemble of the Marxian oeuvre as a “description of characters in a communist society.” But today, on pain of behaving like an heir, we must see what dominated Marx. His dazzling intuitions, still in manuscript form, mix the supersession of the economy with the project of a communitarian economy. Marx is more a critic of value (the commodity, money) than of work (time, productivity). If Marxist thought allowed for the communist revival of the *mir* to be accorded a minor place compared to the industrialization of the world, it is because capitalist progress was accompanied by a worker’s movement that Marx saw as the true mainspring.

To understand Marx is also to distinguish Marx from Marxism without denying the link between the two. If not we run the risk of rewriting a Marx set to everyone’s taste or to the latest fashion.

## 1.9 Marxism

With such a subject so vast and abundantly documented, we will confine ourselves here to Engels and Lafargue.

That which Marx sketched out, Engels systematized, often stripping Marx of his profound ambiguities. For Engels, the passage from the ape to the human being was brought about by labor and language.<sup>15</sup> Work, which “started with the making of tools,” is described as natural, useful and conscious, its birth accompanied by language. Like Marx, but more straightforward, Engels identified productive activity and work.

The dominant interpretation of *The Right To Be Lazy* (a text largely distributed since its first edition in 1880, from social-democrat to anarchist milieus) finds within it a program that results from taking what is good in capitalism (production in abundance) and removing what is bad (exploitation of the producer). Paul Lafargue, this “redeemer of humanity,” explains that by

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<sup>14</sup> “Let’s not idealize the 1840 years as proof of an authentic communism which was then abandoned. The *Principals of Communism* by Engels in 1847 prefigure that which would become the socialist program a few decades later: “(...) to concentrate more and more within the hands of the State all of Capital, agriculture and industry, transportation and exchanges. (...) These measures (...) will become ever more centralized along with the growth of the productive forces thanks to the work of the proletariat. Finally, when the whole of Capital, production and exchanges are concentrated in the hands of the State, private property would also fall, money would become superfluous (...).” <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/47-pdc.htm> A good history book on this time period: Alain Maillard, *La Communnauté des Égaux. Le communisme néo-babouviste dans la France des années 1840*, Kimé, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> *Le Rôle du travail du travail dans la transformation du singe en homme*, 1876 : <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/76-rotra.htm>

dividing productive tasks among all instead of concentrating them in the hands of a few, thus forcing others to employment, socialism would reduce the work day to 3 hours thanks to the suppression of useless production. Coincidentally, it is also a 3-hour workday which Keynes in 1930 promised would come to pass by the end of the 20th c.<sup>16</sup>

Aristotle remains famous for his justification for slavery due to the need to produce food and useful objects so that a privileged minority could indulge in much more noble tasks: the Greek philosopher added that there would be no more slaves “if weaver’s looms weaved all by themselves” : it was Lafargue who proclaimed this day had come. Social-democrats and Stalinists had little trouble in “recuperating” *The Right To Be Lazy*: for them socialism was an extension of industrial development oriented until now for the benefit of the bourgeoisie, an extension supposedly done in the interests of the masses.

According to *The Right To Be Lazy*, work would hardly be work at all. A century later with automation, the myth of a post-industrial society, and more recently, the illusion of a new digital age, has lead some to believe that the 3-hour day announced by Lafargue did not seem so bad at all: work and leisure, manufacturing and creation would become one. Finally reconciling the *homo faber* with the *homo ludens* and thus work would cease to be work.

In 2009, Taillander published a collection of writings by Lafargue titled *Laziness and Revolution*. In the past the association of these two words would make for a provocative title, even an anarchist or situationist one. (“*Ne travaillez jamais*”). By the start of the 21st c., *redemption* by machines is passé, but paradoxically, the omnipotence of work allows a certain “criticism of work” to enter into social morays.<sup>17</sup>

But what do we generally have against work? Above all, we see it is a constraint, an alienation, an impoverisher of both the worker and of nature.<sup>18</sup>

It’s certainly all of those things, but such a critique does not engage with wage-laborers themselves (purchase-sale of human activity), nor work as separation (to make one’s living by producing to later consume thanks to the money gained).

## 2. Work and value

We will only deal here with societies where the constitutive features of work exist, knowing that they have only been fully developed in the last few centuries.

Every social analysis which implicates a definition of what is specific to human beings, for as long as this definition is explicit, at its bare minimum says: the human contributes in the production of their nature, which they are the co-creator of. The human does not model itself at will, but further becomes evolved by changing what surrounds them. In producing their material living conditions, human beings do more than this: to produce means to act in society, to speak, to travel ... human beings produce themselves and take their activity along with the activity of other human beings as an object: the human is a subject and has a history. The human sets themselves

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<sup>16</sup> *Perspectives économique pour nos petits-enfants* : [http://s182403251.onlinehome.fr/IMG/pdf/keynes\\_essais\\_de\\_persuasion.pdf](http://s182403251.onlinehome.fr/IMG/pdf/keynes_essais_de_persuasion.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> In their *Manifest contre le travail* (1999), Krisis describes work as no longer necessary under capitalism, which on the one hand becomes less and less necessary and that the little work it retains is completely devoid of meaning.

<sup>18</sup> Bob Black sums up the dominant perception to found in radical milieus: “My definition of work is forced labor, obligatory production. These two parameters are essential. (...) Work violates freedom.” (*Abolition of work*, 1985)

apart from themselves (and can even become alien to themselves). This implies a choice, this implies freedom (and its eventual loss).

This objectification contains the possibility of *work*.

## 2.1 Whomever speaks of work speaks of classes

So that this potentiality becomes realized, there needs to be a surplus and this surplus would need to be more than a simple reserve (of food, notably): a useful surplus is necessary to liberate a member of society from the obligation of producing for themselves, thus allowing this member to produce for *other* members. Work is a form of human activity taken when work creates a surplus which escapes it. Work is a relation between *necessary work* and *surplus labor* : there is a separation between the expenditure of energy necessary to maintain the worker, and the expenditure of energy beyond this maintenance, which creates a surplus. Workers only exist for as long as a non-worker is making them labor for their benefit. Work, an activity whose product recurs to others, implies (and maintains) the division of groups within a society with opposed interests. Society is divided among workers and non-workers, where non-workers are reaping the production of workers. The worker may maintain some control of their means of production and organize them themselves, but the result of his labor does not belong to them. Work is a class relation.

## 2.2 Work reduces all activity to a single substance

Human activity begins to take the form of *work* when humanity, over thousands of years and in places which we will never know, arrives at certain practices, few in number at the beginning, which have ceased to be lived and received in such a way that each can have and produce what they specifically need, e.g. flour or fabric. From that moment on, that flour or fabric had begun to exist, above all, by and for their capacity to be able to be exchanged one for the other, and have been treated ever since in light of what they have in common: being both different results but comparable within the same practice known as work, now susceptible to be reduced to a universal and quantifiable given, the humanly necessary average amount of effort needed to make that flour or fabric. From then on these two objects have been produced *for* what they have in common, this substance known as *value*.

Then came a decisive change, the passage of the exchange of one commodity for another (flour/fabric), looking to satisfy two needs that meet, an exchange aiming to obtain not a particular useful object, flour or fabric, but the money destined to buy any kind of object, or to be saved or invested.

Crystallized labor, money gave value a material form.

Money is not the result of practical necessity, for example to facilitate barter or as a convenient means of exchanging a sack of flour for a length of fabric so that those in this barter don't "lose anything." Credit and debt precede money and as a proof we have the masses of ancient peasants who were in debt before the invention of money.

Whatever their origins, work and money have become inseparable. Even under their immaterial forms of credit card chips and lines of credit, they materialize the way in which activities and human being relate to each other, and lastly how classes relate to each other.

If value reveals and manifests exchange, its source lies within work and money serves to link up that which the division of labor separates.

As the history of the *longue durée* Fernand Braudel said one day: “The misfortune is that the market exists and then you do not get to see what goes on underneath.”

### **2.3 Wage laborers make of work a commodity**

With wage laborers, work is not just activity done for money: it also an activity which is bought and sold.

With the generalized sale-purchase of labor power, for the first time in history, social classes distinctly distinguish themselves from their respective place (bourgeois or proletariat) occupied by each within production. The relation between necessary work and surplus labor structures the world. No society can survive without productive activity, but modern society is the first to live under the domination of (waged) work.

This crucial fact is doubly obscured. First, there’s the general tendency of making everyone need a wage and thus “everyone works,” even the CEO, blurring the opposition between the worker and the non-worker. Then, there’s two or three thousand proletarians without work or some who are semi-proletarianized who stand outside the class of wage laborers which they nonetheless form a part of.

This generalization of a class of wage laborers creates a completely novel situation, even for those condemned to total or partial unemployment. The slave, the serf and the sharecropper shared the historical perspective that they need only get rid of the domination of the master, the lord of the landowner to be able to work freely. Today, the computer assembler or the palm oil wage laborer can only free themselves by putting an end to their own existence as a bearer of labor power, this commodity which potentially contains all other commodities. Only commodified work can get rid of work. The program is no longer one of liberating work, but to liberate ourselves *from work*. Work is that which transforms activity into salable labor power and which only recognizes the whole of human capacities as labor power.

### **2.4 Work as separated activity**

Work is the form taken by the production of the material conditions necessary for life when that productive activity has become detached from the rest of activities, in varying degrees and forms. The modern-day workforce cuts up their time between work, homelife, school, hobbies, vacations, etc. and the space between places to earn money, live, shop, be entertained and so on.

The space-time of non-work is not a capitalist creation: it has coexisted with the space-time of work ever since the appearance of work. The capitalist novelty lies in pushing this separation to the extreme, accentuating the split between that which is productive and non-productive of value.

### **2.5 Work is productivity and accounting**

Organized into a series of competitive firms, where each is a value-chain in search of optimal growth, capitalism logically tends to increase surplus labor at the expense of necessary labor.

Work brings along with it productivity and normalization, with a permanent search for ever more efficient methods of diminishing the cost of renewing manufacturing processes: the famous “development of productive forces.” Work and value – one cannot go without the other – implying production for production’s sake – for the accumulation of value – and with it “productivism” and planned obsolescence.

Today we constantly measure things against each other, compare and exchange them according to the average labor-time they require or are supposed to require, which also leads us to evaluate acts and people.

The augmentation in productivity (the growth of surplus labor which creates new value in relation to the necessary labor compared to the simple reproduction of labor power) is essential to all which we have recounted here. If the search for productivity is an irresistible force, with such destructive effects for humanity and nature, it is because the race for ever more profitability is the engine of capitalism; this race is its power and also the cause of its crises. So as to become more profitable than their competitors, each firm is led by an intensification of work, a development of mechanization and the growth of capital invested in equipment, tools, robots, etc., increasing its mass of value and ending up suffering diminishing returns.

## 2.6 Work is the reduction of everything to its minimum time

If human societies have over the last few centuries moved towards the evermore precise and rigorous measure of time, it is so that they may economize it so that production time may be reduced. The obsession with “winning” time and the fear of “losing” it are integral to capitalism. To work is to struggle against time.

On the contrary, human beings for whom the frantic search for productivity is not an imperative, have no need to measure everything by the seconds and minutes as they produce.

The best way to render energy-use in the most productive way possible is to measure it by time so as to shorten it. For this reason the separation between work and the rest of life is essential to the accounting of time which finds itself at the core of value: one cannot measure a moment and the effort expended in that moment unless that segment of time is detached from all others.

We know how much to pay for a housekeeper: we cannot know the “worth” of what a housewife does in their own home. Even if the two accomplished the same tasks between 9AM and noon, those 180 minutes do not have the same meaning for the employee who came to perform a three-hour task and for the housewife who is busy at home performing various tasks.

Even the “by piece” wage of a single worker alone at his machine will be calculated according to the number of seconds need to make each piece.

Indeed, one cannot **really** reduce labor time, because labor time, by its socially-average definition, is not calculable for each task or for each object. A worker’s wage at their machine will be the *price* of a work whose *value* cannot be calculated, the specific contribution of this worker to all the value created in the firm. Money really is crystallized labor, only existing as an instrument within the circulation of goods under the condition that these commodities also set in motion other commodities and not by the calculation of the quantity of labor each carries within it. A specific loaf of bread and a teapot can be comparable in weight and not by the energy expenditure need to produce either of them. Whatever Taylor may have believed, no scientific method will ever quantify the new value added by a specific work task within a workshop or an office.



“Rational madness,” Taylorism is none the less consistent with the necessities of Capital.<sup>19</sup> As soon as a computer mousepad plant begins to use equipment which requires the worker to produce more but at the same wage, management ignores the precise resulting increase of value, meanwhile it knows exactly how much it will pay the worker, how many mousepads the worker is supposed to make within a given time and how much they will sell each mousepad for. What is important here is that the introduction of new equipment forces the worker to be more productive. All the bourgeois knows, and which they count, are the prices, first the wages and the profits and although economists speak of *value* and *creation of value*, they openly consider “value” to be a metaphysical speculation.

The capitalist struggle against time bears the effect of a planned permanent obsolescence of commodities. Another consequence is the obsession with saving time in everyday life. These two phenomena have accelerated in the last twenty and thirty years, giving rise to a denunciation of speed and “the dictatorship of immediacy”; we see eulogies to slowness, slow food...reactions with little impact because they do not ascend to recover labor time.

30 years ago, a study by Barbara Garson showed *how computers are transforming the office of the future into the factory of the past*.<sup>20</sup> The wage worker charged with taking airline ticket reservations by phone sees their work cut up into four mandatory phrases, timed and monitored. “To control everything, that’s the goal of the system,” declared one employee. It’s not simply that “the system” knows everything done at each moment but that for this end “the system” decomposes each gesture to such a degree that the work becomes more and more incomprehensible for those who do it (at the very moment where the operation of our daily objects become infinitely more mysterious to us than the motor in the fridge).

In 1966 when an MIT researcher came up with the ELIZA program, an automated therapist who responded without human intervention to medical questions, this expert system found widespread approval, many considering it already a human therapist “as an information processor and decision-taker.” If this shortening of human skills was possible, it was because knowledge and social relations have already previously been reduced to mechanics, to the quantifiable.

Computerization is not the cause: a machine does not create a social relation. Capitalism privileges the result (the product) over the process, the (measurable) object over relations and privileges the decomposable and quantifiable tasks over the continuity of the ensemble. But why bother to reduce the cost of labor which remains a small part of the cost of production? According to official statistics, around 1980, in the metal industry, direct work accounted for 10% of total costs. 30 years later, a pair of Nike Air Pegasus would sell for \$70 in the United States, which includes a \$3 wage for Asian workers, \$16 for raw materials and \$16 for design and advertising which adds up to \$35. In summary, \$3 in labor, a production cost of \$35 for a sale price of \$70.<sup>21</sup>

This is so because the game is not played from an accounting point of view. It is about controlling the direct workers who, unlike executives, advertisers and machines, are likely to resist or strike. “That’s why,” concluded B. Garson, “any large mass of workers that can be automated will be. Automated does not necessarily mean that robots will replace them, but that their work is organized so as to become controllable at all times. At least in theory, because it is always the one who execute the work that will be best able to control the work. As the old worker at Renault

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<sup>19</sup> B. Doray, *Le Taylorisme, une folie rationnelle ?*, Dunod, 1981.

<sup>20</sup> *The Electronic Sweatshop. How Computers are Transforming the Office of the Future into the Factory of the Past*, Penguin, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> D. Cohen, *Trois leçons sur la société post-industrielle*, Seuil, 2006.

said: “Your boss pays you for your work, not for the way you do the work.” At the beginning of the 20th century, counters were installed on typewriters to check the number of keystrokes: some typists responded by leaving wider spaces, by not hitting the space bar one time, but two, three, four, even five times.

## 2.7 The society of king-labor

Our order of presentation is not chronological: we did not go back to the origin of work, knowing that in real history these elements related to work did not take on the same importance at the same time. It has taken millenia before there was an exchange of equivalents, that is to say, an exchange based on the more or less rigorous estimates of necessary labor time and that “the law of value” would come and equalize private work. Moreover, “money,” as the means to count in terms of value and production and to circulate goods according to an exchange of equivalents indeed precedes currency as we know it: there were not instruments specifically reserved for the function of money (which also did not have other uses, whether everyday or ritualistic). The arrival of coinage is late (7th. Century B.C.).

In the world in which we live, each of the aspects which we have conveniently distinguished in the exposition are the conditions for all the others. For example, to force humans to “make a living” via the wage, it was necessary to deprive them of autonomous means of existence (§2.1). Further, measuring work supposes that it is separated from all other activities (§2.4). It is only modern capitalism which has fully developed the constitutive elements of work.

Despite the fact that only a minority of the world’s population receive a wage and that even smaller minority benefits from a good labor contract (with fixed & duly paid wages, labor rights, social security contributions and union dues), the wage-employment nonetheless dominates.

Capitalist forms determine pre-capitalist forms. A 9 year old Turkish girl shepherding her parent’s herd of goats contributes to the family’s income. Meanwhile, one of her brothers lives by working odd jobs in a neighboring city, and the eldest brother works in a factory in Germany, where in 10 years maybe the young Turkish girl may work as a cleaning lady. This family is integrated into the global reproduction of the Capital/labor relation. The global market brings in more and more people into its logic, a minority of Earthlings today live on a purely “economy of subsistence” and work and money penetrate into the heart of slums.

It all depends on the point of view. For a sociologist or an anthropologist the activity of the young girl remains “entrenched” in precapitalist relations and he would describe how her kinship ties are saturated with archaisms, since, for example, her family has destined her to an arranged marriage. The anthropologist is not wrong. But for those who want to understand the nature of work, the method consists in finding what is in common between the young Turkish girl and a worker of Maruti Suzuki, or with a Bolivian bank employee (which is not to say that the three would have the same impact on the course of history).

The dominant social relation (wage labor) is not the sole one, but it determines all the others, including any sort of benevolent activity (which is labor indirectly remunerated), as well as including slavery (forced unpaid labor with absolute boss control over the worker, estimated at between 20 and 30million worldwide). And while we may read that the *informal economy* makes up 40% (made up of mostly women) of the so-called active world population, this statistic utilizes

a category produced by the existence of wage-laborers which distinctly classifies that which does not enter its strict framework (labor contract) of work.<sup>22</sup>

Let us not confuse *work* with *employment*. The undeniable fact that there are and will be fewer hires than the unemployed in the world does not prevent productive work from remaining the center of the world today. What is called “social security” refers to the place of work: the money paid (or not) to the student, the unemployed, the sick, to families, to the elderly, the disabled is granted to categories that either cannot, cannot yet or cannot any longer work. Although public opinion denounces king-money (and more subtle theoreticians denounce the domination of value), it would be more accurate to say that we live under the reign of work, that is to say, wage labor.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Neither work nor economy

§2 sought out to identify six characteristics which altogether constitute work: necessary work/surplus-labor and class divisions; value; commodification; separation; productivity and accounting; and time. Our ambition was not to construct a theoretical machine which would cease to function as soon as you remove one piece, as though, missing three of these six components, work would only partially continue to exist: only abstraction requires the separation into categories that which in reality is nested.

To comprehend the possible link between capitalism and a revolution which would abolish work, instead of taking these six elements separately, let's consider them next as a whole.

#### 3.1 Production is not economy

“Production” is often assimilated into artisanal or industrial fabrication of objects. It would seem to be more apropos to consider, as Alain Testart, does that there is production “whenever the means of work are applied to raw material to turn it into a consumable product in a form in which it was not before.”<sup>24</sup> Hunter, harvester and fisher, unlike predators, make use of weapons and knowledge. By producing, the human also produces *instruments* and *means* of production, for example a bow for hunting. With agriculture, the human modifies nature with the intentional sowing of nutritional plants: from hunter-gather, the human becomes a “producer.”

But *production is not synonymous with economy*.

The difficulty lies in understanding that the production of the material conditions for existence has become a reality we call economy, progressively more autonomous from the rest of life, to the point where in the modern era it is a distinct sphere, with a separation between the time-space consecrated to making a living (work) and all other activities.

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<sup>22</sup> B. Lautier, *L'Economie informelle dans le tiers-monde*, Repères, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> G.D., *La boulangère & le théoricien (sur la théorie de la forme-valeur)*, 2014 : <https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?s=forme-valeur>

<sup>24</sup> *Avant l'histoire*, Gallimard, 2012.

There is no “economic history,” because economy is a historical fact that has not reigned at all times and everywhere. For example, the noting of “per capita income” or “of households” only has any meaning when there exists individual persons or nuclear households.<sup>25</sup>

Malthus attributed the possible crisis of capitalism to a growth of population that goes over the growth of resources, particularly food. Ecologists explain history by the capacity or the incapacity for societies to adjust to the environment to their needs. Rejuvenated by its taking into account of natural resources and the need to renew these resources, economic thought is nonetheless economic: its number one problem is the creation of a balance between means and ends. It’s a morality based on accounting.

Gregory Clark wrote in a well-documented book: “during the Malthusian era economic laws governing human society are the same as those governing all animal societies.”<sup>26</sup> The driving thread within history would be the evolution of the relationship between available resources and the population, whether human or animal: the same reasoning was applied to the residents Charleville-Mézières, as the deer of the nearby Ardennes [forests].

Nonetheless, far from being an apologist for progress, Gregory Clark argues, with backing figures, that hunter-gathers spent between 4 and 5 hours a day gathering food; that in 1800 the average Earthling did not live better than those who lived 100,000 years before Christ; that in Asia the conditions were even worse, and that the so-called primitive “produced” more calories per hour of “work” than the civilized did in England. These facts are sobering, but what these figures show is a desire to reduce everything to measurability, as if the Amazonian and the Yorkshire laborer lived the same social relationship, separated only by different degrees on a scape of production and consumption.

The dominant mental schema has changed little since [Henri de] Saint-Simon’s time: “the production of useful things is the sole reasonable, and positive goal that political societies can propose for themselves.” The ideal would then be a society where “all men work. This obligation is imposed on all to constantly give their personal efforts toward a useful direction for society.” (*L’Industrie*, 1811-1812). For Saint-Simon, the merchant or farmer are as much “producers” as the worker or the industrialist (For him socialism would mean the suppression of the merchant and to meld the worker and the industrialist into one figure).

Under economic thought, society relies on the production and the allotment of resources. The socialist economist also brings into the fold the criterion of utility and of justice; the ecological economist brings the obligation of harmony with nature; but it is still a question of administrating a surplus: the relation between necessary labor and surplus labor become thought of as self-evident: it is a matter of producing something to eat, somewhere to live, somewhere to heal oneself...then finally arrive to the spice of life. Utility before what is pleasant. Soup before the concert. We must first be ants to then become a cicada.

To retain the relationship between necessary labor and surplus-labor is to retain work itself.

The fundamental mistake is to make everything about meeting the need to satisfy basic needs. Without food, I die: this self-evident statement only makes sense if it is connected to the fact that human existence is social. I don’t eat first so I can then be in society. Hunger is always lived and treated in function to the conditions imposed upon by human beings (whether they’re in

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<sup>25</sup> This is not stopped Thomas Piketty from measuring the relationship between the return on capital (from patrimonial wealth ) and the rate of growth of the last 2,000 years as though these realities had similar worth in ancient Rome as they do in contemporary New York.

<sup>26</sup> A Farewell to Alms. A Brief Economic History of the World, Princeton UP, 2007.

Alaska or Tahiti) and their social organization. Hunger does not further intervene: both play at the same time: the cold is not more the cause of social life of the Inuit than the tropical humidity is the cause of the Tahitians. No vital necessity takes precedence over social links: between the two there is a simultaneity. The same is true under capitalism. Likewise in revolution. Similarly in communism. Except that production will no longer play the same role.

It is not a question of how do human beings produce themselves?; nor, what do they produce? (whether education software or assault weapons) But rather: what place do they take within the production of human life.

According to a widespread idea in the radical milieu, the objective will not be to “produce just to produce,” but rather to create the minimum abundance necessary without which human emancipation will not be possible.

Alfred Rosemer wrote in 1923: “Communism supposes and demands abundance because the distribution of products should be simple and easy.”<sup>27</sup>

The real motive of this imperative for production is to not allow overconsumption: Rosmer prioritizes abundance because he sees in it the necessary condition for a just distribution.

Inversely, others make of a frugal moderation the condition of a free and solidarity-based community. In *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin (1974), on the planet Anarres owes much of its rather libertarian<sup>28</sup> way of life to its harsh climates, which lends itself to favor mutual aid and also makes accumulation difficult.

Whether one prefers abundance or a soberness in production, in both visions, the priority is economic. This what we must criticize.

### 3.2 Communism as an activity

A frequent criticism of capitalism is that it fabricates goods without taking care of real needs, and then goes on to sell its wares on the market: the satisfaction of needs is but a side consequence. This conception then leads some to do the opposite: *to start* off based on needs, but this time based on supposed real needs which are decided upon collectively; a conception which desires to satisfy these needs through adequate production and equitable distribution, without the mediation of the market, thanks to a communitarian, democratic and self-organized organization.

This ignores that *needs* also make up an economic category.

Let’s observe that needs are almost always defined in the negative: to not die of hunger, of cold or of sickness; to not be forced to sleep in the rain, etc. When we speak of *needs*, we speak of a *lack*.

It is self-evident that human beings have basic necessities, such as to eat and to sleep, just as it is imperative to match these with existing resources. That which is untrue is the idea that human life consists of, above all, satisfying these needs. The only way we satisfy these needs, or fail in doing so, is by way of social interrelations. It is only under exceptional circumstances that we eat just so that we will not die. For human beings, to eat will always be *more* than just eating. Generally, we eat in the company of others, chosen or not, or we choose to eat alone, or we are

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<sup>27</sup> *L’Humanité*, 3 février 1923, cité dans Ch. Gras, *Alfred Rosmer (1877-1964) et le mouvement révolutionnaire international*, Maspéro, 1971.

<sup>28</sup> Translator’s note: here ‘libertarian’ is closer to ‘anarchist’ than those who, in the English-speaking world, have taken on this term as a way to align with small gov’t and free-market capitalism.

forced to eat alone, which is also itself a social situation. Often we follow a diet, either dietary or not.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes we have to skip a meal so as to not eat or drink too much. The same is true of all our other vital activities. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, meeting vital needs also creates new needs, and “this production of new needs is the first historical fact.”

Contrary to a common error, the “materialist conception of history” does not say that “the economy” leads the world. This is often the way that the first part of *The German Ideology* is read, although Marx intended something else altogether. Firstly, social relations depend on how we produce our material conditions for life and not what our ideas are of the world. Secondly, we produced these material conditions in relation with other human beings, and in class societies, we create them through class relations. The “materialist conception” does not make “the economy” the motor of human evolution, but it can explain how the current domination of the economy over our world is a historical phenomena; a phenomena that was unknown in pre-history and one which was less important in Athens 500b.c. than in Athens 2015; and it is a phenomena which will disappear with communism.

Without developing what is said within *From Crisis to Communization*, let us say here that our problem lies not in inventing a new society which will put in parallel our needs and resources (as the economists may want), or transform artificial and extravagant needs into reasonable needs so as to attain a sufficient frugality (as the ecologists may want). It is rather a matter of understanding what our basic needs truly are. The first human need, wrote Marx, is the need for the other. We would say: the need to feed ourselves is indissoluble from the need of the other, and the two are satisfied (or not) at the same time. We must eat, that much is self-evident, and social relations do not fill empty stomachs, but we eat within those social relations.

All of this is verified during revolutionary periods: “without reserves,” the proletariat having neither money or food, or arms (at first), find their only strength is their acting with other proletarians.

Admittedly, at first the pressure of circumstances (internal conflicts, armed struggle, shortages...) will sometimes lead the insurgents to share and distribute as justly as possible (in both sense of the word), so, whether it they like it or not, they must ration. But the revolution would be damned if it proved incapable of distinguishing a social emergency from the rest of its fundamental “program,” it would be damned if it were to allow social emergency to determine its base.

We will not ask ourselves: “How many roof tiles are necessary for that house?” but rather: “how many could it house?” Starting from there, we will then figure out how many  $x$  tiles are necessary by how many  $y$  squared meters for the roof: to suppress *accounting* does not mean we will renounce the use of measurements.

The communizing motor of action will not be the search for the best or the most equal way of distributing goods, but rather the human relations and activities found therein: within communization, activity is more important than its productive result because this result depends on an activity and of ties that could and would strengthen bonds among the insurgents. That which stirs the proletariat to act is not the need to eat, it is the need to create among other proletarians a social relation, which among other things will also feed them.

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<sup>29</sup> Translator’s note: in French the word for “diet” is “régime” which can mean either a diet taken on for health reasons (‘dietary’) or just a diet that we follow on custom (‘or not’).

The need to create food, to cultivate carrots for example, will be satisfied by way of social relations which, among other activities, will cultivate beans, which will not mean that each minute or hour of horticulture will be lived as a kind of a joy without cloudy skies.

Counter-revolution will of course exploit our inevitable disarray and local shortages. The revolution will not respond by bringing back to life an even-more productive industry, nor will it do away with bourgeois armies by creating an even stronger army. “Realism” is to be found where you least expect it. It is the bureaucrats whom of course will try to pass themselves as “practical,” explaining that after insurrectionary spontaneism must follow productive organization, which solely could resolve the most vital and urgent problems. Through means of some large and small transformations, the ideology of “common sense” (a hammer or computer are neutral, they will tell us, and that they’re neither capitalist nor communist) will promote a concern for efficiency which, despite a shift in discourse, will contain all the traits of productivity. However, work and productivity are linked. Work normalizes things. Keeping track of time during production demands that we separate it from the rest of the day, thus we detach it from life by distinctly calling it *work*. Revolution cannot make time-saving one of its priorities.

The division of labor will neither be overcome by a simple permanent sharing of duties. A varied form of work remains work. Working cooperatively is also work: collective work is also work. Working two hours a day is also work. The replacement of private producers with communitarian production, or the systematic re-distribution of tasks, only makes communist sense if the products are not compared – and thus incomparable – among each other (nor the activities which have produced them) by way of some calculus (implicit or not) of the real or supposed average labor time to make them. Because if we count, if social life revolves around this measure, whatever the mode of association, sooner or later value will reappear, even in a community with the most fraternal intentions.<sup>30</sup>

This text started with a fictitious boss who offered illusory employment. In the so-called real world, many of our contemporaries “make a living” by making up marketing campaigns, which others print, then are deposited into mailboxes, which then are recovered at the dump to make into recycled paper, on which will be printed new prospectus, while experts are hired to analyze it all and intellectuals are hired to deplore them. The surrealists asked themselves if we suffered either *too little* or *too much* from reality... At any rate, the “absurdity” of work will never be enough to do away with it. We will need nothing less than a revolution. We do not ignore that “there is something ridiculous in talking about revolution”: “But the *whole rest of it* is even more ridiculous, since it is that which exists, along with the various forms its accepted.”<sup>31</sup>

\* G.D.

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<sup>30</sup> To learn more on what would make a communist revolution, see chapter 5 (« L’Insurrection créatrice ») of this book, which this is an excerpt of : *De la Crise à la communisation*, Entremonde, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> *Internationale Situationniste*, n°6, 1961 : [https://www.larevuedesressources.org/IMG/pdf/internationale\\_situationniste\\_6.pdf](https://www.larevuedesressources.org/IMG/pdf/internationale_situationniste_6.pdf)

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Here you will find a lightly modified chapter 3 from the book "*From Crisis to Communization*"  
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