

On the Poverty of Student Life

**Considered in Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Especially
Intellectual Aspects, With a Modest Proposal for Doing Away With It**

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To make shame more shameful still by making it public

It is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest. But the reasons for which he⁽¹⁾ is despised are often false reasons reflecting the dominant ideology, whereas the reasons for which he is justifiably despised from a revolutionary standpoint remain repressed and unavowed. The partisans of false opposition are aware of these faults — faults which they themselves share — but they invert their actual contempt into a patronizing admiration. The impotent leftist intellectuals (from *Les Temps Modernes* to *L'Express*) go into raptures over the supposed “rise of the students,” and the declining bureaucratic organizations (from the “Communist” Party to the UNEF [National Student Union]) jealously contend for his “moral and material support.” We will show the reasons for this concern with the student and how they are rooted in the dominant reality of overdeveloped capitalism. We are going to use this pamphlet to denounce them one by one: the suppression of alienation necessarily follows the same path as alienation.

Up till now all the analyses and studies of student life have ignored the essential. None of them go beyond the viewpoint of academic specializations (psychology, sociology, economics) and thus they remain fundamentally erroneous. Fourier long ago exposed this “methodical myopia” of treating fundamental questions without relating them to modern society as a whole. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, the mass of details obscures the *totality*. Everything is said about this society except what it really is: a society dominated by *commodities* and *spectacles*. The sociologists Bourderon and Passedieu,⁽²⁾ in their study *Les Héritiers: les étudiants et la culture*, remain impotent in face of the few partial truths they have succeeded in demonstrating. Despite their good intentions they fall back into professorial morality, the inevitable Kantian ethic of a *real democratization through a real rationalization of the teaching system* (i.e. of the system of teaching the system). Meanwhile their disciples, such as Kravetz,¹ compensate for their petty-bureaucratic resentment with a hodgepodge of outdated revolutionary phraseology.

¹ Marc Kravetz, a slick orator well known among the UNEF politicians, made the mistake of venturing into “theoretical research”: in 1964 he published a defense of student unionism in *Les Temps Modernes*, which he then denounced in the same periodical a year later.

⁽¹⁾ In some passages of my translations from the SI I have followed the current practice of replacing formerly conventional masculine forms with gender-neutral ones (e.g. changing “man” to “humanity”). In other cases, however, I have retained the original terms in order to avoid a complicated recasting of what are sometimes already rather complex texts. In the present case, much of the incisiveness of the SI’s critique of “the student” would be lost if the text was changed to plural or “his or her” forms.

Note also that “student” in this pamphlet always refers to college students. Grade school and high school students are referred to by different French terms.

⁽²⁾ “*Bourderon and Passedieu*”: The actual names of these authors (transposed to make a sarcastic French play on words) are Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron.

Modern capitalism's spectacularization² of reification allots everyone a specific role within a general passivity. The student is no exception to this rule. His is a provisional role, a rehearsal for his ultimate role as a conservative element in the functioning of the commodity system. Being a student is a form of initiation.

This initiation magically recapitulates all the characteristics of mythical initiation. It remains totally cut off from historical, individual and social reality. The student leads a double life, poised between his present status and the utterly separate future status into which he will one day be abruptly thrust. Meanwhile his schizophrenic consciousness enables him to withdraw into his "initiation group," forget about his future, and bask in the mystical trance of a present sheltered from history. It is not surprising that he avoids facing his situation, particularly its economic aspects: in our "affluent society" he is still a pauper. More than 80% of students come from income groups above the working class, yet 90% of them have less money than the lowest worker. Student poverty is an anachronism in the society of the spectacle: it has yet to attain the new poverty of the new proletariat. In a period when more and more young people are breaking free from moral prejudices and family authority as they are subjected to blunt, undisguised exploitation at the earliest age, the student clings to his tame and irresponsible "protracted infancy." Belated adolescent crises may provoke occasional arguments with his family, but he uncomplainingly accepts being treated as a baby by the various institutions that govern his daily life. (If they ever stop shitting in his face, it's only to come around and bugger him.)

Student poverty is merely the most gross expression of the colonization of all domains of social practice. The projection of social guilty conscience onto the students masks the poverty and servitude of everyone.

But our contempt for the student is based on quite different reasons. He is contemptible not only for his actual poverty, but also for his complacency regarding every kind of poverty, his unhealthy propensity to wallow in his own alienation in the hope, amid the general lack of interest, of arousing interest in his particular lacks. The requirements of modern capitalism determine that most students will become mere *low-level functionaries*, serving functions comparable to those of skilled workers in the nineteenth century.³ Faced with the prospect of such a dismal and mediocre "reward" for his shameful current poverty, the student prefers to take refuge in an unreal lived present, which he decorates with an illusory glamor.

The student is a stoical slave: the more chains authority binds him with, the freer he thinks he is. Like his new family, the university, he sees himself as the most "independent" social being, whereas he is in fact *directly subjected* to the two most powerful systems of social authority: the family and the state. As their well-behaved, grateful and *submissive child*, he shares and embodies all the values and mystifications of the system. The illusions that formerly had to be imposed on white-collar workers are now willingly internalized and transmitted by the mass of future petty functionaries.

If ancient social poverty produced the most grandiose systems of compensation in history (religions), the student, in his marginal poverty, can find no other consolation than the most shopworn images of the ruling society, the farcical repetition of all its alienated products.

² It goes without saying that we use the concepts of *spectacle*, *role*, etc., in the situationist sense.

³ But without the revolutionary consciousness: the skilled worker did not have the illusion of promotion.

As an ideological being, the French student always *arrives too late*. The values and enthusiasms that are the pride of his closed little world have all long ago been condemned by history as laughable and untenable illusions.

Once upon a time the universities had a certain prestige; the student persists in the belief that he is lucky to be there. But he came too late. His mechanical, specialized education is as profoundly degraded (in comparison to the former level of general bourgeois culture)⁴ as his own intellectual level, because the modern economic system requires a mass production of uneducated students who have been rendered incapable of thinking. The university has become an institutional organization of ignorance. “High culture” is being degraded in the assembly-line production of professors, *all* of whom are cretins and most of whom would be jeered by any audience of highschoolers. But the student, in his mental menopause, is unaware of all this; he continues to listen respectfully to his masters, conscientiously suppressing all critical spirit so as to immerse himself in the mystical illusion of being a “student” – someone seriously devoted to learning *serious things* – in the hope that his professors will ultimately impart to him the ultimate truths of the world. The future revolutionary society will condemn all the noise of the lecture halls and classrooms as nothing but *verbal pollution*. The student is already a very bad joke.

The student is unaware that history is altering even his little “ivory tower” world. The famous “crisis of the university,” that detail of a more general crisis of modern capitalism, remains the object of a deaf-mute dialogue among various specialists. It simply expresses the difficulties of this particular sector of production in its belated adjustment to the general transformation of the productive apparatus. The remnants of the old liberal bourgeois university ideology are becoming banalized as its social basis is disappearing. During the era of free-trade capitalism, when the liberal state left the university a certain marginal freedom, the latter could imagine itself as an independent power. But even then it was intimately bound to the needs of that type of society, providing the privileged minority with an adequate general education before they took up their positions within the ruling class. The pathetic bitterness of so many nostalgic professors⁵ stems from the fact that they have lost their former role as guard-dogs serving the future masters and have been reassigned to the considerably less noble function of sheep-dogs in charge of herding white-collar flocks to their respective factories and offices in accordance with the needs of the planned economy. These professors hold up their archaisms as an alternative to the technocratization of the university and imperturbably continue to purvey scraps of “general” culture to audiences of future specialists who will not know how to make any use of them.

More serious, and thus more dangerous, are the modernists of the Left and those of the UNEF led by the FGEL “extremists,” who demand a “reform of the university structure” so as to “reintegrate the university into social and economic life,” i.e. so as to adapt it to the needs of modern capitalism. The colleges that once supplied “general culture” to the ruling class, though still retaining some of their anachronistic prestige, are being transformed into force-feeding factories for rearing lower and middle functionaries. Far from contesting this historical process, which is subordinating one of the last relatively autonomous sectors of social life to the demands of the commodity system, the above-mentioned progressives protest against delays and inefficiencies in its implementation. They are the partisans of the future cybernetized university, which is al-

⁴ We are referring to the culture of Hegel or the Encyclopédistes, not to that of the Sorbonne or the École Normale Supérieure.

⁵ No longer daring to speak in the name of philistine liberalism, they invoke fantasized freedoms of the universities of the Middle Ages, that epoch of “the democracy of nonfreedom.”

ready showing its ugly head here and there.⁶ The commodity system and its modern servants — these are the enemy.

But all these struggles take place over the head of the student, somewhere in the heavenly realm of his masters. His own life is totally out of his control — *life itself* is totally beyond him.

Because of his acute economic poverty the student is condemned to a paltry form of *survival*. But, always self-satisfied, he parades his very ordinary indigence as if it were an original “lifestyle,” making a virtue of his shabbiness and pretending to be a bohemian. “Bohemianism” is far from an original solution in any case, but the notion that one could live a really bohemian life without a complete and definitive break with the university milieu is ludicrous. But the student bohemian (and every student likes to pretend that he is a bohemian at heart) clings to his imitative and degraded version of what is, in the best of cases, only a mediocre individual solution. Even elderly provincial ladies know more about life than he does. Thirty years after Wilhelm Reich (that excellent educator of youth),⁷ our would-be “nonconformist” continues to follow the most traditional forms of amorous-erotic behavior, reproducing the general relations of class society in his intersexual relations. His susceptibility to recruitment as a militant for any cause is an ample demonstration of his real impotence.

In spite of his more or less loose use of time within the margin of individual liberty allowed by the totalitarian spectacle, the student avoids adventure and experiment, preferring the security of the straitjacketed daily space-time organized for his benefit by the guardians of the system. Though not constrained to separate his work and leisure, he does so of his own accord, all the while hypocritically proclaiming his contempt for “good students” and “study fiends.” He accepts every type of separation and then bemoans the “lack of communication” in his religious, sports, political or union club. He is so stupid and so miserable that he voluntarily submits himself to the University Psychological Aid Centers, those agencies of psycho-police control established by the vanguard of modern oppression and naturally hailed as a great victory for student unionism.⁸

But the real poverty of the student’s everyday life finds its immediate fantasy-compensation in the opium of cultural commodities. In the cultural spectacle the student finds his natural place as a respectful disciple. Although he is close to the production point, access to the real Sanctuary of Culture is denied him; so he discovers “modern culture” as an *admiring spectator*. In an era when *art is dead* he remains the most loyal patron of the theaters and film clubs and the most avid consumer of the packaged fragments of its preserved corpse displayed in the cultural supermarkets. Consuming unreservedly and uncritically, he is in his element. If the “Culture Centers” didn’t exist, the student would have invented them. He is a perfect example of all the platitudes of American market research: a conspicuous consumer, conditioned by advertising into fervently divergent attitudes toward products that are identical in their nullity, with an irrational preference for Brand X (Pérec or Godard, for example) and an irrational prejudice against Brand Y (Robbe-Grillet or Lelouch, perhaps).

And when the “gods” who produce and organize his cultural spectacle take human form on the stage, he is their main audience, their perfect spectator. Students turn out *en masse* to their most

⁶ See “Correspondence with a Cybernetician” in *Internationale Situationniste* #9 and the situationist tract *La tortue dans la vitrine* directed against the neoprofessor A. Moles.

⁷ See *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* and *The Function of the Orgasm*.

⁸ With the rest of the population, a straitjacket is necessary to force them to appear before the psychiatrist in his fortress asylum. But with students it suffices to let them know that advanced outposts of control have been set up in their ghetto: they rush there in such numbers that they have to wait in line to get in.

obscene exhibitions. When the priests of different churches present their lame, consequenceless dialogues (seminars of “Marxist” thought, conferences of Catholic intellectuals) or when the literary debris come together to bear witness to their impotence (five thousand students attending a forum on “What are the possibilities of literature?”), who but students fill the halls?

Incapable of real passions, the student seeks titillation in the passionless polemics between the celebrities of Unintelligence: Althusser — Garaudy — Sartre — Barthes — Picard — Lefebvre — Lévi-Strauss — Halliday⁽³⁾ — Châtelet — Antoine, and between their rival ideologies, whose function is to mask real problems by debating false ones: Humanism — Existentialism — Structuralism — Scientism — New Criticism — Dialectico-naturalism — Cyberneticism — *Planète*-ism — Metaphilosophism.

He thinks he is avant-garde if he has seen the latest Godard, or bought the latest Argumentist book,⁹ or participated in the latest happening organized by that asshole Lapassade. He discovers the latest trips as fast as the market can produce its ersatz version of long outmoded (though once important) ventures; in his ignorance he takes every rehash for a cultural revolution. His overriding concern is always to maintain his cultural status. Like everyone else, he takes pride in buying the paperback reprints of important and difficult texts that “mass culture” is disseminating at an accelerating pace.¹⁰ Since he doesn’t know how to read, he contents himself with fondly gazing at them.

His favorite reading matter is the press that specializes in promoting the frenzied consumption of cultural novelties; he unquestioningly accepts its pronouncements as guidelines for his tastes. He revels in *L’Express* or *Le Nouvel Observateur*; or perhaps he prefers *Le Monde*, which he feels is an accurate and truly “objective” newspaper, though he finds its style somewhat too difficult. To deepen his general knowledge he dips into *Planète*, the slick magical magazine that removes the wrinkles and blackheads from old ideas. With such guides he hopes to gain an understanding of the modern world and become politically conscious!

For in France, more than anywhere else, the student is content to be *politicized*. But his political participation is mediated by the same *spectacle*. Thus he seizes upon all the pitiful tattered remnants of a Left that was annihilated *more than forty years ago* by “socialist” reformism and Stalinist counterrevolution. The rulers are well aware of this defeat of the workers movement, and so are the workers themselves, though more confusedly. But the student remains oblivious of it, and continues to participate blithely in the most laughable demonstrations that never draw anybody but students. This utter political ignorance makes the universities a happy hunting ground for the manipulators of the dying bureaucratic organizations (from the “Communist” Party to the UNEF), which totalitarianly program the student’s political options. Occasionally there are deviationary tendencies and slight impulses toward “independence,” but after a period of token resistance the dissidents are invariably reincorporated into an order they have never fundamentally questioned.¹¹ The “Revolutionary Communist Youth,” whose title is a case of ide-

⁹ On the *Arguments* gang and the disappearance of its journal, see the tract *Into the Trashcan of History* issued by the Situationist International in 1963.

¹⁰ In this regard one cannot too highly recommend the solution already practiced by the most intelligent, which consists of stealing them.

¹¹ The latest adventures of the “Union of Communist Students” and its Christian counterparts demonstrate that all these students are united on one fundamental principle: unconditional submission to hierarchical superiors.

⁽³⁾ *Halliday*: rock star Johnny Halliday (or Hallyday), a sort of French Elvis, included in this list as an additional insult to the other “celebrities of Unintelligence” (all the rest of whom were prominent academic intellectuals).

ological falsification gone mad (they are neither revolutionary nor communist nor young), pride themselves on having rebelled against the Communist Party, then join the Pope in appealing for "Peace in Vietnam."

The student takes pride in his opposition to the "outdated" aspects of the de Gaulle regime, but in so doing he unwittingly implies his approval of *older crimes* (such as those of Stalinism in the era of Togliatti, Garaudy, Khrushchev and Mao). His "youthful" attitudes are thus actually even more *old-fashioned* than the regime's — the Gaullists at least understand modern society well enough to administer it.

But this is not the student's only archaism. He feels obliged to have general ideas on everything, to form a coherent worldview capable of giving meaning to his need for nervous activity and asexual promiscuity. As a result he falls prey to the last doddering missionary efforts of the churches. With atavistic ardor he rushes to adore the putrescent carcass of God and to cherish the decomposing remains of prehistoric religions in the belief that they enrich him and his time. Along with elderly provincial ladies, students form the social category with the highest percentage of admitted religious adherents. Everywhere else priests have been insulted and driven off, but university clerics openly continue to bugger thousands of students in their spiritual shit-houses.

In all fairness, we should mention that there are *some* tolerably intelligent students. These latter easily get around the miserable regulations designed to control the more mediocre students. They are able to do so precisely because they have *understood the system*; and they understand it because they despise it and know themselves to be its enemies. They are in the educational system in order to get the best it has to offer: namely, grants. Taking advantage of the contradiction that, for the moment at least, obliges the system to maintain a small, relatively independent sector of academic "research," they are going to calmly carry the germs of sedition to the highest level. Their open contempt for the system goes hand in hand with the lucidity that enables them to outdo the system's own lackeys, especially intellectually. They are already among the theorists of the coming revolutionary movement, and take pride in beginning to be feared as such. They make no secret of the fact that what they extract so easily from the "academic system" is used for its destruction. For the student cannot revolt against anything without revolting against his *studies*, though the necessity of this revolt is felt less naturally by him than by the worker, who spontaneously revolts against his condition as worker. But the student is a product of modern society just like Godard and Coca-Cola. His extreme alienation can be contested only through a contestation of the entire society. This critique can in no way be carried out on the student terrain: the student who defines himself as such identifies himself with a pseudo-value that prevents him from becoming aware of his real dispossession, and he thus remains at the height of false consciousness. But everywhere where modern society is beginning to be contested, young people are taking part in that contestation; and this revolt represents the most direct and thorough critique of student behavior.

It is not enough for theory to seek its realization in practice; practice must seek its theory

After a long period of slumber and permanent counterrevolution, the last few years have seen the first gestures of a new period of contestation, most visibly among young people. But the society of the spectacle, in its representation of itself and its enemies, imposes its own ideological categories on the world and its history. It reassuringly presents everything that happens as if it were part of the natural order of things, and reduces truly new developments that herald its *supersession* to the level of superficial consumer novelties. In reality the revolt of young people against the way of life imposed on them is simply a harbinger, a preliminary expression of a far more widespread subversion that will embrace all those who are feeling the increasing impossibility of *living* in this society, a prelude to the next revolutionary era. With their usual methods of inverting reality, the dominant ideology and its daily mouthpieces reduce this real historical movement to a socio-natural category: the Idea of Youth. Any new youth revolt is presented as merely the eternal revolt of youth that recurs with each generation, only to fade away “when young people become engaged in the serious business of production and are given real, concrete aims.” The “youth revolt” has been subjected to a veritable journalistic inflation (people are presented with the spectacle of a revolt to distract them from the possibility of participating in one). It is presented as an aberrant but necessary social safety valve that has its part to play in the smooth functioning of the system. This revolt against the society reassures the society because it supposedly remains partial, pigeonholed in the *apartheid* of “adolescent problems” (analogous to “racial issues” or “women’s concerns”), and is soon outgrown. In reality, if there is a “youth problem” in modern society, it simply consists in the fact that young people feel the profound crisis of this society most acutely — and try to express it. The young generation is a product par excellence of modern society, whether it chooses integration into it or the most radical rejection of it. What is surprising is not that youth is in revolt, but that “adults” are so resigned. But the reason for this is historical, not biological: the previous generation lived through all the defeats and swallowed all the lies of the long, shameful disintegration of the revolutionary movement.

In itself, “Youth” is a publicity myth linked to the capitalist mode of production, as an expression of its dynamism. This illusory preeminence of youth became possible with the economic recovery after World War II, following the mass entry into the market of a whole new category of more pliable consumers whose consumer *role* enabled them to identify with the society of the spectacle. But the official ideology is once again finding itself in contradiction with socioeconomic reality (lagging behind it), and it is precisely the youth who have first asserted an irresistible rage to live and who are spontaneously revolting against the daily boredom and dead time that the old world continues to produce in spite of all its modernizations. The most rebellious among them are expressing a pure, nihilistic rejection of this society without any aware-

ness of the possibility of superseding it. But such a perspective is being sought and developed everywhere in the world. It must attain the coherence of theoretical critique and the practical organization of this coherence.

At the most primitive level, the “delinquents” all over the world express with the most obvious violence their refusal to be integrated into the society. But the abstractness of their refusal gives them no chance to escape the contradictions of a system of which they are a spontaneous negative product. The delinquents are produced by every aspect of the present social order: the urbanism of the housing projects, the breakdown of values, the extension of an increasingly boring consumer leisure, the growing police-humanist control over every aspect of daily life, and the economic survival of a family unit that has lost all significance. They despise work, but they accept commodities. They want everything the spectacle offers them and they want it now, but they can’t afford to pay for it. This fundamental contradiction dominates their entire existence, constricting their efforts to make a truly free use of their time, to express themselves, and to form a sort of community. (Their microcommunities recreate a primitivism on the margin of developed society, and the poverty of this primitivism inevitably recreates a hierarchy within the gang. This hierarchy, which can fulfill itself only in wars with other gangs, *isolates* each gang and each individual within the gang.) In order to escape this contradiction the delinquent must either resign himself to going to work in order to buy the commodities — to this end a whole sector of production is specifically devoted to seducing him into consumerhood (motorcycles, electric guitars, clothes, records, etc.) — or else he is forced to attack the laws of the commodity, either in a rudimentary manner, by stealing, or in a conscious manner by advancing toward a revolutionary critique of the world of the commodity. Consumption “mellows out” the behavior of these young rebels and their revolt subsides into the worst conformism. For the delinquents only two futures are possible: the awakening of revolutionary consciousness or blind obedience in the factories.

The *Provos* are the first supersession of the experience of the delinquents, the organization of its first political expression. They arose out of an encounter between a few dregs from the world of decomposed art in search of a career and a mass of young rebels in search of self-expression. Their organization enabled both sides to advance toward and achieve a new type of contestation. The “artists” contributed a few ideas about play, though still quite mystified and decked out in a patchwork of ideological garments; the young rebels had nothing to offer but the violence of their revolt. From the beginning the two tendencies have remained distinct; the theory-less masses have found themselves under the tutelage of a small clique of dubious leaders who have tried to maintain their “power” by concocting a “provotarian” ideology. Their neoartistic reformism has prevailed over the possibility that the delinquents’ violence might extend itself to the plane of ideas in an attempt to supersede art. The *Provos* are an expression of the last reformism produced by modern capitalism: the reform of everyday life. Although nothing short of an uninterrupted revolution will be able to change life, the Provo hierarchy — like Bernstein with his vision of gradually transforming capitalism into socialism by means of reforms — believes that a few improvements can transform everyday life. By opting for the fragmentary, the *Provos* end up accepting the totality. To give themselves a base, their leaders have concocted the ridiculous ideology of the “provotariat” (an artistico-political salad composed of mildewed leftovers of a feast they have never known). This new provotariat is contrasted with the supposedly passive and “bourgeoisified” proletariat (eternal refrain of all the cretins of the century). Because they despair of a total change, the *Provos* despair of the only force capable of bringing about

that change. The proletariat is the motor of capitalist society, and thus its mortal threat: everything is designed to repress it — parties, bureaucratic unions, police (who attack it more often than they do the Provos), and the colonization of its entire life — because it is the only really menacing force. The Provos have understood none of this; they remain incapable of criticizing the production system and thus remain prisoners of the system as a whole. When an antiunion workers' riot inspired the Provo base to join in with the direct violence, their bewildered leaders were left completely behind and could find nothing better to do than denounce “excesses” and appeal for nonviolence. These leaders, whose program had advocated provoking the authorities so as to reveal their repressiveness, ended up by complaining that they had been provoked by the police. And they appealed over the radio to the young rioters to let themselves be guided by the “Provos,” i.e. by the leaders, who have amply demonstrated that their vague “anarchism” is nothing but one more lie. To arrive at a revolutionary critique, the rebellious Provo base has to begin by revolting against its own leaders, which means linking up with the objective revolutionary forces of the proletariat and dumping people like Constant and De Vries (the one the official artist of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the other a failed parliamentary candidate who admires the English police). Only in this way can the Provos link up with the authentic modern contestation of which they are already one of the fledgling expressions. If they really want to change the world, they have no use for those who are content to paint it white.⁽⁴⁾

By revolting against their studies, the American students have directly called in question a society that needs such studies. And their revolt (in Berkeley⁽⁵⁾ and elsewhere) against the university hierarchy has from the start asserted itself as *a revolt against the whole social system based on hierarchy and on the dictatorship of the economy and the state*. By refusing to accept the business and institutional roles for which their specialized studies have been designed to prepare them, they are profoundly calling in question a system of production that alienates all activity and its products from their producers. For all their groping and confusion, the rebelling American youth are already seeking a coherent revolutionary alternative from within the “affluent society.” Unfortunately, they remain largely fixated on two relatively incidental aspects of the American crisis — the blacks and Vietnam — and the small “New Left” organizations suffer from this fact. Their forms reflect a striving for genuine democracy, but the weakness of their subversive content causes them to fall into dangerous contradictions. Due to their extreme political ignorance and naïve illusions about what is really going on in the world, their hostility to the traditional politics of the old left organizations is easily rechanneled into unwitting acceptance of them. *Abstract* opposition to their society leads them to admire or support its most conspicuous enemies: the “socialist” bureaucracies of China or Cuba. A group like the “Resurgence Youth Movement” can in the same breath condemn the state and praise the “Cultural Revolution,” that pseudorevolt staged by the most gargantuan bureaucracy of modern times: Mao's China. At the same time, these semilibertarian and nondirective organizations, due to their glaring lack of content, are constantly in danger of slipping into the ideology of “group dynamics” or into the closed world of the sect. The widespread consumption of drugs is an expression of real poverty and a protest against this real poverty: it is a fallacious search for freedom in a world without freedom, a religious critique of a world that has already superseded religion. It is no accident that it is so prevalent

⁽⁴⁾ For more on the Provos, see “Révolte et récupération en Hollande” (*Internationale Situationniste* #11, pp. 65–66).

⁽⁵⁾ Allusion to the 1964 Free Speech Movement at the University of California in Berkeley. See David Lance Goines's *The Free Speech Movement*.

in the Beat milieu (that right wing of the youth revolt), where ideological refusal coexists with acceptance of the most ridiculous superstitions (Zen, spiritualism, “New Church” mysticism, and other rotten carcasses such as Gandhism and Humanism). In their search for a revolutionary program the American students make the same mistake as the Provos and proclaim themselves “the most exploited class in society”; they must henceforth understand that they have no interests distinct from all those who are subject to commodity slavery and generalized oppression.

In the Eastern bloc, bureaucratic totalitarianism is also beginning to produce its own forces of negation. The youth revolt there is particularly intense, but the only information on it must be derived from the denunciations of it in official publications and from the police measures undertaken to contain it. From these sources we learn that a segment of the youth no longer “respects” moral and family order (which still exists there in its most detestable bourgeois form), devotes itself to “debauchery,” despises work, and no longer obeys the Party police. The USSR has set up a special ministry for the express purpose of combatting this new delinquency. Alongside this diffuse revolt, a more coherently formulated contestation is striving to express itself; groups and clandestine journals emerge and disappear depending on the fluctuations of police repression. So far the most important act has been the publication of the *Open Letter to the Polish Communist Party* by the young Poles Kuron and Modzelewski,⁽⁶⁾ which explicitly affirms the necessity of “abolishing the present production relations and social relations” and recognizes that in order to accomplish this, “revolution is inevitable.” The Eastern intelligentsia is seeking to elucidate and make conscious the critique that the workers have already concretized in East Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest⁽⁷⁾: the proletarian critique of bureaucratic class power. This revolt is in the difficult situation of having to pose and solve real problems at one fell swoop. In other countries struggle is possible but the goal remains mystified. In the Eastern bureaucracies the struggle is without illusions and the goals are known; the problem is to devise the forms that can open the way to their realization.

In England the youth revolt found its first organized expression in the antibomb movement. This partial struggle, rallied around the vague program of the *Committee of 100* — which was capable of bringing 300,000 demonstrators into the streets — accomplished its most beautiful action in spring 1963 with the “Spies for Peace” scandal.¹ For lack of radical perspectives, it inevitably fell back, coopted by traditional political manipulators and noble-minded pacifists. But the specifically English archaisms in the control of everyday life have not been able to hold out against the assault of the modern world; the accelerating decomposition of secular values is engendering profoundly revolutionary tendencies in the critique of all aspects of the prevailing way of life.² The struggles of the British youth must link up with those of the British working class, which

¹ In which the partisans of the antibomb movement discovered, made public, and then invaded several ultrasecret fallout shelters reserved for members of the government.

² One thinks here of the excellent journal *Heatwave*, which seems to be evolving toward an increasingly rigorous radicality.⁽⁸⁾

⁽⁶⁾ English-language editions of Kuron and Modzelewski’s text have appeared under several different titles: *An Open Letter to the Party*; *A Revolutionary Socialist Manifesto*; *Revolutionary Marxist Students in Poland Speak Out*; and *Solidarnosc, the Missing Link*.

⁽⁷⁾ Allusion to the East Berlin revolt of 1953 and the Polish and Hungarian revolts of 1956.

⁽⁸⁾ *Heatwave* editors Christopher Gray and Charles Radcliffe subsequently joined the SI.

Obsolete addresses of *Heatwave*, the Zengakuren, and the Japanese RCL (included in the original pamphlet) have been omitted.

with its shop steward movement and wildcat strikes remains one of the most combative in the world. The victory of these two struggles is only possible if they work out common perspectives. The collapse of the Labour government is an additional factor that could be conducive to such an alliance. Their encounter will touch off explosions compared to which the Amsterdam Provo riot will be seen as child's play. Only in this way can a real revolutionary movement arise that will answer practical needs.

Japan is the only advanced industrialized country where this fusion of student youth and radical workers has already taken place.

The *Zengakuren*, the well-known organization of revolutionary students, and the *League of Young Marxist Workers* are the two major organizations formed on the common orientation of the *Revolutionary Communist League*. This formation is already tackling the problems of revolutionary organization. Simultaneously and without illusions it combats both Western capitalism and the bureaucracy of the so-called socialist countries. It already groups together several thousand students and workers organized on a democratic and antihierarchical basis, with all members participating in all the activities of the organization. These Japanese revolutionaries are the first in the world to carry on large organized struggles in the name of an advanced revolutionary program and with a substantial mass participation. In demonstration after demonstration thousands of workers and students have poured into the streets to wage violent struggle with the Japanese police. However, the RCL lacks a complete and concrete analysis of the two systems it fights with such ferocity. It has yet to define the precise nature of bureaucratic exploitation, just as it has yet to explicitly formulate the characteristics of modern capitalism, the critique of everyday life and the critique of the spectacle. The Revolutionary Communist League is still fundamentally a vanguard political organization, an heir of the best features of the classical proletarian organizations. It is presently the most important revolutionary grouping in the world, and should henceforth be a pole of discussion and a rallying point for the new global revolutionary proletarian critique.⁽⁹⁾

⁽⁹⁾ The SI's judgment of the Revolutionary Communist League turned out to be mistaken in some respects. The RCL *Zengakuren* was not "the" *Zengakuren*, but only one of several rival ones (another was dominated by the Japanese Communist Party, others by various combinations of Trotskyists, Maoists, etc.). In the early sixties the *Zengakuren* faction that was to form the RCL did indeed have many of the positive features the SI attributed to it: it had a political platform distinctly to the left of Trotskyism, participated militantly in political struggles on many fronts, and seems to have had a fairly experimental approach to organizational and tactical questions. In 1963 it sent some delegates to Europe who met the situationists, and it later translated a few situationist texts into Japanese. At least by 1970, however, when an SI delegate (René Viénet) visited Japan, the RCL had devolved into a largely Leninist position and turned out to be not very different from leftist sects everywhere else.

To create at last a situation that goes beyond the point of no return

“To be avant-garde means to move in step with reality” (*Internationale Situationniste* #8). The radical critique of the modern world must now have the *totality* as its object and as its objective. This critique must be brought to bear on the world’s actual past, on its present reality, and on the prospects for transforming it. We cannot grasp the whole truth of the present world, much less formulate the project of its total subversion, unless we are capable of *revealing its hidden history*, unless we subject the entire history of the international revolutionary movement, initiated over a century ago by the Western proletariat, to a demystified critical scrutiny. “This movement against the whole organization of the old world came to an end long ago” (*Internationale Situationniste* #7). *It failed*. Its last historical manifestation was the Spanish proletarian revolution, defeated in Barcelona in May 1937. But its official “failures” and “victories” must be judged in the light of their eventual consequences, and their essential truths must be brought back to light. In this regard we can agree with Karl Liebknecht’s remark, on the eve of his assassination,⁽¹⁰⁾ that “some defeats are really victories, while some victories are more shameful than any defeat.” Thus the first great “defeat” of proletarian power, the Paris Commune, was in reality its first great *victory*, in that for the first time the early proletariat demonstrated its historical capacity to organize all aspects of social life *freely*. Whereas its first great “victory,” the Bolshevik revolution, ultimately turned out to be its most disastrous defeat.

The triumph of the Bolshevik order coincided with the international counterrevolutionary movement that began with the crushing of the Spartakists by German “Social Democracy.” The commonality of the jointly victorious Bolshevism and reformism went deeper than their apparent antagonism, for the Bolshevik order also turned out to be merely a new variation on the old theme, a new guise of the old order. The results of the Russian counterrevolution were, internally, the establishment and development of a new mode of exploitation, *bureaucratic state capitalism*, and externally, the spread of a “Communist” International whose branches served the sole purpose of defending and reproducing their Russian model. Capitalism, in its bureaucratic and bourgeois variants, won a new lease on life, over the dead bodies of the sailors of Kronstadt, the peasants of the Ukraine, and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and finally Barcelona.

The Third International, ostensibly created by the Bolsheviks to counteract the degenerate social-democratic reformism of the Second International and to unite the vanguard of the proletariat in “revolutionary communist parties,” was too closely linked to the interests of its founders to ever bring about a *genuine socialist revolution* anywhere. In reality the Third International was essentially a continuation of the Second. The Russian model was rapidly imposed on the Western workers’ organizations and their evolutions were thenceforth one and the same. The totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy, the new ruling class, over the Russian proletariat found its echo

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Karl Liebknecht*: one of the few German socialists to oppose World War I. He and Rosa Luxemburg founded the Spartakus League in 1916; they were both killed following the crushing of the Spartakist insurrection in January 1919.

in the subjection of the great mass of workers in other countries to a stratum of political and labor-union bureaucrats whose interests had become clearly contradictory to those of their rank-and-file constituents. While the Stalinist monster haunted working-class consciousness, capitalism was becoming bureaucratized and overdeveloped, resolving its internal crises and proudly proclaiming this new victory to be permanent. In spite of apparent variations and oppositions, a single social form dominates the world. The principles of the *old world* continue to govern our *modern world*; the tradition of dead generations still weighs on the minds of the living.

Opposition to this world offered from within it, on its own terrain, by supposedly revolutionary organizations is only an apparent opposition. Such pseudo-opposition, propagating the worst mystifications and invoking more or less rigid *ideologies*, ultimately helps consolidate the dominant order. The labor unions and political parties forged by the working class as tools for its own emancipation have become mere safety valves, regulating mechanisms of the system, the private property of leaders seeking their own particular emancipation by using them as stepping stones to roles within the ruling class of a society they never dream of calling into question. The party program or union statute may contain vestiges of “revolutionary” phraseology, but their practice is everywhere *reformist*. (Their reformism, moreover, has become virtually meaningless since capitalism itself has become officially reformist.) Wherever the parties have been able to seize power — in countries more backward than 1917 Russia — they have only reproduced the Stalinist model of totalitarian counterrevolution.¹ Elsewhere, they have become the static and necessary complement² to the self-regulation of bureaucratized capitalism, the token opposition indispensable for maintaining its police-humanism. Vis-à-vis the worker masses, they remain the unflinching and unconditional defenders of the bureaucratic counterrevolution and the obedient agents of its foreign policy. Constantly working to perpetuate the universal dictatorship of the economy and the state, they are the bearers of the biggest lie in a world of lies. As the situationists put it, “A universally dominant social system, tending toward totalitarian self-regulation, is only apparently being combatted by false forms of opposition — illusory forms that remain trapped on the system’s own terrain and thus only serve to reinforce it. Bureaucratic pseudosocialism is only the most grandiose of these disguises of the old world of hierarchy and alienated labor.”

As for student unionism, it is nothing but a parody of a farce, a pointless and ridiculous imitation of a long degenerated labor unionism.

The theoretical and practical denunciation of Stalinism in all its forms must be the basic banality of all future revolutionary organizations. It is clear that in France, for example, where economic backwardness has delayed awareness of the crisis, the revolutionary movement can be reborn only over the dead body of Stalinism. *Stalinism must be destroyed*.⁽¹¹⁾ That must be the constantly repeated watchword of the *last* revolution of prehistory.

This revolution must once and for all break with its own prehistory and derive all its poetry from the future. Little groups of “militants” claiming to represent the “authentic Bolshevik heritage” are voices from beyond the grave; in no way do they herald the future. These relics from

¹ The parties have striven to industrialize these countries through classic primitive accumulation at the expense of the peasantry, accelerated by bureaucratic terror.

² For 45 years the French “Communist” Party has not taken a single step toward seizing power. The same is true in all the advanced countries that have not fallen under the heel of the “Red” Army.

⁽¹¹⁾ The original text cites the Latin phrase *delenda Carthago* (“Carthage must be destroyed”) with which the ancient Roman senator Cato the Elder ended all his speeches. The sense is that the destruction of Stalinism must be constantly, and even obsessively, insisted upon until it is carried out.

the great shipwreck of the “revolution betrayed” invariably end up defending the USSR; this is their scandalous betrayal of revolution. They can scarcely maintain their illusions outside the famous underdeveloped countries, where they serve to reinforce theoretical underdevelopment.³ From *Partisans* (organ of reconciled Stalino-Trotskyist currents) to all the tendencies and semi-tendencies squabbling over the dead body of Trotsky within and outside the Fourth International, the same revolutionary *ideology* reigns, with the same theoretical and practical inability to grasp the problems of the modern world. Forty years of counterrevolution separate them from the Revolution. Since this is not 1920, they can only be wrong (and they were already wrong in 1920).

The dissolution of the “ultraleftist” *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group after its division into two fractions — “Cardanist-modernist” and “traditional Marxist” (*Pouvoir Ouvrier*) — is proof, if any were needed, that there can be no revolution outside the modern, nor any modern thought outside the reinvention of the revolutionary critique (*Internationale Situationniste* #9). Any separation between these two aspects inevitably falls back either into the museum of revolutionary prehistory or into the modernism of the system, i.e. into the dominant counterrevolution: *Voix Ouvrière* or *Arguments*.

As for the various anarchist groups, they possess nothing beyond a pathetic faith in the ideological label “Anarchy” in which they have pigeonholed themselves. The pitiful *Le Monde Libertaire*, obviously edited by *students*, attains the most incredible degree of confusion and stupidity. Since they tolerate each other, they would *tolerate anything*.

The dominant social system, which flatters itself on its constant modernization, must now be confronted with a worthy opponent: the equally modernized negation that it is itself producing.⁴ Let the dead bury the dead. The practical demystifications of the historical movement are exorcizing the phantoms that haunted revolutionary consciousness; the revolution of everyday life is being confronted with the immensity of its tasks. Revolution and the life it announces must both be reinvented. If the revolutionary project remains fundamentally the same — the abolition of class society — this is because the conditions giving rise to that project have nowhere been radically transformed. But this project must be taken up again with a new radicality and coherence, learning from the failure of previous revolutionaries, so that its partial realization will not merely bring about a new division of society.

Since the struggle between the system and the new proletariat can only be in terms of the *totality*, the future revolutionary movement must abolish anything within itself that tends to reproduce the alienation produced by the *commodity system* — i.e. the system dominated by commodified labor. It must be a living critique of that system, a negation embodying all the elements necessary for its *supersession*. As Lukács correctly showed, revolutionary organization is this necessary mediation between theory and practice, between man and history, between the mass of workers and the proletariat *constituted as a class*. (Lukács’s mistake was to believe that the Bolshevik Party fulfilled this role.)⁽¹²⁾ If they are to be realized in practice, “theoretical” tendencies and differences must immediately be translated into organizational questions. Everything ultimately depends on how the new revolutionary movement resolves the organization question; on whether its organizational forms are consistent with its essential project: *the international realization of the absolute power of workers councils* as prefigured in the proletarian revolutions

³ On their role in Algeria, see The Class Struggles in Algeria (*Internationale Situationniste* #10).

⁴ Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria (*Internationale Situationniste* #10).

⁽¹²⁾ See the last chapter of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*.

of this century. Such an organization must make a radical critique of all the foundations of the society it combats: commodity production; *ideology* in all its guises; the state; and the separations imposed by the state.

The rock on which the old revolutionary movement foundered was the separation of theory and practice. Only the supreme moments of proletarian struggles overcame this split and discovered their own *truth*. No organization has yet bridged this gap. *Ideology*, no matter how “revolutionary” it may be, always serves the rulers; it is the *alarm signal* revealing the presence of the enemy fifth column. This is why the critique of ideology must in the final analysis be the central problem of revolutionary organization. Lies are a product of the alienated world; they cannot appear within an organization claiming to bear the *social truth* without that organization thereby becoming one more lie in a world of lies.

All the positive aspects of the power of workers councils must already be embryonically present in any revolutionary organization aiming at their realization. Such an organization must wage a mortal struggle against the Leninist theory of organization. The 1905 revolution and the Russian workers’ spontaneous self-organization into soviets was already a critique in acts⁵ of that baneful theory. But the Bolshevik movement persisted in believing that working-class spontaneity could not go beyond “trade-union consciousness” and was thus incapable of grasping “the totality.” This amounted to decapitating the proletariat so that the Party could put itself at the “head” of the revolution. Contesting the proletariat’s historical capacity to liberate itself, as Lenin did so ruthlessly, means contesting its capacity to totally run the future society. In such a perspective, the slogan “All power to the soviets” meant nothing more than the conquest of the soviets by the Party and the installation of the party state in place of the withering-away “state” of the armed proletariat.

“All power to the soviets” must once again be our slogan, but literally this time, without the Bolshevik ulterior motives. The proletariat can play the *game* of revolution only if the stakes are the *whole world*; otherwise it is nothing. The sole form of its power, *generalized self-management*, cannot be shared with any other power. Because it represents the actual dissolution of all powers, it can tolerate no limitation (geographical or otherwise); any compromises it accepts are immediately transformed into concessions, into surrender. “Self-management must be both the means and the end of the present struggle. It is not only what is at stake in the struggle, but also its adequate form. It is itself the material it works on, and its own presupposition” (“The Class Struggles in Algeria”).

A unitary critique of the world is the guarantee of the coherence and truth of a revolutionary organization. To tolerate the existence of an oppressive system in some particular region (because it presents itself as “revolutionary,” for example) amounts to recognizing the legitimacy of oppression. To tolerate alienation in any one domain of social life amounts to admitting an inevitability of all forms of reification. It is not enough to be for the power of workers councils in the abstract; it is necessary to demonstrate what it means concretely: the suppression of commodity production and therefore of the proletariat. Despite their superficial disparities, all existing societies are governed by the *logic of the commodity*; it is the basis of their totalitarian self-regulation. Commodity reification is the *essential* obstacle to total emancipation, to the free

⁵ After the theoretical critique of it by Rosa Luxemburg.⁽¹³⁾

⁽¹³⁾ See Luxemburg’s “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy” (1904), in which she criticizes Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1903).

construction of life. In the world of commodity production, praxis is not pursued in accordance with autonomously determined aims, but in accordance with the directives of external forces. Economic laws take on the appearance of natural laws; but their power depends *solely* on the “unawareness of those who participate in them.”

The essence of commodity production is the loss of self in the chaotic and unconscious creation of a world totally beyond the control of its creators. In contrast, the radically revolutionary core of generalized self-management is everyone’s conscious control over the whole of life. The self-management of commodity alienation would only make everyone the programmers of their own survival – squaring the capitalist circle. The task of the workers councils will thus be not the self-management of the existing world, but its unceasing qualitative transformation: the concrete supersession of the commodity (that enormous detour in the history of human self-production).

This supersession naturally implies the abolition of *work* and its replacement by a new type of free activity, thereby eliminating one of the fundamental splits of modern society: that between an increasingly reified labor and a passively consumed leisure. Presently decomposing groups like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* or *Pouvoir Ouvrier*,⁶ although adhering to the modern watchword of Workers’ Power, continue to follow the path of the old workers movement in envisioning a reformism of labor through its “humanization.” But work itself must now be attacked. Far from being “utopian,” the abolition of work is the first condition for the effective supersession of commodity society, for the elimination within each person’s life of the separation between “free time” and “work time” – those complementary sectors of alienated life – that is a continual expression of the commodity’s internal contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Only when this opposition is overcome will people be able to make their vital activity subject to their will and consciousness and see themselves in a world that they themselves have created. The democracy of workers councils is the solution to all the present separations. It makes impossible “everything that exists outside individuals.”

The conscious domination of history by the people who make it – that is what the whole revolutionary project amounts to. Modern history, like all past history, is the product of social praxis, the (unconscious) result of human activities. In the era of totalitarian domination, capitalism has produced its own new religion: the *spectacle*. The spectacle is the terrestrial realization of *ideology*. Never has the world been so inverted. “And like the ‘critique of religion’ in Marx’s day, the critique of the spectacle is today the essential precondition of any critique” (*Internationale Situationniste* #9).

Humanity is historically confronted with the problem of *revolution*. The increasingly grandiose material and technological means are equalled only by the increasingly profound dissatisfaction of everyone. The bourgeoisie and its Eastern heir, the bureaucracy, are incapable of putting this overdevelopment (which will be the basis of the *poetry* of the future) to any good use precisely because they both must strive to *maintain an old order*. The most they can use it for is to reinforce their police control. They can do nothing but accumulate *capital*, and therefore *proletarians* – a proletarian being someone who has no power over his life and who knows it. It is the new proletariat’s historical fortune to be the only consequent heir to the valueless riches of the *bourgeois world* – riches that it must transform and *supersede* in such a way as to foster the development of fully realized human beings pursuing the total appropriation of nature and of their own nature.

⁶ In contrast, a group like ICO, by shunning any organization or coherent theory, condemns itself to nonexistence.

This realization of human *nature* can only mean the unlimited multiplication and full satisfaction of the real *desires* which the spectacle represses into the darkest corners of the revolutionary unconscious, and which it can realize only fantastically in the dreamlike delirium of its advertising. The true fulfillment of genuine desires — which means the abolition of all the pseudoneeds and pseudodesires that the system manufactures daily in order to perpetuate its own power — cannot take place without the suppression and positive supersession of the commodity spectacle.

Modern history can be liberated, and its innumerable achievements can be freely put to use, only by the forces that it represses: the workers without power over the conditions, the meaning and the products of their own activities. In the nineteenth century the proletariat was already the heir of philosophy;⁽¹⁴⁾ now it has become the heir of modern art and of the first conscious critique of everyday life. It cannot suppress itself without at the same time realizing art and philosophy. To transform the world and to change life are one and the same thing for the proletariat,⁽¹⁵⁾ the inseparable passwords to its suppression as a class, the dissolution of the present reign of necessity, and the finally possible accession to the reign of freedom. The radical critique and free reconstruction of all the values and patterns of behavior imposed by alienated reality are its maximum program. Free creativity in the construction of all moments and events of life is the only *poetry* it can acknowledge, the poetry made by all, the beginning of the revolutionary festival. Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce. *Play* is the ultimate principle of this festival, and the only rules it can recognize are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints.⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹⁴⁾ “Just as philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapons in philosophy... Philosophy cannot be realized without the supersession of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be superseded without the realization of philosophy” (Marx, “Introduction to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”).

⁽¹⁵⁾ “‘Transform the world,’ said Marx. ‘Change life,’ said Rimbaud. For us these two commands are one and the same” (André Breton).

⁽¹⁶⁾ The ending is stronger and more scandalous in the original: the French word *jouir* (“to enjoy”) also means “to come” in the sexual sense.

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Members of the Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg University
On the Poverty of Student Life
Considered in Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Especially Intellectual Aspects,
With a Modest Proposal for Doing Away With It
November 1966

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