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Vanishing Points in Working Class Culture

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Publishing a book that contains biographies of anarchists who participated in the glorious episode of the May Days of 1937 during the Spanish Revolution must seem anachronistic and out of place in a society that lives in a perpetual present. In a society without any consciousness of time and without memory, the past reemerges only as an object of archeological research or as spectacular ephemera like the “eightieth anniversary of the civil war”, its usual place being the university, the museum or the cultural supplements of the mainstream press, locations where its subversive power, having been pickled, is neutralized. These biographies are aimed at the heirs of the legendary Friends of Durruti—but do such heirs exist?

Traditional societies transmitted their legacies orally from one generation to the next. Young people learned from their elders; there was no generation gap. They were static societies: the future of the youth conformed to the molds established in the past and they followed the same trail blazed by previous generations. Family and territorial bonds were very strong. Memory, for which elders were the depositories, played an im-

portant role in the preservation of social customs and identity, and therefore in the continuing reproduction of society. The rise of historical societies, based on constant exchange and the accumulation of knowledge, trade and the written word, introduced factors of dissolution that were at first restricted to the cities. These historical societies are dynamic societies with weak bonds and fragile identities, in which memory plays a secondary role. Even when it is possible, the ability to recall the past is of little use. At first, however, most of the population still lived in the rural areas and maintained traditional lifestyles that were not eliminated until the consolidation of agrarian capitalism. In fully capitalist society, young people learn only from young people, not from their progenitors: their future depends on the present, which is cut off from the experience of the preceding generations.

In the first stages of capitalism, once traditional ways of life had been dissolved, a whole new world was created with its own characteristics, a society within a society, composed of the disinherited, the pariahs, the uprooted folk expelled from the countryside or from the guild workshops; in a word, the workers. The proletarian world, based on the family unit, whose only connection with the industrial society that surrounded it was labor, developed communitarian features that gave it a particular identity, a class identity. There was a kind of working class tradition that articulated the society of labor, and this tradition had its own specific values: the need for association, the federative idea, the zeal for learning, mutual aid, the dignity of one's trade, building a future for one's children in an egalitarian world organized strictly in accordance with the needs of industry, class pride, internationalism.... The autobiographies of working class militants perfectly reflect this mentality. Gustave Lefrançais, James Guillaume, Anselmo Lorenzo, Nestor Makhno, Emma Goldman, Victor Serge, José Peirats, etc.: these are precious accounts of the rebels who devoted their lives to serving the workers' cause.

The eternalization of the present not only devalues past struggles, but entails the volatility of social groups, which are easily reducible to aggregates of individuals. Much the same has happened with respect to the sense of community, which has been replaced by a swarm of desperate identities, truly pathological to various degrees, which are incapable of discovering any other way of countering the generalized feeling of uprootedness. The only way the system overcomes its contradictions, however, is by plunging into even greater ones. With the suppression of memory, society is not made stronger, but becomes increasingly more unpredictable. Conflict constantly arises, making possible the creation of communities of struggle, still fragile, but capable of rediscovering history and articulating a project for the creation of a radically egalitarian and just society. This will involve neither a return to, nor a recreation of, but the reestablishment of contact with the past. It is therefore not a nostalgic turn back towards lost traditions, but an impulse towards the formation of a new tradition of struggle by way of a non-doctrinaire reappropriation of the past and resistance to the insane changes brought about by economic development. In this sense, books like this can be instructive. The Friends of Durruti will finally have heirs.

In this world there is no room for any other utopia besides the capitalist utopia.

The world around them is becoming increasingly more unknown and hostile for the survivors of the old generations, but for the recent arrivals it is their world and they feel right at home in it. It is not that the preceding generations no longer serve them as guides, but rather that, because the past is incommunicable, there is no possibility for the existence of guides at all. Not only do the various generations speak different languages, but so, too, do the various strata of each existing generation. The recent arrivals do not know more than the others, it is just that what the older people know does not interest them, because it does not provide the hoped-for answers to their questions. The experience of their elders is of no use, since that experience was forged in very different circumstances. So what good is memory? This attitude does, however, entail certain consequences: the vitiation of memory implies the disappearance of the concept of truth. The true, once it is disconnected from history, is relativized; it is not founded on any solid cause, but depends exclusively on a contingent, arbitrary and variable opinion, beholden to the immediate conditions of the individual who expresses it. This marks the end of ideologies that legitimate great collective causes, and ushers in the absolute rule of individualism, private life and ephemeral commitments. This situation is unparalleled; it is entirely new. Some have called it “liquid modernity” and others “postmodernity”. In a postmodern context, thought does not delimit, but instead accumulates on the fringes of the dynamic path traced by technology. It accompanies technology as a decorative feature. It explains nothing, it is self-referential, and has no influence. Rather than a liquid, reflection becomes gaseous, like the tremendously fluid reality to which it is yoked. Its function is not rooted in its capacity for grasping the epoch, but rather in rendering it unintelligible.

Proletarian society was in a state of permanent conflict with the rest of society, which is why the experience of past struggles was so important, and consequently, those who had participated in them played a significant role in proletarian society. The future of the class was based on the memory of the class struggles of the past and also on remembering the people who had distinguished themselves in those struggles. Working class culture, the typically historical culture, was constituted by the written word, that is, it discovered its meaning and its existence in history. The history of the workers, which is the history of their struggles, despite the fact that it is a collective history, has its names and its personalities. These correspond to people who embodied the conduct and the values that could best represent the class, which is why the deeds of individuals were not relevant and dissipated with the passage of time. Such personalities were, for example, Salvador Seguí and Buenaventura Durruti, the two greatest mythical figures of the Iberian proletariat. In these men, the working class identity was reaffirmed and shielded from the corrosive effect of the historical process determined by capitalism.

In the more advanced stages of capitalism—those in which the defeats that accompanied incessant, profound change, for the most part of a technological nature, shattered working class society, integrating it into the world of the commodity—the proletarian present broke with its past, it separated from it, it ceased to identify with it. With the working class family reduced to its minimal nuclear expression, the worker subsists in a society that is integrated individually, but not as a collective. He does not derive his norms from the past, since those norms have been usurped by trade union bureaucrats, but from the present, reproducing the erratic and consumerist ways of his contemporaries. The generation gap has special consequences for a working class in decline, since the latter is disarticulated, hollowed out, and transformed into a mere shadow of its former self. It is incapable of resisting this process, and even less

capable of assimilating these changes without harm. On the surface it is a class, but on the inside it is fragmented and liquefied. As a result, it is now the case that older proletarians cannot transmit knowledge and values with which the new, constantly changing situation can be confronted; and they are even less capable of doing so if they allow themselves to be led by the logic of choosing the lesser evil and confide their interests to the wrong hands. Their way of life, oriented around the family, a way of life that is frugal, austere and moralistic, is not valid in a world of consumers, a world that is completely bureaucratized, commodified and massified. The rules that applied to poverty are not the same rules that apply to the abundance of commodities and spectacles. What was effective against hunger, is not effective against boredom. A class culture competes, from a clearly inferior position, not with a bourgeois culture, but with an omnipresent culture industry and trade union theatrics. Thus, working class culture dies with the institutionalization of its organizations and the generalization of mass culture.

The past itself is extinguished with the passing of a whole generation of the defeated, because the old workers cannot offer practical guides for conduct; such guides must be manufactured on the basis of a different, extremely mobile reality, one that is without moorings. The conditions of today's young wage workers are radically unlike those of previous generations. Today, the children of the workers are educated by public institutions rather than by their parents, and these institutions transmit norms of a different kind that are disconnected from past experience, norms that are consistent with the reproductive needs of capital. This disconnection from the past makes it necessary to engage in a search for cultural reference points in a present that is colonized by the commodity, in conditions of extreme isolation. The old worker is a stranger to the young worker, neither takes the other seriously, and they even view one another with suspicion. The old worker does not tell the

whole truth, which, in the real absence of community, further exacerbates the generation gap, the loss of memory, and, as a result, the loss of identity. Without either memory or past, class consciousness does not exist. The conflict between generations, the clash of mentalities, prevents its resurgence. The abstract and voluntarist reaffirmation of the old concepts of working class culture, which have now become clichés, not only fails to resolve the problem but makes it the object of ridicule.

One characteristic feature of today's social movements is the scarce presence of adults and the abundance of adolescents. This is the most glaring example of these movements' disconnection from previous social struggles, even with relatively recent ones. The hallmark of these movements is the fact that they start from zero and always succumb to the same old crude manipulations, since, by their very nature, they lack the experience that would allow them to perceive the onset of these threats. Furthermore, the thrust of their protest is often turned towards the preservation of the dominant system. Social changes are reflected in culture and the lessons that young dissidents learn have little connection with the past because they are the products of the present moment and do not go beyond the present. Moreover, in the latest stage of capitalism, mass culture has become so unstable that not even the present is capable of providing guides for conduct. Changes now come so fast that chasms open up within the same generation. The contemporary young person grows old in a few years, as he adopts lasting convictions. His life history rapidly loses any interest for those younger than him, with the ever-increasing pace of the succession of fashions. A decade constitutes an abyss. Past, present and future are concentrated in a single instant. Once this stage has been reached, the problem is not that experience cannot be transmitted, but rather that there is no longer any experience. There is not even a future; there are only short-term objectives. Thus, institutional politics, having been thrown out the front door, returns through the window.