

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



The Ghost of Theory

Jaime Semprun

Jaime Semprun
The Ghost of Theory
August 25, 2010

Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from libcom.org
Translated from the Spanish translation available at:
colaboratorio1.wordpress.com

theanarchistlibrary.org

August 25, 2010

edly be more useful for getting through the impending catastrophes than any number of theoretical writings that persist in calmly pondering, as if we stood on solid ground, the why and the wherefore of the shipwreck of industrial society.

who arriving at the scene of an area devastated by an earthquake can find nothing more urgent to do than to spread out the Persian carpets—which by the way are already somewhat moth-eaten—and to display the somewhat tarnished golden and silver vessels, and the already faded brocade and damask garments which his servants had brought. It is obvious that Bloch has excellent intentions and great ideas. But, on reflection, he refuses to put them into practice. In such a situation—in a place devastated by misfortune—the great lord has no other remedy than to use his carpets as blankets, to cut his fabrics into table-cloths...”

At the end of our *Observations on Genetically Modified Agriculture and the Degradation of Species*,²⁵ we said that the only way to escape from “the closed world of industrial life” was to “cultivate one’s garden”. If we ignore the stereotypical snide remarks of the sub-Marxist progressives and the jackasses who seem to fear “the return to animal traction” more than anything else, this formulation has generally been taken as a simple little pirouette, a makeshift chosen due to an inability to elaborate a more ambitious program. However, if one subjects it to a thorough examination, without looking at it through “radical” lenses, it was a program of the most ambitious people, to take it both literally and figuratively; even hearkening back to the “garden of Epicurus”. But since it is proper to begin by considering the meaning of the word garden in its botanical sense (because, as Epicurus correctly stated, “The beginning and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach. Even wisdom and culture must be referred to this”), I will conclude by saying that a good handbook on gardening, along with all the critical considerations that the exercise of that activity requires (because in this respect as well the hour grows late) would undoubt-

²⁵ *Observations Concerning Genetically Modified Agriculture and the Degradation of Species*.

Contents

I. <i>The Figure in the Carpet</i>	6
II. <i>The Aspern Papers</i>	17
III. <i>The Beast in the Jungle</i>	25

to do with critical consciousness, and if it is a matter of feeding ideological pap to the most left-wing elements of the “Another World Is Possible” crowd, Negri has already taken care of that).

Even today, one can still rely on the essential truth of that aphorism that holds, breaking with all philosophies of history and all contemplation about a supreme external agency, of whatever kind—the development of the productive forces or, as a substitute for the latter, capitalism’s self-destruction—that “theory only needs to know what it is doing” (*The Society of the Spectacle*). Like many other of the old revolutionary theory’s assertions, however, this one is vindicated in a way quite different than expected: since the catastrophic course of current history (the “chain reaction”) is, for a period of time whose duration cannot be foreseen, beyond our control, one cannot theorize about it unless the separate and contemplative position of the philosophy of history is in one way or another restored. In this matter, as well, one may practice a “barbarian ascesis” against the false wealth of reconstituted or superannuated theories. When the ship is taking on water, there is no more time for erudite speeches about the theory of navigation: one must rapidly construct a lifeboat, however crude. This necessity of limiting oneself to very simple things, unworthy of course of “grand theory” but now of essential urgency, of concentrating on what is absolutely necessary and sacrificing all the rest, is what Walter Benjamin expressed in a letter²⁴ in which he discusses Ernst Bloch’s book published in France under the title, *Heritage de Notre Temps*:

“The serious objection which I have of this book (if not of its author as well) is that it in absolutely no way corresponds to the conditions in which it appears, but rather takes its place inappropriately, like a great lord,

²⁴ Letter dated February 6, 1935 to Alfred Cohn (Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, Vol. II, eds. Gershom Sholem and Theodor W. Adorno, Frankfurt am Main, 1966, pp. 648–649).

totally lack the quality which imparts consistency and bite to a revolutionary theory: the tension of collective activity and the search for practical mediations, strategic reflection with regard to precise time periods, the ability to connect every conflict with a universal program of emancipation. And if all of this is lacking, it is not—in any event not always or primarily—as a result of some particular intellectual deficiency, but because the social and historical terrain on which such a theoretical intelligence could be born and could unfold has disappeared from under our feet.

No one knows for sure what is going to pounce upon us from the jungle of the present, from the unpredictable combinations of an unprecedented chaos. Theoreticians, however, distinguish themselves in this respect, and the more “radical” they are the more they stand out in this regard, by the undisguised satisfaction with which they speak of crisis, of collapse, and of death-throes, as if they possessed some special certainty about the course of a process which the whole world hopes will come to a decisive conclusion, an event that would once and for all elucidate the obsessive enigma of our time, whether humanity sinks or is compelled to save itself. This dispossessed hope, however, forms an integral part of the catastrophe which is already upon us, and the first task of critical theory is to break with this hope, refusing to entertain all sorts of contemplative hopes, like the kind that Jappe entertains, for example, when he speaks of the vacuum created by the implosion of capitalism that is ripe for “the emergence of another form of social life”, or like the kind offered by Billeter, who speaks of the “event”, of the “unforeseeable moment when something new suddenly becomes possible” and when critical musings finally have some usefulness; or even of the kind spoken of by Vidal, though a few stages lower, with regard to “the labor of various generations” that it seems we shall have the pleasure of facing so that the “antiglobalization movement” can “define, in a more or less libertarian [sic] way, the terms of a new social contract” (not even a much longer time frame would suffice for such a “movement”, as the way it has begun to develop has nothing

I would like to set forth the reasons why I think the various recent attempts at “radical theory” seem to possess an unreal, hollow, and in any case ghostly quality, insofar as they lack, in my opinion, the body and blood, or the nervous system, if you prefer, in short, the vitality of previous revolutionary theories. This will obviously lead me to speak of what revolutionary theory is, or rather what it was during the era when such a thing existed, and why I believe that the conditions that made its existence possible no longer prevail.

But first I have to consider two objections that might occur to the reader. The first is that the texts I have taken as examples are too dissimilar, with respect to both tone and content, not to speak of quality, to serve as illustrations for any considerations of “theory”. I respond that it is precisely this undeniable dissimilarity that permits a much better understanding of the extent to which the theoretical ambition they have in common constitutes an obstacle to a lucid approach to some of the principle aspects of contemporary society (which must be, after all, the function of any critical theory of society).

The second possible objection is that by hurling the accusation of unreality, or even artificiality, at certain attempts at theory which represent rather the flower and the cream of their kind, I make myself susceptible to a kind of *pro domo* accusation, with all the bad faith that can imply, because it was only a few years ago¹ that I maintained that one only needed to imagine a decomposing corpse to get a good idea of a society whose diverse and changing corruptions, “mixing everything and disfiguring everything”, made us so painfully unreadable; indeed, I went on to point out that this was no time to be subjecting a thing’s function to detailed analysis when the object of analysis was fundamentally broken: “one does

¹ In *L’abîme se repeuple*, Éditions de l’Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 1997, 85 p.

not study the anatomy of carrion whose putrefaction has blurred the outlines of the body's parts and mixed up its organs."²

Those formulations were, I agree, somewhat bold, and for me of course it was not a matter of preaching, in the face of chaos on a planetary scale that literally defies description, resignation before the incomprehensible (or the faith of Michel Bounan, whose universal law of life will solve as if by magic all the problems caused by the collapse of market society without our having to inconvenience ourselves with the need to confront them). I do, however, persist in believing that the critical lucidity demanded by our current situation does not have much to do with that variety of salvation through theory, an intellectual operation worthy of the Baron Von Munchausen, that consists of extracting oneself from the mud in which we are sinking so as to observe it from above. But, for the purpose of arguing for this position, it is better to start by examining the attempts made by those who evidently think otherwise and want to be theoreticians.

I. *The Figure in the Carpet*

The story bearing this title, written by Henry James, appeared fifteen years before Lukacs wrote *Soul and Form*³:

² Three years later, Michel Bounan used the same metaphor, modifying it to illustrate how, "under a decomposing form, a new life is beginning to sprout and spread thanks to the passionate labor of the worms". According to the author of *Sans valeur marchand*, it is true that this new life is beginning to swarm "with an initially horrible aspect", but one must not worry about this, since "we have the secure pleasure of seeing how, from today's monstrous chaos, another earth and another heaven are springing forth". Just as Marx said that theology was the rotten side of philosophy, one could say that prophecy has always been the rotten side of revolutionary theory. And this is precisely what remains of the latter in Bounan. (His prophecy, furthermore, is above all copied from that of René Guénon: Kali-Yuga, "signs of the times" and the whole "traditional" rigmarole).

³ Georg Lukacs [1911] in *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*.

although still distant enough from a hypothetical terminus. And in this case, the question arises concerning the resources—and not just natural resources—that humanity will have at its disposal, after so many years of disaster, for the reconstruction of the world on different foundations. In other words: in what condition will men find themselves, in what condition are they now, after all the things they have worked so hard to inflict upon themselves, and after having been in the process desensitized to enduring them all? One could maintain that an exacerbation of the catastrophe will sweep aside all the preconditioning and will galvanize the best energies of humanity or that it will on the contrary precipitate, under the reign of panic, the collapse into barbarism. One could conjecture and dogmatize on this topic for as long as one likes and never escape from opinions, beliefs or "personal convictions" without foundation or depth. If no theory can reasonably answer this question, it is only because it is not a theoretical question, although it is the crucial question of our time.

Thus, since the theoreticians are in reality, as I have pointed out, just as defenseless as ordinary people when it comes to formulating hypotheses concerning the consequences, even the most immediate, of the ongoing disaster, it is hardly surprising that their writings have something ghostly about them, all the more so when they adopt a venerable tone of absolute certainty for the audience. (Ghosts, as everyone knows, like to cover themselves in rusty armor.²³) Unable to conceive of a future of any kind, they almost

²³ I will refrain here from dismantling, as I had initially intended, a particularly scandalous example of theoretical bluff: *Résistance au chaos*, by Jordi Vidal (Allia, 2002), a pompous stew in which the scarce ideas that deserve consideration are immediately drowned in an ocean of leftist platitudes, when they are not pure foolishness worthy of an Ignacio Ramonet. The all-purpose pseudo-concept of the "chaotic mechanism" has demonstrated all its value and operational performance by allowing the author to pose as a strategist and to be credited as such in the columns of that annoying little magazine *Hélène*. On this question of chaos and what sustains it, I refer the reader to Chapter Five of René Riesel's recent text, *On the Progress of Domestication*.

by alienation which were designated by the term “spectacle” implied an abandonment of the critique of capitalism, but to the contrary modified it in a way that made it usable. In any event, however superficial some of its formulations may be, the anti-industrial critique has had the merit of satisfying one of the prerequisites for a subversive theory according to one expert; that is, it must be “completely unacceptable” in the sense that it can “denounce as bad, to the indignant stupefaction of all those who find it good, the very center of the existing world...”²¹

Such a critique, however, must necessarily remain quite disarmed with respect to pointing out how this “center” should be attacked, since, by describing industrial society as a closed world in which we are imprisoned, it correctly insists on the fact that industrial society is a terrible world whose center, properly speaking, is not located in any particular place because its circumference is everywhere: we are in contact with it at every instant²² (here we shall encounter, in an inverted form, another very old and very striking metaphor). Unless we persist in postulating the existence of a class, the proletariat, whose central position in production constitutes it as the revolutionary subject, it is hard to see, in effect, if we coldly consider the coherence of the coercive force imposed by the industrial system, what could put an end to the latter apart from its self-destruction, which is certainly fully underway,

²¹ Guy Debord, “Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*”, Chronos Publications, tr. Michel Prigent and Lucy Forsyth, London, 1979, p. 9. You have only to see how scandalized those who want to go on repeating the old revolutionary theory become when someone attacks industrial organization, which they still dream of placing, along with automation and all the rest, at the service of a “free life”, a life which they do not notice has thereby been emptied of all contents. I must point out, nonetheless, in order to avoid misunderstandings, that this quality (being “unacceptable”) obviously proves nothing by itself: any negationist finds his paranoid conviction reaffirmed by the unanimous condemnation of his views.

²² Baudouin de Bodinat, *La vie sur terre*, Vol. 1, Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 1999, p. 55.

“Nonetheless, there is a hidden order to this world, a composition in the confused intertwining of its lines. But it is the ineffable order of a carpet or a dance: it seems to be impossible to interpret its meaning, and even more impossible to refrain from such interpretation; it is as if the whole texture of its interwoven lines only awaits a word to become clear, univocal and intelligible, as if this word is always just on the tip of everyone’s tongue but has nevertheless never been uttered.”

Lukacs soon thereafter mitigated the anxiety so eloquently expressed in the above passage by uniting it with Bolshevik Marxism. In *History and Class Consciousness* he thus announced the good news⁴:

“Only with the appearance of the proletariat is knowledge of social reality consummated. And this knowledge is consummated by discovering the class perspective of the proletariat, the point from which all of society becomes visible.”

Unfortunately for Lukacs, who identified class-consciousness with the Party, and the Party with its Leninist model, this finally discovered point of view led to total blindness. The persistence and inflection of certain metaphors, however, cannot but shed light on certain mental operations. The idea of a central or supreme point from which the totality of the world is revealed was obviously a legacy of religion, by way of the philosophy of history. In what is perhaps the most extreme formulation of this idea, set forth by Cieszkowski, the future itself, as an integral part of universal history conceived as an organic totality, is becoming accessible to the knowledge and action of men, who will consciously realize

⁴ Georg Lukacs [1922], in *History and Class Consciousness*.

the plan of Divine Providence.⁵ But this kind of “secularization” of the omniscient point of view of God did not result only from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, with its “historical laws” and its theology revised by determinism: the attempt to “return to man all the power he had previously been able to attribute to the name of God” (Breton, discussing Nietzsche), of making him equal, therefore, to a chimera of omnipotence, freed from the inherent limitations of humanity, has seduced and led astray diverse currents of “modern thought”,⁶ and even more so despite reality having in the meantime evinced a contrary trend: impotence in the face of alienation. The experimental method itself, which confers upon the observer stooped over the “miniature world” of the laboratory the point of view of God surveying his creation, undoubtedly also plays its role when it legitimizes the idea of a total knowledge of phenomena, once the right point of view has been found.

In any event, the form of specialization to which the idea of a central point of view corresponds derives in all certainty from a powerful mental need. More than just a pleasing image, it is a true intellectual representation, a mode of knowledge—seek the point of view that puts into perspective the greatest number of phenomena—a way of ordering the real which any search for a principle of intelligibility spontaneously assumes. (And in this sense, if it prevails as a provisional and necessarily approximate representation, it possesses complete legitimacy, of course.) We can thus encounter it, in an almost canonical form, in a “methodological” note featured at the beginning of the book by Jean-Françoise Billeter, *Chine Tríos fois Muette*.⁷ After quoting Pascal (“there is only one indivisible point which is the true place”), Billeter writes: “I have sought this

⁵ August van Cieskowski, *Prolegomena to Historiography*.

⁶ Michel Carrouges demonstrates this with respect to Surrealism (*André Breton et les dones fondamentales du surréalisme*, Gallimard, 1950).

⁷ *Chine tríos fois muette: essai sur l'histoire contemporaine en et la chine*, Allia, 2000.

crimination” any judgments based on those “thoughts and desires not formed by the commodity”, whose existence Jappe grudgingly admits only to immediately deny that “one can simply mobilize [them] against the logic of the commodity”). Otherwise, critique will continue to be that “passion of the mind” about which Marx spoke: one intellectual specialization among others.

III. *The Beast in the Jungle*

Any revolutionary theory worthy of the name must provide an explanation for social reality that is at least plausible, and must identify what must be fought against in order to transform that social reality. The criterion of truth applicable to such a theory is not exactly of the scientific type: it is not enough for it to be “pertinent”, or to fit the facts; it must also crystallize discontent and dissatisfaction and suggest ways they can be used. One can see that nothing like that exists today. Even those attempts at theoretical explanation that are not simply absurd or ridiculously arbitrary are nonetheless incapable of pointing to a practical goal, even a distant one, or of saying where to concentrate forces, no longer for the purpose of shaking the foundations of established society, which is collapsing on its own, but in order to confront this collapsing society with a collective activity that has some chance of putting an end to the world’s devastation.

There is no doubt that the critical analyses that emphasize the fundamentally industrial nature of today’s society provide a better summary of its characteristics and identify what obviously constitutes its most universal and most concrete determination, than do other critical analyses. For one who would use it without fetishizing it, this definition obviously does not imply that we should forget that this industrial society is also capitalist, commodity-based, spectacular, hierarchical, technologized, and so on, any more than the emphasis placed during the sixties on the recent advances made

to a better society". When he takes the risk of trying to decipher the enigma of our times, he first points out that the crisis, the self-destruction of capitalism, can only result in "the collapse into barbarism", but then tempers this observation somewhat lamely by asserting that "the implosion of capitalism leaves a vacuum that could also allow the emergence of another form of social life". Without insisting too forcefully on the fact that this "vacuum" is a rather crowded one (full of poisons of every kind bequeathed to a hypothetical alternate "form of social life"), one may nonetheless ask what purpose is served, then, by the pearls of wisdom scattered throughout this book if they only end up, when it is a question of moving on to "praxis", in more or less vacuous and disarmed formulations not unlike the pious wishes of the Citizens Movement ("Another World Is Possible") which Jappe subjects to extensive and acute ridicule. And calling upon Mauss, Polanyi or Sahlins for weighty proofs to the effect that other forms of social organization have existed that were not subject to the economy cannot convince anyone that capitalism is only "a kind of historical accident", a deviation that can easily be rectified once it has been fully understood, thanks to the critique of value, and that it was not just pure "madness".

The contradiction to which I referred in the first part of this article (between a strict determinism vis-à-vis the past and a nebulous "sense of the possible" with regard to the present) reappears here in an almost parodic form. On the one hand, no conscious subject can exist within capitalism, only the "logic of value", the "automatic subject"; on the other hand, "never before has there been a time in history when man's conscious will has assumed as much importance as it will during the long death-throes of commodity society", death-throes which "are taking place before our eyes. But to begin to embody such a conscious determination to do away with commodity society it will perhaps be necessary to criticize the deadly abstraction of capitalism in a manner that will itself be less abstract" (and not to reject as "simple moralist or existentialist re-

point from which everything becomes visible." But immediately thereafter, defending the idea that it is possible to "discern the entire present as a moment in history", he invokes:

"An idea conceived by Hegel and borrowed by Marx for his own purposes, that of the totality. This idea invites us to apprehend the world as a whole which is always transforming itself, which is intelligible on the basis of its ongoing transformation and is only really intelligible in this way, as a whole and as transformation."

From a spatial metaphor, that of the step backward, of the correct distance between the observer and the object of observation,⁸ we then shift to a dialectical concept, that of the totality as process. This shift is indicative of an unresolved contradiction that reappears in numerous contemporary theoretical works, even the best, such as Billeter's: the contradiction between a more or less strict and mechanistic determinism with respect to the past, and the "sense of the possible" with respect to the present, with respect to the possibilities for emancipation that must be asserted by any critique that wants to be revolutionary.

If the dialectical theory passed down from Hegel and Marx possesses any usefulness for a revolutionary critique of society, it can only be for the purpose of conceptually grasping the exact moment of the "ongoing transformation" in which we find ourselves. As understanding of qualitative change in time, it is assumed that the dialectic is good for something, that it has its field of application in the present, conceived as becoming, in which one must discern the active contradictions, the possibilities opened up by these contradictions, the opportunities they create, etc.

⁸ A painting was used in Pascal's example, but the continuation of the fragment, not quoted by Billeter, expresses some serious reservations concerning this idea of the "indivisible point", "the true location": "Perspective designates it in the art of painting. But in truth and morality, what designates it?"

In reality, however, since present-day theoreticians are just as disarmed as ordinary non-theoreticians when it comes to saying anything about the future course of this obscure turn which humanity has taken, the dialectic is demoted to a system of *a posteriori* interpretation, and considers the present exclusively as conclusion, as result. Past history and its current conclusion are then reciprocally explained in a perfect circularity: such a process can only lead to such a result, and such a result presupposes such a process. The demotion of the dialectical comprehension of reality has had a kind of retroactive effect on historical intelligence strictly speaking, in the sense that it smoothes out the course of history in a purely logical chain from which are eliminated not only the contingent part but above all the conflicts which in each era open up possible roads of development. This strict determinism which petrifies causal relations in accordance with the model of mechanics (such a cause, such an effect), is itself a form of specialization of time: for it grants to the latter the characteristics of a spatial sequence suitable for being intellectually surveyed the way one would survey a house, going from one room to another; but it is a very museum-like house, in which quite distinct and highly delineated periods are juxtaposed (the Renaissance, the Enlightenment) without containing anything of the contradictory processes and crucial moments which gave them their richness.

Billeter's tendency towards a certain schematicism (hence his taste for Crosby-style simplifications⁹) seems to have been rectified in *Chine Tríos fois Muette* by his concrete and detailed knowledge of Chinese history, and by his determination to lucidly confront the question of what it will take to "escape from economic rationality" and "recover the use of plain reason". In this text, however, we can find, with respect to this issue of our possible emancipation from

⁹ Alfred W. Crosby is the author of two books, *Ecological Imperialism* and *The Measure of Reality*, which attempt to explain the origins of western rule over the world by means of dramatic and highly debatable claims.

der which these productive forces remain: we have finally reached "the point where the internal contradiction inherent to capitalism begins to impede its function in out-of-control machine production" and "the separation of the producers no longer has a material or technical basis and is exclusively derived from the abstract value form, which has thus definitively lost its historical function".

One can understand the intellectual satisfaction now felt by a Marxist theoretician, or just a Marxist, whose diagnosis claims that today what is being artificially prolonged (through "fictitious capital", the finance "bubble") is "the life of a mode of production that has already died". Likewise, it must be spruced up for the times to come, or more accurately, for the times that will come crawling towards us, so as to prove without any doubt at all that:

"Value brings on its own abolition precisely as a result of its successes. The definitive victory of capitalism over the remains of the precapitalist era is also its own definitive defeat. When a fully developed capitalism coincides with its concept, it is not the foreclosing of any possibility of crisis but, to the contrary, the beginning of the real crisis."

There is, however, something frightening about this sort of Hegelian exultation, which again and again plucks the rose of reason from the cross of the present, if we keep in mind the fact that this "definitive victory of capitalism over the remains of the precapitalist era", before the promised parousia can take place—at least for the devotees of a fetishized dialectic—is first of all our defeat in everyday life, the crushing of everything that could serve as the basis for rebuilding a life freed from the economy. It must be pointed out, nevertheless, that Jappe avoids giving his *Adventures of the Commodity* a strictly happy ending: the final redeeming crisis. He even explicitly declares that "the end of capitalism does not by any means imply a guaranteed transition

“new critique of value” which Jappe defends does all it can to reject any understanding of this type, as if it was above all necessary for theory not to have the least applicability to reality, perhaps out of fear of thereby committing itself, like the old revolutionary movement, to combating “empirical” realities from which one must “keep one’s distance”: the logic of value. It is true that Jappe wants to acknowledge that there is a type of labor, which he calls “empirically abstract”, whose “diffusion is effectively a result of the predominance of abstract labor in the formal sense”; but only to add immediately that “it is not totally identical to the latter”, and conceding at once that, nevertheless, “abstract labor in the formal sense becomes the dominant social form only when the interchangeability of jobs, their non-specificity and the possibility of going from one job to another, has penetrated all of society”, and finally recalling that Marx, when he formulated his first reflections on the question while observing the process underway in the most modern societies, “did not even distinguish between ‘unskilled’ labor and ‘abstract labor’ as a formal determination”.

All of this is quite messy, not to say confusing. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that, in contrast to his diverse observations regarding the essentially destructive character of capitalism, Jappe wants to preserve at the core of his renovated theoretical fortress the quite Marxist belief that “freedom from labor means freedom from living labor and leaving as much as possible of the metabolism with nature to dead labor, that is, to machines”.²⁰ And since he clings to this article of faith, with quotations from the *Grundrisse* in hand, he requires that “abstract labor” be something very different from the phenomenal form it assumes in the real world. This allows Jappe to discretely recycle the old clichés of emancipatory automation and the contradiction between the highly-developed productive forces (which make communism “possible”) and the existing relations of production; in other words, “the domain of value” un-

²⁰ *Notes on the Manifesto Against Labor.*

the market economy, the same blind spot displayed by other texts with revolutionary pretensions. Like Jean-Marc Mandosio,¹⁰ Billeter resolves the contradiction between retroactive determinism and the freedom required for consciousness-raising—rhetorically—by going from one metaphor (that of the “chain reaction”) to another (that of the “rules of the game”), whose significance is very different. The first metaphor is used to explain the process which, beginning in the Renaissance, has culminated in our current situation; the second metaphor is used to evoke the possibility of successfully accomplishing the task imposed upon us by such a situation:

“To put an end to this chain reaction which has had such bad effects and which will have even more bad effects if we allow it to continue on its course; to do this, we must put an end to the specific form of unconsciousness which feeds it, and thus free ourselves from the particular misfortune which has dominated recent history.”

For Billeter, however, the chronological order implicit in these two metaphors—their “dates of validity”, so to speak—is exactly the opposite of what would be necessary for the presentation of a less imperfect account of real history, that is, of a process in which, once a certain qualitative threshold has been crossed (once a certain critical mass has been attained, to continue with the nuclear metaphor), the destructive effects of what then becomes a chain reaction escape all control. Previously (before Hiroshima, to be exact), it was possible to speak of the domination of economic rationality as “rules of the game” that could be changed, once they were understood in that way. Furthermore, this is more or less what Engels said when he spoke of a law “based on the unconsciousness of

¹⁰ *Theorie critique et histoire critique, Nouvelles de nulle part* No. 4, October 2003, pp. 25–26.

those who suffer under it". Now, on the other, hand, one can speak of a chain reaction, that is, of a process in which the fact of becoming conscious of its existence cannot change anything. (I write this at the moment when climate change is becoming the oppressive reality we all know.)

We shall return to this point, which is obviously so decisive for the ghostly character of all contemporary revolutionary theory. For now, however, I would like to finish by describing, on the basis of the metaphor of the "central point", what the latter reveals concerning what we may call the theoretical-radical mentality. I will have to consider forms of de-dialecticization that are incomparably more awkward than any in Billeter: in the theoretical pose of the sort I shall now evoke, ideological compensation for intellectual and practical impotence becomes the main feature.

It never ceases to amaze me when I consider that, after thirty years or more, most of those who present themselves as defenders of "revolutionary theory" (generally that of the Situationists) have not only done nothing with it—nothing subversive, that is—but have also used it primarily for the purpose of protecting themselves from perceiving reality, to the point of enclosing themselves in a perfectly coherent delirium.¹¹

Connected with specialization, which is now a recognizable symptom of false consciousness, the idea of total knowledge guaranteed for he who can situate himself at the exact point from which the world becomes perfectly legible and "transparent" will remind anyone, in the context of everyday life, of a psychopathological condition combining interpretive delusion and megalomania. But radical theoreticians clearly enjoy a kind of impunity in this regard, and paper can bear anything, as everyone knows. It must

¹¹ I am well aware of the fact that the mere utilization of the categories of psychopathology will cause me to be branded as a supporter of a repressive psychiatry. The reply to this is simple: I don't think that irrationality is just what we need today, and madness, an unfortunate response to misery, has never been emancipatory. (Author's Note.)

The task consists in extracting "the Marxian Corpus" from "more than a century of Marxist interpretations" in order to reconstruct it around its "valid nucleus"; in a way this is reminiscent of the task set by Viollet-le-Duc who sought to "reestablish in a finished state something which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time".¹⁹ And, as in any restoration of this kind, the problem consists of choosing between what is preserved and what is eliminated. For Jappe it seems that this sometimes implies the difficulty of disentangling what is truly critical and radical from what is not in Marx. Somewhat like the way Míchea contrasts "original socialism" with "Leftist thought" impregnated with Enlightenment liberalism, Jappe contrasts the "most radical" Marx (the Marx of *Capital*) with that other Marx who was influenced by the illusions of the revolutionary movement of his time; but this cleavage ("we can ... speak of a double Marx") is cloven again in turn:

"The difference between the 'exoteric' Marx and the 'esoteric' Marx is even present within his analysis of value and is visible in his vacillations with regard to the determination of value."

The reader, in any case, is somewhat lost, all the more so in that, each time he believes he can situate the author's explanation within a historical process and certain "empirical" realities, the author warns him against such intellectual comforts. This is especially striking in connection with "abstract labor", for Jappe deplores the fact that Marx himself never completely distinguished it from "average social labor", that is, from undifferentiated labor, without qualities, which was generalized by big industry. Nonetheless, if there is one case where the formulas concerning the abstraction that becomes real, etc., possess an immediately comprehensible meaning for the non-theoretician, it is this case. But the

¹⁹ Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonne de l'architecture, 1864-68*, article entitled "Restauration".

consider Marx's work as a "sacred text" but this does not prevent him from asserting that "devoting oneself to the 'esoteric' Marxian critique of the commodity is then [that is, when the 'new contestation' is still content with an 'eclectic ideology'—(Semprun's interpolation—translator's note)] a prerequisite for any serious analysis, which in turn is the precondition for all praxis". This is why, quite logically, he devotes the greater part of his book to summarizing, paraphrasing or quoting what for him is "the valid nucleus of Marxian analysis". Not being a Marxist or much less a Marxologist, I will not venture an opinion with regard to the validity, from the philological point of view, of this restoration of "the Marxian corpus". One can in any event tranquilly concur that the critical analysis of commodity fetishism is far from having become a mere archaeological curiosity in the world in which we live, and it does not need to be repeated that it is not Marx's theory that "reduces" everything to economics, but "market society that constitutes the most extensive reductionism ever seen"; and that "to escape from this reductionism one must escape from capitalism, not from its critique". However, even if we admit that one must turn to the critique of the "value form" elaborated by Marx in order to really oppose the world of the market, one is not at any time disposed to hope, while reading these frankly hardly thrilling *Adventures of the Commodity*, since, as Jappe himself says, "once these basic categories are established, the whole evolution of capitalism, up to its exit from the stage, is already programmed by the contradictions which follow from those basic categories"; one is not disposed to hope, I say, while reading this, that the sleeping "praxis" can, like *Sleeping Beauty*, be awakened from its lethargy by this quite conceptual blue prince: the "new critique of value".¹⁸

¹⁸ Jappe points out that his exposition faithfully expresses the point of view of the German journal *Krisis*, which he helped to formulate. He admits that it is true that despite all his efforts, his "presentation of the Marxian theory of value is not easy to read".

nonetheless be pointed out that the essentially paranoid character of delusions of total knowledge, of a central point of view, etc., is revealed by the fact that they necessarily imply the pretense of infallibility: to admit that an error has been committed with respect to one small point, phenomenon or episode, would in effect amount to admitting that one did not know how to take things by the root, by the principle from which all phenomena derive. In short, you are either in the center or you are not: you are either located where all possible historical intelligence is concentrated (the party, the sect or solitary delirium), or you fall into the external darkness through which the unconscious wanders. (It must also be pointed out that, like all good paranoid logic, the fantasy of the center often leads to the symmetrical postulate that attributes an equal level of consciousness to domination in its war against the possessors of the true theory.)

Thus, formally, there is no difference at all between, on the one hand, the sectarian delusion that claims to have identified the hidden center of domination and denounces everything that does not square with its systems of interpretation as fabricated appearances or deceptions and, on the other hand, the critique that quite reasonably aspires to discover, behind appearances, the real mechanism that makes the social machinery run; hence the ease with which hodge-podge constructions often act as the policemen of thought among critical analyses and negationisms¹² of every kind. Distinguishing between what is evident or plausible, and what is arbitrary or even insane, requires a degree of rectitude of judgment that only forms, along with common sense, through confrontation with arguments in public debate, and which is therefore disappearing today along with the latter. In its absence, it is possible to continue to maintain, for example, that the current climate change attributed to greenhouse gases is in reality a disinformation operation under-

¹² In France, the position of those who deny that the Nazi concentration camps were extermination centers is called negationism.

taken by industrialists who are developing replacements for the incriminated gases.

But even if one does not get lost in the labyrinth of quite real falsifications and mad revelations, one will concretely confront a real breakdown of causality as one tries to escape one's oppression in the face of the increasingly more confused interconnections of an illegible reality:

"The crux of the matter is that society has actually reached such a degree of integration, of the universal interdependence of all of its moments, that causality no longer functions as a weapon of criticism. In vain will you search for the cause because there is no cause other than this society. Causality is, so to speak, being reabsorbed by the totality, it is becoming indiscernible within a system in which the apparatus of production, distribution and domination as social and economic relations, as well as ideologies, are inextricably linked."¹³

Under such conditions, the rational theoretician in search of the "determinant factor in the last instance" evidently can only be helpless. Which explains his propensity to content himself, by way of compensation, with a kind of genealogical research in which chronological proof takes the place of historical explanation. He can at least affirm that, in effect, such a thing took place before something else and it is therefore plausible, and in any case not at all impossible, that a cause-effect relation is manifested in this temporal succession. Reminiscent in a way of the joke about the general history of the cinema told by the Stalinist Sadoul, who

¹³ Jaime Semprun, *Dialogues sur l'achèvement du temps modernes*. I borrow these excellent formulations of the negative dialectic from Adorno (on the crisis of causality). It is worth pointing out that the verification of the phenomenon was not new. It is in the future, however (the one that will succeed the idolatry of reason), that Bounan comically situates the moment when "what is important will switch places with what is incidental, and causes with effects". (Author's Note.)

to a work that tries to lead us to recover the "esoteric Marx" buried under the rubble of traditional Marxism; who, alongside the "exoteric Marx", that "representative of the Enlightenment who sought the perfection of the industrial society of labor under the control of the proletariat", elaborated a "critique of the very foundations of capitalist modernity":

Today, "only the 'esoteric Marx' can constitute the basis for thought capable of grasping contemporary challenges and investigating their most distant origins at the same time. Without such thought, all contestation at the dawn of the 21st century runs the risk of seeing nothing in the current transformations but a repetition of the previous stages of capitalist development. [...] In a central part—although in a smaller number of pages—of his mature work, Marx traced the leading threads of a critique of the basic categories of capitalist society: value, money, commodity, abstract labor, commodity fetishism. This critique of the core of modernity is more relevant today than it was in Marx's own time, because in his day this core only existed in an embryonic state."

It is the hidden core of Marx's theory, those pages that only needed "to be read with care, which almost no one did for a century",¹⁷ to which the "core of modernity" therefore corresponds, whose later development was contained there *in nuce*. At certain moments, when perusing some particularly dry pages on the "logic of value", one gets the feeling of being in the presence of a kind of Marxist Cabala, and that it would be enough to decode the scriptures in order to discover the secret of the world, "the basic logic of modern society". Jappe evidently expresses his refusal to

¹⁷ This claim is quite surprising coming from an author who devoted a whole book to Debord (*Guy Debord*).

“This book will have achieved its goal if it succeeds in transmitting to the reader the passion felt by the author for the seemingly-abstract theme of value. This is the passion which is born when one has the impression of entering a chamber where the most important secrets of social life are kept, the secrets upon which all the others depend.”

Not being at all tempted to offer a Freudian interpretation *a la* Míchea, two things immediately occurred to me when I read this passage. First of all, Marx’s statement: “Critique is not a passion of the mind, but the mind of passion.” Also, another Henry James story, *The Aspern Papers*. And I must say that it seems to me that these two impressions, once I finished reading the book, are still relevant to its contents. In *The Aspern Papers*, James retells a true story he heard in Florence: an American literary critic had arrived in Florence to rent a room in a house owned by a former lover of Byron, who was at that time quite elderly, hoping to get hold of some papers she had saved (some letters from Shelley, for whom the critic professed an almost religious reverence); but when the old woman finally died, a (relatively) younger relation of hers, with whom she had lived, told the critic that if he wanted the letters he would have to marry her. In James, of course, the tale, set in Venice instead of Florence, is much more ambiguous, like the way the critic was finally frustrated with the secrets he coveted, for example. When his American friend first appeared at the ramshackle *palazzo* into which the critic sought to insinuate himself to get access to the letters, she exclaimed: “One would think you expected to find in them the answer to the riddle of the universe.” And later, when, after having been accepted as a guest, he approached the room where the “treasure” of Aspern’s papers was kept, their owner seemed to him to represent “esoteric knowledge” in this world.

We see that besides the image of the “Chamber of Secrets” referred to above, what is striking about this passage is its similarity

proclaimed that such a history was so anchored in the past that someone could suggest that the first volume of this history could be entitled *The Cinema under Louis XIV*, wise genealogists have sought the origin of the Spectacle in the Middle Ages, while others pointed out some time ago that the invention of totalitarianism could be attributed to Plato. Descartes has also been very useful, but ultimately the Enlightenment can count on the support of the searchers for the first cause.

Whatever reservations one may have about some of his earlier formulations, one could very well expect that Jean-Claude Míchea would not succumb to this kind of paternity search. Unfortunately, in his latest work,¹⁴ not only does he employ without too much circumspection a very vague “history of ideas” as a sufficient explanation, but he does not even spare us, when he recounts the admittedly amusing detail that Adam Smith’s father was a customs official, the psychoanalytic explanation of the ideology of free trade by the Oedipus Complex of its first theoretician:

“Obviously, this is a detail which confers a very particular meaning to the idea that men cannot enjoy the blessings of nature if customs barriers are not abolished and, more generally, all frontiers, regardless of their nature. Thus, it is possible that the death of the Father (and, consequently, the indefinite expansion of the “empire of the Mothers”, easily disguised as “feminism”) constitutes the real unconscious of capital and, even more, of modernity itself.”

It is true that this silliness is relegated to a footnote at the end of the text but, even so, if one sets aside the digressions, references and notes of every kind that often parasitize discourse rather

¹⁴ *Impasse Adam Smith: brèves remarques sur l'impossibilité de dépasser le capitalisme par sa gauche*, Climats, 2002.

than help to explain it, this book can be summarized by the following series of claims: “Enlightenment philosophy”, “the intellectual springboard of our modern world”, is the original womb for both leftist thought and “liberalism”; the radical critique of contemporary liberalism, the “coherent struggle against the liberal utopia and the reinforced class society that it inevitably engenders”, demands that we break with this “religion of progress”; by acting in this way the virtues of the “original socialism” will be rediscovered, virtues which have been altered by the modernist ideology of the left, and we will be able to avail ourselves of *common decency* [in English in original] (the moral values of ordinary people) in our struggle against the triumphant Economy. Towards the end of his book, Míchea writes:

“[...] we now possess, perhaps for the first time in history, the philosophical means sufficient for beginning to understand to what extent the intuition of the European workers of the 19th century concerning the world in preparation (therefore, our world) was profoundly human and well-founded.”

Thus, once again the owl of Minerva takes flight at sunset. It is true that, even though we are not philosophers, today we have a better understanding of the historic opportunity wasted with the crushing of the workers revolutions of the 19th century (and the 20th century). But since the “original socialism” was defeated so long ago, while its “philosophical understanding” could very well be painted in garish colors, that will not bring it back to life. Philosophical consciousness always arrives too late. Except, perhaps, for the purpose of pretending to be a thinker of common decency, and to do this even in the indecent columns of *Le Nouvel Observateur* or *Charlie Hebdo*, relying of course not so much on the thing’s reality, which has unfortunately become so ghostlike, as on the works of the dreary professors of MAUSS (Anti-Utilitarian Movement in

the Social Sciences), who are to the living practice of the gift what a handbook on Sexology is to love.¹⁵

What an interpretation of the genealogical type fails to explain is, from a truly historical viewpoint, the most essential point; that is, in the case of the schema presented by Míchea: why did those excellent revolutionary workers of old, who were so admirable (and they often really were) yield to such a terrible “Modernity”? An explanation based on this single cause—the ideological womb of the Enlightenment—conveniently makes the alienation process that affected the old workers movement disappear, as well as the formation of the modern bureaucracy, submission to technological development, the new conditions produced by these causes, and the very concrete thresholds left behind that mark the disappearance of certain historical possibilities, which will never return. Two adversaries remain, facing off in a timeless confrontation: modernist elites, who are today the “libertarian-liberals”, and ordinary people, the people who are by virtue of their essence the depository of all anticapitalist values. Against this garishly painted canvas, Míchea can stand out as a knight of virtue (that is, of common decency). But we know what punishment awaits knights of virtue in a world without virtue: to mistake a common barber’s trimmings-bowl for Mambrino’s helmet.

II. *The Aspern Papers*

At the beginning of his erudite work, in which he expounds a “new critique of value”¹⁶, Anselm Jappe writes some quite singular lines:

¹⁵ And now they are trying to set themselves up in France as the theoreticians that an effectively quite mindless “Another World Is Possible Movement” needs. (Author’s Note.)

¹⁶ *Les aventures de la marchandise: pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur*, Denoël, 2003.