Technological Society—Mass Society

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"Without automobiles, without airplanes, and without loudspeakers, we could not have seized power in Germany."
—Hitler

The loss of class consciousness after the defeat of the most recent proletarian assault on capitalist society obliges us to revise Marx's famous dictum and say instead that it is no longer a matter of transforming the world but rather of interpreting it. Now more than ever, in order to change the world we must understand it. We repudiate self-satisfied activism, but we do not renounce practice nor are we calling for complacent speculation, but instead, to the contrary, we proclaim theoretical activity to be the most important part of practice at the historical juncture in which we find ourselves. Because the project of domination is based on the unintelligibility of the world in order to make us voluntarily hand over its management to its leaders, the project of liberation must be exactly the opposite: the world must be rendered comprehensible so

that its inhabitants can control it without the need for intermediaries. For this purpose, deeds are not enough; it is words that are needed above all.

The victory of capitalist domination entailed two fundamental changes: the predominance of technology and the emergence of the masses. By technology, we do not mean an agglomeration of machines or practical knowledge that we have the choice to use or not to use. Technology is a medium, an environment, a world that envelops all social activities, from which no one can escape. In short, technology is a total, universal system. And when we use the term masses, a concept invented by the Frankfort School, we are referring to the majority of the population that has arisen from the dissolution of classes. This dissolution takes place when classes are deprived of their technical environment. Neither change was a matter of ineluctable fate; they are historical products that arose during the 1990s after two decades of crises and revolts.

The military inventions of World War Two revolutionized transport and communications when they were adopted by civilian industry. If technology made big industry, and therefore the proletariat, possible, at a subsequent stage of its development it put an end to both. Automobiles, airplanes, telephones, household appliances, television, etc., were innovations that profoundly transformed the means of production and everyday life, undermining the stability of the classes. During the 1960s, entire sectors of the working class attained a standard of living that would have been unthinkable in previous eras, and governments assumed full responsibility for a broad range of social services, so that, with the collaboration of the trade unions, a long period of social peace was made possible. The "Welfare" State transformed the legal system, health care, education, communications, transport and leisure into powerful bureaucratic machines. The "scientific organization of labor" was imposed in factories and consumption increased in working class households. The working class developed a tendency towards reformism and immersion in private life, and began to dis-

2

integrate. The challenges that were posed by the most important aspects of the integration of the working class into the system led to the rise of resistance and refusal within the proletariat (especially among the youth) and to the emergence of a more profound awareness of the role of machines and deteriorating working conditions; the result was the wave of revolts that took place between 1968 and 1982. The rise in the price of oil during the early 1970s marked the beginning of the crisis that paralyzed industry and plunged millions of people into unemployment. The reaction of the working class was blunted and destroyed. In its struggles it launched new forms of organization (committees, assemblies, coordinadoras, pickets) that were, however, incapable of taking the form of a revolutionary project. Finance capital emerged as the absolute victor. Issues that flourished alongside labor conflicts, such as protest movements in favor of the rights of women, homosexuals and children, the defense of nature, prisoners' protests, the struggle against racial discrimination, etc., were no longer considered to be specific aspects of the social question and were transformed into the platforms of particular ideologies that were compatible with the system. Financial policies steered the economic recovery of the 1980s onto new foundations: industrial restructuring, the trend towards part-time and temporary jobs, the privatization of government services and the growing predominance of the service sector in the economy. National economies dissolved in a globalized economy thanks to computers and the internet. Technology became the determinant factor in capitalist society, because the source of value was no longer human labor but technological invention and innovation. Technology was the main productive force. Technology was institutionalized and became autonomous and capable of self-perpetuation. The course of development of the dominant order came to depend on technological progress. Social institutions began to base their legitimacy and activities on new (technological) foundations. Due to the fact that the workers were excluded from the productive process by automation, the contradic-

tion between productive forces and social relations was seemingly abolished. Technology accentuated the international division of labor by means of industrial "relocation", that is, by dispatching to the periphery of the system, along with whole industries, the class struggle, so that the latter could be mixed up with all kinds of ideological archaisms, nationalisms, indigenous identity movements, racial and religious questions, pre-capitalist traditions, etc. If the complications generated by this division of labor endangered the interests of the ruling classes, then the latter resorted to the military solution, the technological solution par excellence. War is the continuation of politics—and global economics—by strictly technical means. The differences between economics, politics and war are only differences of degree. The situation was no longer characterized by power becoming technological, but by technology becoming power. Technology defined and justified the new dominant interests. The new social relations, and along with them, exploitation, the lack of freedom, suffering, war, etc. … were presented as technically necessary facts in a rationalized society. Technical jargon would be used to formulate every question because under technology, now transformed into the ruling power, all problems are technical problems. Nutrition, health, freedom, well-being, culture and desire will from now on be susceptible to technical treatment and must be reconciled with technology to be viable.

The new society, regardless of the political form that it takes, is a fascist totalitarian society. Fascism is nothing but the result of the logic of the technological State of modern society pursued to its extreme conclusions. This fascism of a new type—derived, like the other kind of fascism, from a reaction to contemporary social crisis—is the product of a definitive leap forward in technological development. The technological system is superimposed on class society and absorbs the latter. All of society is then transformed into a laboratory where all kinds of new inventions are tested. At the end of this process, the result is social anomie, that is, the decomposition of classes into masses. Modern fascism is based on

a micro-society of dissidents—a veritable ghetto—is feasible, but in a clandestine state, outside of the din of the mass media. It could find support in the larger struggles, but without allowing itself to be mystified by them. This ghetto has a paradoxically conservative function, since it must rescue the emancipatory and libertarian dream of past struggles from the "uninterrupted noise of all social situations" and preserve it for a time when men and women will "finally be forced to contemplate their real life and mutual relations without illusions" (Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto"). It must be invisible to the eyes of power, and therefore outside of the law, unrecuperable, criminal; only thus can it cast light on the cracks in this system that is constantly undergoing self-destruction and help to make these cracks bigger at the right moment. Nothing is objectively certain; history promises nothing. Resistance might become a subject, or it might become merely a picturesque detail in a panorama of desolation, it all depends on how we play our cards.

this transformation. It is the regime that is based on the mass mobilization of atomized and isolated elements. It cannot survive unless it can permanently mobilize everyone. These masses have been manufactured with the destruction of all sociability, of every form of rank and file power, of all horizontal institutions or means of expression, of the most minimal group solidarity, etc. … by way of confinement in private life, incessant movement, emotional discharge and control. All these developments are not so much the work of cunning leaders as they are the outcome of the impersonal logic of the technological system. Technology, by colonizing everyday life and facilitating the penetration of the cultural commodity, has created a situation where the workers are no longer a world apart, and in which their social behavior has become identical with that of their rulers, so that, although hierarchies still exist, not only the tastes, but also the illnesses typical of executives are now the tastes and illnesses of the workers, too. There are differences with respect to categories, but not with respect to style. Urbanism is an effective means of dispersion and confinement, that is, of massification. The masses live in conurbations, not in cities. Space is subdivided in accordance with vertical criteria: the leaders tend to occupy the centers and the population is transferred to the periphery but well-being is still defined for all as highly-equipped privatization. Every era produces the people that it needs and their fetishes. Our era has continuously produced, everywhere, men and women who are fascinated by technology, men and women who have been raised from the cradle in its world. Their way of thinking is conditioned by the artificial urban environment in which they live. The police are merely a supplemental factor, for thanks to the generalized feeling of impotence generated by isolation, control has been internalized by most people. Neither experience nor arguments will affect the masses and modify their conduct; the work-consumption-escape cycle abolishes real free time and destroys both the capacity to have experiences as well as the capacity to reason. The masses live as prisoners of the present, they have no

memory because they do not have either a past or a future. They therefore do not adopt a truly fascist ideology, but are simply incapable of distinguishing between reality and fiction, truth and deception, present and past. They are emancipated from experience and memory. Unlike classes, masses are indifferent, they have neither public life nor political opinions, and they are therefore incapable of formulating common interests or of uniting behind a single objective. They are much more exploitable. Regardless of the political form taken by domination, the mass-individual is only a cog in the social machinery, without a real place in the world, useless, superfluous, replaceable. Totalitarianism cannot exist without this feeling of uselessness, emptiness and uprootedness that dwells in the masses and facilitates their accelerated circulation. Change, fashion, novelty, constant motion, the race to the office, the supermarket, the stadium, the voting booth … these constitute the soul of fascism. Constant movement causes the masses to be malleable and makes it easier to get them to move in the desired direction. And technology is a dynamic system that modifies and reinvents everything, and forces constant re-adaptations; in a word, it demands movement.

Fascism can adopt democratic ways and allow a certain range of political activity. However, because government and politics have been subjected to technological imperatives, the traditional differences between democracy and fascism have been erased. Technology is not neutral, but neutralizes all social activity, such as, for example, government and protest. It does not seek participation, but productivity, higher yields, efficiency. On the one side, it is the business of professionals, experts, technicians; on the other side, it is pure triviality and entertainment. In terms of the techniques they utilize, all parties are the same. This does not mean the end of ideologies, but the triumph of one ideology, the ideology of progress, of the spectacle, of technology.

Technological society is a society without a subject, and any attempt to manufacture such a subject by extolling the mass spec-

control, the social function of the State becomes a weighty responsibility for its leaders. Then they set aside their welfare functions in order to devote themselves more seriously to the technological variety of social control par excellence; the complete technological State is a police State. Anyone can be an enemy, and at the extreme point the whole population is a potential enemy. In a totalitarian regime the entire population is under suspicion and therefore all of its movements are under surveillance.

Without a historical subject, the unity of theory and practice, of reality and reason, is impossible. Events do not awaken consciousness, but at most instill resignation, thus tending to lose their significance as the terrain of practice, but never totally. While it is true that there is no revolutionary class, since all that exists now are masses, it is no less certain that minorities still survive amidst the masses, minorities who have not admitted defeat and who believe in the possibility of a revolutionary practice. The radical struggles that do take place, although few and far between, are the manifest proof that not all is lost. Fascism rules in the geographical center, but not one hundred percent. The normalization of catastrophe is not yet automatic. It is a poor foundation but it is the only practical basis for a revolutionary critique. Every aspect of the lives of the masses is the object of exploitation, and in this respect as well the masses are different from classes. For the masses there is no distinction between work and non-work, which is why struggles cannot be circumscribed by the confines of the workplace. Furthermore, struggles that affect the places where people live have a much greater chance of generating consciousness. Thus, the defense of the urban neighborhoods or the territory, insofar as they demand the self-management of areas, of areas as the space of freedom and desire, is more clarifying. In a fascist environment broad movements and huge dissident organizations, such as characterize the Third World countries, are not possible, but on a small scale solidarity and resistance, information and debate, theory and practice, are perfectly plausible. So that within modern totalitarianism

ficacy of such malfunctions. The consequences are irreversible: the project to make the world a world of technology therefore results in catastrophe. The technological solution for catastrophe is based on generalized control. Thus, by learning to live with this prospect of catastrophe we are turning this generalized control into the normal social condition, but the process does not stop there. New catastrophes are superimposed on the old ones while social control is tending to develop towards absolute control. In fascist conditions a catastrophe does not trigger any kind of social crisis but instead provides yet another reason for legitimizing the status quo: technology will save us from the evils caused by technology. There is no turning back. Furthermore, as the principal motor force of development, catastrophe becomes the defining characteristic of the economy and politics, so that it ceases to be a misfortune and becomes instead a necessity. All social activity then revolves around the dialectic of destruction and reconstruction. Politics is then redefined as managing the survival of the masses under catastrophic conditions, a circumstance that gives rise to the further development of all kinds of mechanisms of control. In reality, social control takes two forms: the kind of social control that pursues adaptation to extreme environments, and the kind that seeks to contain anti-social conduct. The former is mild and gentle, because domination needs rank and file partners who will cooperate with its managers; these elements constitute the residents of the fish tank that holds the pro-system volunteers such as the environmentalists, the staffs of the NGOs and the members of the civil society groups. A party of the vanquished who join the side of the victors. The second kind of social control is harsh, it is the business of the police. Its purpose is to detect dissidents, because at a time when technical domination has destroyed the traditional control mechanisms like the family, the educational system and trade unionism, dissidence is dangerous. Police control will always be the best organized and equipped sector of any kind of fascism. Once the point is reached where the system's vulnerability has forced it to mobilize its mechanisms of

tacle amounts to fighting on behalf of the dominant fascism. The masses are the object of the new totalitarianism; the "multitude", the "citizenry", the "working class" and the "human species" are merely its apologetic carbon copies. The forms of alternative false consciousness, the ideologies of dissent, can be the deliberate products of the servants of domination, but they are often the simple expressions of that inability to distinguish between reality and fiction that is characteristic of the masses, and therefore of their individual atoms. Ideologies are not the crystallization of incomplete thought, or of a badly elaborated critique, but a hodgepodge of diverse themes derived from previous ideologies. Thus, the mass-individual will find no contradiction at all between his everyday conservatism and his particular "utopia". Nor will he think that there is any major problem involved in passing from one to the other, or in combining two or three such concepts. Ideologies are psychological mechanisms of adaptation. They no longer reflect the aspirations of specific sectors of the population, that is, of classes or fragments of classes, but are the extremely varied efflorescence of mental aberrations that can be produced by the schizophrenia of the masses. As a result, false protest can easily become more and more spectacular, more and more an expression of role-playing. It is above all a matter of escape and "having a good time". In spite of all appearances to the contrary, there are no fundamental differences between ideological fashions. All of them ignore the temporal conjuncture and therefore history, which is why all of them think it is possible to turn back the clock. The "alter-globalization" movement, for example, advocates a return to the political and economic conditions of the pre-globalization period, the period when economic power was legitimized by social pacts, while it simultaneously accepts the current technological system and the deplorable condition of the masses. While the former position has led its proponents to become the servants of traditional politics, the latter view has established them as defenders of hard-core capitalism pure and

simple, and therefore, regardless of their intentions, the closer they get to reality, the more their activities resemble a circus act and the more vacuous their program becomes. Other phony rebels have advocated even more improbable returns to the past with similar results. Despite the fact that they live only in the present, or perhaps for that very reason, the present instills them with panic. Their common characteristic is the way that all of them shield themselves from reality: their belief in a Golden Age. This dissatisfied sector of the suffering masses thinks that any past time was better. For the civil society movement, this past time is the era of the Nation State, the period of bourgeois democracy tempered in the bureaucracy which they want to reach by riding the wave of technological advances. Technophiles of a workerist bent situate this Golden Age in the Russia of 1918, in the Spain of 1936 or in May '68, a Golden Age which they will attain when the "proletariat" seizes control of the existing means of production. The technophobic minority, which at least does not believe in the self-management of technology, directs its gaze deeper into the past, to the Renaissance, to the rural Middle Ages (contempt for the Court, praise for the village), or to the Paleolithic era (up with hunting and gathering, down with agriculture), as the place where virtue makes its dwelling. In their nostalgic yearning for the past, they believe that history might have existed at one time, but after their respective Golden Ages, there is no longer any history. The present is only a deviation that must be corrected by applying the magic formula contained in their dogmas. They therefore ignore the historic distance that separates us from the past and restrict themselves to awaiting the return of the conditions that once made the Golden Age possible. They do not want to face reality, but instead want to merely worship the ideal image of a defunct reality whose impossible restoration serves them as a moral consolation and as an alibi for their inactivity. Contrary to what is commonly believed, ideology is not the secular religion of the ghetto, for whether it is the ideology of Negri, or virtual internet guerrillas, or

primitivists, it does not seek to establish itself in a confined milieu outside of the system, but seeks something much more simple, that is, to choose a particular form of lack of style within the broad range of choices offered by the spectacle of domination. If there is one thing that distinguishes the new totalitarianism it is the fact that those who stand out from the crowd and are appropriately creative make much better citizens than those who are lifelong conformists.

Technological systems are fragile; technical progress reaches a point beyond which it is no longer susceptible to control and we have already passed this point. In fact, many sub-systems no longer function; they have ended up producing effects contrary to the purposes for which they were created; the justice system foments crime, the healthcare system fosters illness, the educational system produces idiots. The system of food production exacerbates world hunger, the production of automobiles swells the number of fatalities in traffic accidents, the "welfare" system results in a higher suicide rate…. Technological society has reached such a degree of development that the more it advances, the greater are the unforeseen effects that it produces and the more irremediable the nature of those effects. Neither experts nor managers know where they are going. Progress entails a greater concentration of personnel and more organizational complexity, increasing the likelihood of errors and breakdowns and amplifying the repercussions of accidents. Attempts to correct these trends have only a minor impact, insofar as the system depends to a growing degree on a constantly increasing number of factors, and are much too late in view of the fact that the system is always functioning at a higher speed. Small slip-ups can have formidable consequences; just one absent-minded oversight could shut down an entire sector. In fact, a single person could bring about the collapse of whole zones of production with relative ease, while the precautions necessary to forestall his mistakes or his sabotage, if this is even possible, require thousands of people. We are constantly having to deal with the destructive ef-