

Notes on The Manifesto Against Labor

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It would seem to be granting too much credit to technological modernization to say that it has made labor “superfluous”. Without even considering the qualitative dimension of labor saving technology (what does “liberation” by machines cause us to lose?), it is quite doubtful that, in the quantitative sense, modernization makes labor obsolete and can only preserve it by increasingly artificial means (the central thesis of the *Manifesto*).

Not to speak of the “jobs directly created by technological innovation” (and what jobs!), what must be taken into account are all the waged activities that this same process makes socially necessary (at the same time that it abolishes others): the psycho-social classification of the “lonely crowd”, police control of “savagery”, the “health” industry (an expanding sector where it exists), entertainment and “cultural” compensations for the desertification of life, not to mention the field of “remediation”, the technical improvisation of a neo-nature. It is true that all this “labor” is only necessary in the society of alienation, within the framework of its mad logic, etc., but its necessity is no less horribly real in these conditions; it is something like cancer: knowing that it is the product (in most cases) of one’s living conditions does not cure it: one still needs to resort (with greater or lesser prudence, which is another problem) to existing medicine. Likewise, knowing that the economic calamity is the inexhaustible raw material of all the “goods”, “conveniences” or “remedies” produced by the market economy does not obviate the fact that this calamity is a system of material impositions from which no one is exempt. (One can refuse, out of dignity or disgust, its various compensations and rewards, but one cannot refuse the privations that the former cause to be necessary and even desirable for most people; cf. Günther Anders regarding television.¹

To speak, under these conditions, of a “conquest of the means of production by free associations” (p. 63) amounts to a rhetoric of prayer. Means of production? Production of what? Of more economic calamity (dependence, isolation, social pathology), that is, of what the free associations are attempting to abolish as the first plank on their program. Let us take the example of a basic need like housing, having a roof over your head. The way this need is “satisfied” by industrial society is well known: mass housing; vast urban concentrations; the cell of *Existenzminimum*. “Free associations” fighting for the transformation of all this will inherit “means of production” (the

¹ “Whatever we do or refrain from doing, our private strike will not change anything, because today we live in a humanity for which the ‘world’ and the experience of the world have lost all their value: now, nothing is of interest if it is not the ghost of the world and the consumption of this ghost” (The Obsolescence of Man, 1956).

construction and public works industries) that can only be used to construct precisely the same things, with a few variations (they could, strictly speaking, “bring the facades to life” and give the concrete a quick makeover; but this is already being done). And this example is a relatively benign one compared to others, such as industrial agriculture or nuclear power, to illustrate the lengthening shadow cast by today’s alienation over any imaginable future.

Thus, Krisis seems to have preserved—at least in some passages of the *Manifesto*—precisely the most obsolete part of the project of the old revolutionary workers movement: the idea of a possible re-appropriation of the “productive forces” of big industry, in the form given them by capitalism. It must be admitted, however, that over the course of the 20th century, let us say, between Hiroshima and Chernobyl, a threshold has been crossed in the transformation of “productive forces” into “destructive forces”. Since its origins, capitalism has been waging a permanent war against everything that exists independently of it (in nature, social relations and human activities); but, once a certain stage of technical power was reached, this war, with its constantly accelerating cycle of destruction/reconstruction, has become the principle motor of capitalist valorization. The technological “remediation” applied to a truly devastated world is, of course, for any lucid soul, the guarantee of new devastations, but from the perspective of the market economy it is above all the guarantee of job creation, always more jobs, to restore, decontaminate, clean up, manipulate, that is, to create value along with disaster.

To summarize: the naturalization of the need for labor is not only ideological (as the *Manifesto* points out); it has been embodied in facts, it has materialized in the form of the ongoing catastrophe. Put another way, one can claim, with Anselm Jappe, that “historically, capitalism constitutes an exception, a monstrosity”,² but one must immediately add that it has succeeded in almost totally destroying that which, when contrasted to it, made it an exception and a monstrosity.

It seems to me that the principal “blind spot” in the analysis set forth by the *Manifesto* is its adherence to a certain Marxist orthodoxy that requires the preservation of the postulate of a “good side” to capitalism’s technological development. (As everyone knows, the assumption is that this technological development can only be capitalist in the formal sense.) This is particularly evident in the praise bestowed on several occasions on the “microelectronics revolution”, which appears to produce “wealth” and seems to free us from “routine tasks”; when in reality information technology impoverishes everything it touches and spreads the routine of its procedures everywhere. But what is most striking is the vacillation over this question exhibited by the authors of the *Manifesto*. They write, for example, that “once the objective capitalist determinations of labor have been removed, the modern forces of production will be capable of bringing about an enormous increase in the amount of free time available to everyone”, but almost immediately add, as if to correct this foolish remark, that “only a small part of technology in its capitalist form will be suitable for use”; a statement that, on a moment’s reflection, seems to totally negate the previous claim.

To conclude: to believe that use value and emancipatory technology can be recovered intact, once they are stripped of their capitalist form, makes no sense and predisposes one to the kind of contradictions encountered several times in the *Manifesto*. We do not live in Marx’s time, and

² The quotations from Anselm Jappe (a member of the Krisis Group) are from a text announcing a conference, held in early 2003, marking the occasion of the publication of the book Krisis by the Longo Mai de Forcalquier cooperative.

the ambiguities of his theory (the progressivist hopes placed in the benefits of big industry) no longer have the least justification. The contradiction undermining the old society is not that of the preservation of “abstract labor”, “the sale of the commodity labor power”, and the means of production that will hypothetically allow us to free ourselves from the former. Commodity society’s fatal contradiction (but perhaps it is also civilization’s fatal contradiction, and the fatal contradiction of the possibilities for humanization which civilization has produced over the course of history) is that which exists between certain means of production, that is, “scientific fixed capital”, or modern technology, on the one hand, and on the other the vital necessities of the appropriation of nature, from which no human society can escape (barring the adaptive mutation announced by the geneticists).

Any social organization, regardless of its form, is before anything else a form of appropriation of nature, and it is with regard to this aspect that commodity society has failed miserably. The flight forward into artificialization, as proposed by the neotechnological utopia, which attempts to resolve the problem by abolishing it, is only one manifestation of this failure. The “absolute historical limit” discussed by the *Manifesto* is actually situated there: the undifferentiated labor of big industry (from which all particularity, individual qualities, local character, etc., have been eliminated) has finally, after successive “technological revolutions”, realized its concept as dead labor, death in labor. And this is no mere formula: de-vitalization is evident in all fields, and every technological palliative makes it worse. Industrial labor has the product (de-individualized, interchangeable man, the human material of mass society) and the “world” of the product (the representation of the world that conforms to total production). With the “new technologies”—the sensory world reduced to digital data sets, and biological life to easily manipulated and recombinant codes—industrial imprisonment is in a sense “closed”, but at the same time humanity thereby finds itself cut off from all its resources, biological as well as spiritual. It is obvious that such madness cannot last very long, but it could lead even deeper into the “de-civilization” and “savagery” evoked in the last pages of the *Manifesto*.

To conclude these brief and all-too-disjointed notes, I will say that the fear of resorting to a vulgarly edifying formulation of “positive principles”, or perhaps of succumbing to the futility of making “recipes for the cook-shops of the future”, seems to have prevented the authors of the *Manifesto* from pursuing their critique of the rule of dead labor and its techno-scientific rationality to its logical conclusion. It is true, of course, that the critique of “technology” can easily slide into impractical abstraction, with all the risks from idealist regression to pious “ethical” wishes, spiritualism or estheticism (the flourishing of this kind of false consciousness must be seen as a symptom of most people’s confusion when faced with the immense practical tasks imposed by the prospect of reasonably dismantling the industrial system). However, the effort of “combining the forms of counter-social practice with the offensive rejection of labor” (p. 71) cannot be undertaken without a coherent critical assessment of all the technological means developed by modern capitalism, which for their part also take on a coherent, albeit totalitarian form. This assessment, of course, is based on a conception of the kind of life we would like to live, but one which has absolutely nothing abstract or arbitrary about it: it is based on a lucidly historical consciousness of the contradictory process of civilization, of the partial humanization which has allowed this process to continue, and which is reaching its limit with the current anthropological rupture. It is not a matter of “going back” but of re-appropriating humanity’s vital forces by destroying the machinery that has paralyzed them. This is the only possible meaning of a program that seeks the “reproduction of life beyond labor” (p. 71).

A serious discussion of the *Manifesto*'s theses would require the examination of other points. But I have focused on what seemed to me to be central points for an attempt to specify to what extent “a critique of capitalism without a critique of industrial society is as foolish as a critique of industrial society without a critique of capitalism”³ (Anselm Jappe) and to thus make a contribution to the formation of this “new public counter-space”, “a free intellectual space where one can think the unthinkable”, whose necessity is evoked by the authors of the *Manifesto*.

³ The quotations from Anselm Jappe (a member of the Krisis Group) are from a text announcing a conference, held in early 2003, marking the occasion of the publication of the book Krisis by the Longo Mai de Forcalquier cooperative.

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