

'The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water': An Introductory Interview (1974)*

History of Socialisme ou Barbarie

Socialisme ou Barbarie grew out of a tendency established during the summer of 1946 inside the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), the French Trotskyist Party. For my part, I had been developing a critique of the Trotskyist conception of Stalinism since late 1944/early 1945 on the basis of my experience of the December 1944/January 1945 Stalinist coup d'état in Greece. For Trotsky and the Trotskyists, the Stalinist parties in the capitalist countries had lined up definitively on the side of the bourgeois order (at least since the period of the Popular Fronts and the Spanish Civil War). These parties no longer represented, for Trotsky and the Trotskyists, anything but a repeat of reformism, and with regard to them one simply resumed the basics of the Leninist analysis and critique of classical reformism. From this perspective, if the Stalinists were ever to participate in a government, they could do so only in the manner and with the objectives of the reformist parties: that is, in order to save the bourgeois regime during a difficult phase of its existence.

Now, it was obvious in Greece in 1944 that it was not a matter of that, but really and fully an attempt by the CP to seize power and to instaurate its own dictatorship (a dictatorship it was already exercising, during the last phase of the Occupation, over almost the entire country). The insurrection at Athens in December 1944 failed, but we know what happened during the same period in Yugoslavia and then, as the months passed, in the other countries of Eastern Europe.

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This experience already demonstrated the absurdity of the Trotskyist 'tactic', which consisted in supporting the CP and 'pushing' it to take power ('For a PC-PS-CGT Government' was the Trotskyist slogan [in France] and, unless I am mistaken, it remains so). This tactic was based on two ideas, each as illusory as the other:

- That the CP in power would be as fragile as Kerensky, for example, had been;
- That the contradiction between the motivations the masses had in joining or supporting the CP (the masses were supposed to want a revolutionary change of regime) and the real policy of the CP (which supposedly wanted to preserve the bourgeois order) would erupt when the CP came to power.

Now, when the CP is installed in power it is anything but fragile (were it in power, moreover, we would not be here discussing it, since the first act of the CP when in power is always to exterminate any revolutionaries it can lay its hands on). And the 'contradiction' between the CP's policy and the masses' desire for a social transformation does not erupt for the very good reason that the CP effectively *transforms* the regime, expropriating the traditional bourgeoisie, 'planning' the economy, etc., and that some time is needed before the masses can see clearly that they have done nothing but change exploiters.

But all this also led to a reopening of the 'Russian question' and to a rejection of the Trotskyist conception, according to which the Russian bureaucracy was only a parasitic and transitory stratum that maintained itself in power solely as a function of the unstable balance on the world scale between international capitalism, on the one side, and the Revolution on the other. Whence Trotsky's prognostic that the war would provoke the collapse of the Russian bureaucracy and could end only in either international revolution or a victory on the part of capitalism (which implied, in his view, a restoration of capitalism in Russia itself). This prognostic, totally disproved by the outcome of the war, was not merely journalistic: in it are effectively condensed all the tenets and consequences of Trotsky's conceptions both about the question of bureaucracy and about the contemporary era.

The fact that the bureaucracy exited from the war not weakened but considerably strengthened, that it extended its power over all of Eastern Europe, and that regimes in all respects identical to the Russian regime were in the process of being established under the aegis of the CP unavoidably led one to see the bureaucracy not as a 'parasitic stratum' but very much as a dominant and exploitative class — confirmation of which, moreover, was allowed by a new analysis of the Russian regime on the economic and sociological level.

When I came to France (at the end of 1945), the PCI was preparing the

Second Congress of the 'Fourth International', and the main topic was the question of the USSR and Stalinism. I participated in the preparatory discussions, developing there the ideas summarized above. It was during one of these discussions that I met Claude Lefort, who for his part was experiencing a growing sense of unease in relation to the official PCI line. We quickly noted the proximity of our views, and we set up with a few comrades a tendency inside the PCI starting in August 1946. In 1947, when the PCI reached its maximum postwar-era influence (some 700 militants in France), our tendency numbered a few dozen comrades. But after 1947 the PCI entered into one of its periodic phases of decomposition. On the one hand, its right wing left to join the Rassemblement Démocratique of David Rousset and Jean-Paul Sartre; on the other hand, the militants who remained had clearly become less and less capable of putting the party's ideology into question and of evolving (when they succeeded in comprehending the absurdity of this ideology, they simply dropped all political activity). At the same time, both events – the 1947 strikes in France, changes in the countries of Eastern Europe, the beginnings of the Cold War – and the development of our theoretical work led us to see the enormous distance that separated the Trotskyist discourses from what was relevant in the class struggle, contemporary world history, and revolutionary theory itself. Starting from the moment one conducted a thorough analysis and critique of the experience of the Russian Revolution, a fundamental reconsideration of the question, 'What is socialism?', became necessary, and this reconsideration could only start with the idea of the autonomous action of the proletariat as the central theoretical and practical idea of revolution and culminate in the definition of socialism as workers' management of production and as collective management of all social activities by all those who participate in them. All this was separated by an immense gulf from the Trotskyist conception of 'nationalization' and 'planning' as central objectives of the revolution, and of the complete power of the Party as the instrument for their realization.

As early as the summer of 1948, we had decided to leave the PCI and we were discussing the date and the modalities of this exit when, as if by accident, one of those events that seal a situation supervened, the break between Tito and the Cominform. To a man, the Trotskyists started shouting 'Long live Tito, long live the Yugoslavian Revolution' and writing to the Yugoslavian CP to propose a 'Front Unique' (*sic*). It must be recalled that on the eve of this break they were still writing that Yugoslavia (like the rest of Russia's satellite countries) had remained an 'essentially capitalist' country – this because the CP had not nationalized everything the first day and because it had kept in place a few puppet ministers who did not formally belong to the CP (generally they were CPers working under deep cover [*sous-marins*]) and who represented political formations that had been

fabricated by the Stalinists and were completely controlled by them (as the 'People's Progressive Democratic Left Radicals' will perhaps one day be in France). The absurdity of these reasonings is such that one knows not by what end to begin to grasp them. What importance could there be in the fact that a few percentage points of production had not yet been 'nationalized' when the basic levers of the economy already had been, and when, moreover, this percentage was steadily decreasing month after month? And how can one discuss with people who thought that, if everything were nationalized, one would thereby have achieved the essence of socialism? They could see the countries of the East only in terms of the following dilemma: Is it socialism (which they identified with nationalization, etc.) or is it capitalism (which they identified with traditional private property ownership)? But the question could not be posed in those terms. One had to see that the structural assimilation of these countries to the Russian regime was proceeding ever further each day, that the CPs solidly implanted in power were installing their men everywhere, creating a new managerial apparatus for production and society, around which a new dominant and exploitative stratum was rapidly crystallizing, and that this process not only was not incompatible with 'nationalization' and 'planning' but found therein its perfectly adequate form. And what could it mean to form a 'Front Unique' between a Stalinist party in power, having at its disposal an army and the budget of a State, and a few dozen Trotskyists in Paris? That was the comical side. But for us the whole thing was the final straw as far as Trotskyism was concerned. Leaving the PCI, we set ourselves up as an independent group and published the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1949.

I do not want to do the history of the S. ou B. group from start to finish. If one wanted to do it correctly, it would be necessary to study it as a 'case history', both in detail and by examining in a deep way all the aspects, which traditional conceptions evacuate, of the life of a small revolutionary organization over eighteen years, its real [*effective*] and not only its 'ideological' daily life, the persons who made it up, etc. This would take too long to do, and there are more urgent tasks. I shall endeavour only to describe certain aspects of the group's history – recalling that I was deeply and constantly involved in the group, that I am not neutral and that, no doubt, I never will be.

One can begin to 'periodize' the history of the group by defining a first phase that extended from 1949 until 1953. Let us recall here the social, political, and international context. In 1949 the Cold War was starting to develop. In June 1950 the Korean War broke out. People were frozen in place, they were living the situation as if the Third World War were imminent.

After the great strikes of 1947 very few struggles took place in France. The

miners' strike of 1948, the last great conflict of the immediate postwar era, was totally controlled, in totalitarian fashion, by the Stalinists. During this period the immediate public of the group and the review was made up of what was left of the old-style ultraleft groups: Bordigists, Council Communists, a few anarchists, and some offspring of the 1920s German 'Leftists'. These groups, moreover, were breaking up or disappearing at a rather rapid pace (a majority of the largest group among them, the Bordigist group, joined S. ou B. in 1950). As for the life of the group, it is marked by two long discussions that took place over the 'organizational question', the second of which culminated in a scission (which was of short duration) with Claude Lefort and a few other comrades. Starting in 1950, the group suffered increasing isolation. Toward the end of 1952 it found itself reduced to a dozen comrades, and issues of the review came out infrequently and were small in size.

Then, through the strange power of history, the scene changed. Blow after blow, the Korean War ended, Stalin died, the workers of East Berlin revolted, the entire public sector in France went on strike. The life of the group was reanimated, some new people joined, the content of the review was enriched, and the frequency of its appearances increased. Daniel Mothé, who came to the group in 1952, did some systematic work at Renault; with some workers from the factory, he published and distributed a few hundred copies of *Tribune Ouvrière* on the inside. Henri Simon, for his part, played an important role in a movement of employees at a large insurance company; they set up a 'council' of their own and broke with the unions. Other working-class contacts were established here and there, a few correspondents from the provinces began to appear. The Twentieth Congress of the Russian CP, Poznan, then of course the Hungarian Revolution and the Polish movement considerably stimulated the life of the group through the massive confirmation these events gave to our orientation, and they tangibly increased (everything being relative) both the circulation of the review and participation in the public meetings we were holding in Paris. Since that time, at least 700 copies of each issue of the review were sold (up to 1,000 for some issues) and nearly a hundred people from outside the group attended our public meetings. You have lived in the period after May 1968, during which there has been a certain massification of the leftist public; it must be recalled that during our crossing of the desert we held public meetings at the Mutualité building with twenty people from outside the group.

The Algerian War began in November 1954; the Mollet government (early 1956) initiated a partial mobilization in order to send troops to Algeria. The soldiers who had been called up began to demonstrate, stopping trains that were to transport them, the economic mess grew worse, and movements frequently sprang up and lodged new demands. In autumn

1957 agitation in the factories was widespread, the situation was clearly unstable and open. This is when we published the text *Comment lutter* (now in *EMO 1*), a text that benefited enormously from the discussions that took place around the initial draft I had written; there was participation both by comrades within the group and by comrades from various companies who did not belong to the group but who came to the meetings to discuss it. But no large-scale movement developed during the winter of 1957–8, and then, suddenly, it was 13 May [1958] and de Gaulle had arrived in power.

On the eve of 13 May the group comprised approximately thirty members (those who regularly paid dues and participated regularly in meetings and in tasks decided upon in common). The events led several dozen sympathizers to approach us, to organize and to act with us. That posed once again for the group the ‘organizational question’, and this time in practical terms. Indeed, it had become clear that the mode of functioning we had when we were thirty, such that all those who wanted to could express themselves during the group’s weekly meetings, could not remain the same if we were growing to a hundred; a general meeting of 100 persons almost inevitably becomes a general assembly where a few star performers speak and the others listen. Moreover, such a meeting cannot decide anything regarding practical tasks of the kind undertaken by the group. One therefore had to ‘divide’. But if one divides, one must also reunite. How, and under what forms?

The conflict over the organizational question, which had been brewing for ever but had not reappeared in an explicit way since the discussions of 1950–1, re-emerged at this time. Ultimately, the discussion lasted a rather short time and ended in September 1958 in another scission: some of the comrades, with Claude Lefort and Henri Simon as spokesmen, left *S. ou B.* and formed a group, Informations et Liaisons Ouvrières (ILO; later Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières [ICO]). Their positions were formulated in Lefort’s text ‘Organisation et parti’, which was published in no. 26 of *S. ou B.* (and reprinted now in *Éléments d’une critique de la bureaucratie* (Geneva: Droz, 1971; 2nd edn, Paris: Gallimard, 1979, pp. 98–113). As for the majority, it regrouped around the text ‘Prolétariat et organisation’, published in *S. ou B.*, 28 and 29 (reprinted in *EMO 2* [T/E: *PO 1* (1959) appears in *PSW 2*]).

In this text I tried to go beyond an ‘external’ critique of the traditional type of organization and of its activity. It was not only that Bolshevism had erected itself into a ‘position of leadership [*direction*]’ and that the party was subject to an authoritarian bureaucratic regime. In doing that, it was adopting the capitalist model of organization in the most general sense and was introducing this model into the workers’ movement (as social democracy, with different variations, had done). The organization was divided into directors and executants; and it was posing, overall, as a director opposite

this executant of the revolution that was the proletariat. The *type of labour* militants performed was that of executants. And, as the ultimate – but also the most important – aspect, the conception of revolutionary theory underlying the organizational model and the type of activity it implied, as well as the content of this theory, had remained essentially capitalist, and this from as early as Marx himself.

Symmetrical with this analysis and this critique was an effort to define the new revolutionary organization in another way. One had to repudiate the capitalist model in all domains and in all its implications; that could be done, to begin with, only by drawing one's inspiration from the creations of the working class over the preceding 150 years. It went without saying, but it was stated in any event, that the revolutionary organization could not be a 'director' of the working class but, rather, an instrument – one of the instruments – of the revolutionary struggle; and that it could be inspired only by the organizational forms the proletariat had created and by the 'spirit' of those creations. The revolutionary organization therefore had to regulate its structure and its internal operation on the basis of the principles that underlie the organization of soviets, or workers' councils (sovereign general assemblies, held as frequently as possible; committees of elected delegates, revocable at any moment, in all cases where decision by general assembly is not possible). But, beyond the changes in the type of organization, it was the traditional conception as a whole that was profoundly at issue.

Politics

Let us begin with a point that played a great role in the 1958 scission, even if it was not made explicit as such. In my view, Lefort's and Simon's conceptions ended up, without saying so, in a refusal or rejection of the political dimension of the organization. If by 'politics' one means what the French Communist Party or the Trotskyists mean by politics, we would obviously all be in agreement. But, obviously, it was not a matter of that.

The question of politics is the overall question of society; and one of the organization's tasks is to keep this question constantly open before the proletariat. I do not see how one can think and situate oneself as a revolutionary while evading it. We declared ourselves partisans of workers' management (or self-management, as one says today). What does this mean, what does it imply? Suppose the workers gain power in each factory, taken separately. The fact remains that all factories are directly and closely interdependent; that the integration of their activities must still be accomplished one way or another; and that, if it is not done in a revolutionary way, it will be done anyway, inevitably, and then in a bureaucratic way – that is to say, by specialists of the universal who will say, to begin with: 'You go manage your little corner, that's fine; as for us, we are going to take care of the general

coordination of activities.' Obviously, if that were to occur, local 'management' would very quickly be emptied of all meaning, since the question of the integration of the various 'social units' at all levels (firms, localities, types of activity, etc.) cannot miraculously be resolved all by itself, and it does not constitute some sort of secondary and external aspect whose repercussions on each unit might remain strictly circumscribed and of limited importance. It is absurd to think of socialist factories or simply self-managed ones within the context of a bureaucratic 'coordination' of the economy and of society.

On the other hand, as people are always in one way or another conscious of this question, all their particular attempts are hampered and inhibited by the fact that they doubt their own capacities or are unsure of the objective possibility of confronting this overall question of society, of social organization as such. Independent of every other consideration, labouring people clearly cannot reach the point of 'taking power' in the factory if they are not already envisaging in a certain fashion – be it obscure, half-conscious, ambiguous – the question of power on the scale of society as a whole. I am not only taking the standpoint of the 'relation of forces' here; I do not mean – a truism, again illustrated by the Lip case [I/E: a factory takeover] – that the power of the workers in the factory can be liquidated, by hook or by crook, by the bourgeoisie if this workers' power remains 'power in the factory'. I mean that, beyond a certain point, people engaged in struggle necessarily pose themselves the question, 'What comes afterward, on the society-wide scale?' If this question is not made as explicit as possible, this factor can only put a radical brake on the movement at one moment or another. It is a task of the revolutionary organization to help labouring people to elucidate this question, to render it explicit, and to demonstrate that there is no *fatalité* to the dilemma: collapse of the movement or else central 'power' separated from the masses, therefore bureaucracy, therefore a return after a short while to a variant of the previous state of things. It is a task of the organization to show that an overall socialist organization of society, beyond the factory as such, is possible.

But there is an even more important aspect to this question: in impugning, implicitly or explicitly, the political dimension of the organization's existence and activity – starting from the principle that the organization should express only what is preoccupying the workers *hic et nunc* and that the workers do not *now* situate themselves on this terrain – one does nothing more than repeat the premises of the Leninist position in *What Is to Be Done?*, even if in other connections it is severely criticized. For, one is also denying that there is a path or an internal relation between the 'immediate' situation and struggles of the working class and the overall question of society. Now, this path, this relation, they exist and they are of capital importance. They reside in the following, that this or that struggle in this or

that factory, this or that activity of this or that occupational sector, this or that theme of 'everyday' concerns can contain and generally do potentially contain much more than at first glance appears there: they contain, in germinal form, an implicit – though, through its implications and its consequences, an overall – contestation of the established order in general. It is thus first a matter of sifting out this signification, of rendering explicit what, in all these 'particular' struggles, activities, etc., this contestation of the established system contains in potentiality, even though it almost always remains obscure for the participants themselves. This signification, these germs, are repressed by the entire contemporary social structure, by the reigning ideology, by the tireless effort of the traditional organizations to suppress it, and, of course, by individuals' psychical internalization of this structure: the self-repression of the new significations they create without completely knowing it.

It is, for example, a bit of a joke to say that the organization ought to spread the word about exemplary struggles by describing and summarizing them and then dodge the questions, 'How and why are these struggles exemplary, and who decides this?' Now, some struggles are exemplary only in terms of their potential signification, which goes beyond their immediate and manifest tenor, not only in as much as what is produced therein also holds in other cases 'numerically', but also in as much as its implications go far beyond what seems to be at issue as they unfold. An elected and revocable strike committee is not exemplary only in as much as all strike committees ought to be elected and revocable; it is also so in as much as, through its constitution and through the relations the strikers entertain with it, the mass of strikers *shatters* the principles of a political philosophy that have been around for twenty-five centuries and creates another one. But of course it is we who are saying this, and we can say it only on the basis of our overall conception. Now, not only ought we openly to take responsibility for this conception, but also it seems to me dishonest and manipulative not to be explicit about it.

If this conception is true, one can see that it unsettles straight away the traditional distinction between the 'immediate' and the 'political'. But it also opens up a path that allows one to go beyond the traditional views on revolutionary theory and the ways in which this theory is to be elaborated. The need for such an elaboration is obvious; it is also clear that the revolutionary organization cannot and should not be a think tank [CNRS] or an official Academy of the revolution. Theoretical activity is governed by a prior decision concerning the question, 'What really matters?' To this question we can respond only by granting a central place to what is germinating within the population and to what preoccupies it (while remaining, once again, repressed). Overcoming the traditional conception of theory, both as content and as mode of activity, requires, on the one hand, a change in the

axes of one's concerns, a change in what are considered the central themes of theoretical activity, but this also necessarily goes together with a change in the method and the type of elaboration. If it is not to remain the isolated occupation of a separate category of specialists, with all that that fatally implies, revolutionary theory can be elaborated only in a setting [*milieu*] where those who can be called the spokespersons of the population and those who tend to give to what the latter have to say a general expression begin to mingle together and cooperate. And it is clear that an analogous circuit of cooperation and exchange must be instaurated between the organization as such and its surroundings [*milieu ambiant*], and ultimately the social setting in general.

In early 1959 we began to publish a mimeographed monthly, *Pouvoir Ouvrier*. Half of it was devoted to a column entitled 'Giving Labouring People a Voice'. Under this heading we published everything that was sent to the newspaper. But to let the workers really have a voice is an enormous task. It does not suffice to 'let' them have it, for they still have to *take* it. For people to talk, it does not serve much purpose to gather people together and tell them, 'You are free to speak and to say what comes into your mind; there is no taboo here, no authority, nothing that from the outset is considered trivial or unimportant.' Still less does it suffice to call a column 'Giving Labouring People a Voice' for labouring people to write in to it. People do not express themselves; the entire effort of instituted society has always aimed at persuading them that what they have to say does not really matter and that what really matters is what is said by Giscard, Marchais, or Mendès France, the economic and political specialists (generally, pseudospecialists of pseudosciences). This effort has reached its target, and people say, 'What concerns me does not really matter much, it is just some stupid personal stuff; I can't speak about the great affairs of society, because I don't know anything.' We have to destroy the effects of this effort, turn the tables, spread the obvious idea that all the speeches daily filling the newspapers, the radio, and television are of nearly no consequence and that people's preoccupations are the *only* things that really matter from the social point of view.

On the experience of ILO and ICO

After the split, Lefort and Simon founded a group and published a mimeographed newspaper, *ILO*. Some time afterward, Lefort separated from the others and Simon continued, the name of the group and the newspaper becoming *ICO*. Among the founders of *ILO*, there was a more than restrictive, and in my view profoundly contradictory, conception of revolutionary activity: the sole real task the group was to undertake was to gather and circulate information. The basis for this attitude was a certain interpretation of

the idea of the proletariat's autonomy, which they thought implied a refusal to intervene and to contribute anything 'foreign' to the proletariat's own experience. For me this position remains prisoner to the problematic whose other outcome is bureaucracy: We have our ideas and we shall impose them on people - or (as simple negation of the preceding statement, but still situated on the *same* terrain): We have our own ideas, but we shall not state them, because to state them would be to impose them on people (and to adulterate their 'autonomous' evolution). In fact, the autonomous evolution of people does not mean anything. People's evolution is not 'autonomous' in the absolute; it occurs in the midst of a struggle and of a social dialectic in which capitalists, Stalinists, and so on are constantly present. The sole result we would bring about, then, would be that the only voice absent from the concert would be that of the revolutionaries. It is one thing to condemn the conception of the party as 'director', it is another to reject one's own responsibilities and say, 'Our sole point of view consists in putting our newspaper at the disposal of those who want to speak.'

No need to recall that I am giving here my view of things. In any case, the texts are there; those who want to can read them. I think that my criticisms of the time have been confirmed by the events that followed. I would like to illustrate what followed by looking more particularly at a problem that is important and still relevant.

One of the implications of the positions of the founders of ILO was that there was no question of saying in a clear-cut and firm way that there are some people who are members of the organization and some who are not - already because one does not say *on what basis* one would say so. Certainly, the quarrel over the question of membership in the organization has somewhat sinister historical reverberations: the scission between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks at the Second Congress of the RSDLP [Russian Social Democratic Labour Party] centred around Article 1 of the statutes: Who is a member? The Bolsheviks wanted a very clear cut-off, accepting as members only those who worked under the *leadership* of one of the organization's authorities; the Mensheviks wanted to consider as members those who were in agreement with the Party's programme and paid dues while doing any kind of work for the Party. The terms in which the question was posed at the time, the way in which the discussion unfolded, are obviously outdated today; the question itself remains and it cannot be avoided. Suppose one wanted to suppress it. A group is founded on the basis of an affinity of ideas, it goes about its little business, the participants, ten or fifteen of them, have known one another for a long time, they meet together and each has come to like the way the others smell, they are isolated but have a few outside contacts. No problem. One fine day - after May '68, let us say - a hundred guys, it matters little who they are, show up at their meeting and ask, 'Is it open? Can we come in?' They are told: 'Yes, of course.' Then, the person who was

supposed to read the agenda for the meeting says, 'We had decided to discuss today subjects A, B, and C.' Cries from the hall: 'What is this shit? What is this fucking bureaucracy? Agendas are an invention of the bureaucracy.' 'But we have to decide on the table of contents for the next issue of our rag.' 'Why do you need to list the contents? We need an anti-rag, with an anti-list', or, 'The question of the contents is all settled, we're going to publish the Common Programme of the Left, which has to be circulated.' All that remains for the ten or fifteen initial participants is to leave quietly, accused by the others – and rightly so – of deceiving the world by saying that their group was 'open', and to meet elsewhere, in a 'closed' room.

One cannot eliminate the problems at issue here with the aid of some minor, negative recipes. If revolutionaries want to work together, this means that, so long as a degree of agreement remains among them, they assume together, collectively, a certain number of tasks. They alone can decide what these tasks are, how they are to be carried out, and by whom. Certainly, it is of the essence to break down the absolute opposition between militants from the organization and a formless morass of sympathizers who are good for indoctrinating, for shaking down, for buying the group's rag, or for supplying their addresses for correspondence. One must break with this conception of the environment [*milieu*] of the organization and the 'sympathizer', break it down through action, organizing frequent meetings where everyone is on the same footing, inventing activities that really can be shared. But one cannot avoid the fact that it is they who have committed themselves to assuming responsibility, in an ongoing way, for the tasks the collective, the militants, have set for themselves, and that it is they who assume responsibility as well for the decisions made as to their own orientation and activities.

To pretend to suppress the scission between militants, members of the organization, and the others by refusing to say who is and who is not a member of the group is to evade, in thought alone, the real difficulties that arise from the fact that there are people for whom work in a collectivity founded upon a revolutionary project is very important (this is a task that, for them, comes to an end only with their death) but that there are also other people who, at a given stage of their existence, are interested in it, really want to participate in it in a partial way, but do not make of this activity an axis of their life (which does not lessen their value in our eyes). The coexistence of these two categories of individuals is a fact to which one must face up. One does not face up to it by stating that the first type of individuals does not exist because they ought not to exist. That ends only in hypocrisy and manipulations of another kind: these individuals, those who are militants, whatever name they are masquerading under, are still there; they do things, be it silently, due to the fact they have some power, but this power is hidden [*occulte*] because formally they are no greater than anyone else. They have a *de facto* power, masked by the elimination of the question of power as an

explicit question. This situation is sinister not only because it occults their power but because, what is infinitely more serious, it occults *the question of power*.

To finish with the 1958 scission, let me make one last point: it seems to me that, for Claude Lefort, this split was overdetermined – here I am interpreting, it was not written down at the time – by a conception already forming within him, one he did not express, more or less, until later on. I shall summarize it roughly as follows: One cannot aim at a radical revolution; certainly, there are struggles that shake up the established order, movements that prefigure another form of society; one is on their side and one tries to act in the same direction, but the idea that there might be a radical transformation of society, an overcoming of social alienation, is a philosophical absurdity. I did not follow the evolution of ILO/ICO closely, but I think that the break that occurred later on between Lefort and Simon was conditioned by this conception.

The interpretation of Gaullism

Between 1958 and 1961 the S. ou B. group grew numerically in a rather satisfactory way. Two or three cells were operating in Paris and several more were created in the provinces, with students and a few workers. At the end of 1960 we numbered nearly a hundred, which was not bad for the time. People attended public meetings, and the group exerted some influence over certain non-negligible strata of students in Paris and over some Renault workers, thanks to Mothé's efforts there. The way the group was evolving at the time was related to the struggle against the Algerian War and the ignominious stance the traditional organizations adopted all the way until the war ended.

There were in the group no divergences over the interpretation of Gaullism, which had settled into power. No one saw Gaullism as a form of fascism. Gaullism was immediately interpreted as the passage to modern capitalism, within the specific context of the history of the French bourgeoisie and French society, as the attempt to liquidate a whole set of 'backward' characteristics inherited from the previous regime, from the colonial empire, of course, but also from the economic and financial chaos and even from the political chaos of the bourgeois republic.

The text I wrote at the time provided this interpretation but insisted, as well, on the inability of the French bourgeoisie, with or without de Gaulle, to endow itself with a 'normal' and 'regular' form of political functioning. Today – in January 1974 – it can be said, in relation to this political problem, that it, too, in a sense has been 'resolved', because Pompidou is there. But it can also be said that it has not been resolved – precisely because Pompidou is there.

On the other hand, de Gaulle seized power in the population's absence. Even more than that, in November 1958 de Gaulle and his constitution were granted approval in a plebiscite. One cannot pass over the significance of this fact.

A new scission

The question was posed, then, of how to interpret the population's attitude toward politics. This interpretation had to include the overall evolution of all modern capitalist countries, since one noticed this same attitude occurring everywhere. Other threads, notably our critique of the traditional conception of socialism, were also leading us to think that a radical revision was becoming necessary.

I tried to tie together these different threads in *MCR* (1960-1). A first version was circulated within the group as early as 1959 and it immediately divided the group in two, for it served to crystallize opposition within the group from everybody who rejected the idea of undertaking a radical criticism. There were already some texts (such as *DC*, 1953-4) that implied a rejection of the classical positions on pauperization, economic crises, the growth of the reserve industrial army, in short, everything that passes for, and actually is, Marx's economic theory – as well as the classical conception of imperialism, just as there were some texts (*CS I-III*, 1955-8) that rejected another central idea of Marxism, viz., that the revolution could be conceived simply as receiving existing capitalist technique and placing it in the service of socialism. Also being challenged (see above) was the traditional conception of the role and content of theory, which conception partakes of the speculative attitude elaborated in the West over the past twenty-five centuries. All these things flowed together, converged into consequences, and there ultimately was, as comrade Mao would say, a transformation of quantity into quality. No longer was it this or that particular position, but Marxism as a whole, that was being put back in question. And naturally this immediately provoked Maille, Lyotard, Souyri into recoiling in horror, and into crying 'C. is abandoning Marxism', 'C. is becoming an existentialist.'

The ensuing brawl lasted three years. For a long time, those who had, characteristically, called themselves the *antitendency* opposed us only with self-contradictory polemical arguments ('There is no rise in the workers' standard of living', 'There is one, but it has no significance, or not the one you say', etc.). It was only during the three months preceding the scission that they finally produced three texts that attempted to defend an incoherent variant of neo-paleo-Marxism. For my part, I regret that their authors never published them.

Obviously, this brawl very quickly interfered with all the group's activities, blocking them in a rather serious way. At the same time, a sort of

polarization occurred in relation to the tasks of the group: the 'antitendency' had more or less taken charge of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, and the comrades who were in agreement with the line expressed in *MCR* had charge of the review. They tried to make of *P.O.* a sort of agitational newspaper centred around the traditional themes – an attempt we denounced, saying that they were just following a correct Trotskyism. They criticized the unions while saying that one must go further, do this or that on the occasion of some strike or other; they couldn't refrain from writing an editorial each time the Government had done or said something – which in our view was aberrant, since this amounted to placing oneself on the same terrain as the enemy. With scornful jokes, platitudes, and permanent obstruction they opposed our proposals aimed at a radical transformation in the axes of our propaganda and of our work so that we could address in depth the youth and student problems (all this was recorded in texts dating from 1960, several years before Berkeley), or the problems of woman and the family, pedagogy and the critique of the alleged education one receives today, the critique of the very existence of education, or the importance of struggles other than those of the industrial proletariat and wage-based strikes.

The chasm, both theoretical and practical, between the two sides grew ever deeper. The scission occurred in July 1963. In an amicable manner, the 'antitendency' kept *P.O.* and the rest of us *S. ou B.*

The suspension of publication of S. ou B. and of the group's activities

After the scission we published another six issues of the review (nos. 35–40), the last dated June 1965, and the group continued to function until spring 1966. During this final period the review's outside audience was perhaps at its greatest (around 1,000 copies sold per issue, public gatherings of up to 200 people). Nevertheless, there was almost no feedback. The readers of the review never or almost never wrote in, people came to meetings and went home (despite our attempts to break down the professorial structure of the traditional meeting); the ideas were being put into circulation, no doubt, but the public was behaving as a passive consumer of ideas. On the other hand, an increasingly insistent problem arose concerning recruitment into the group. Some very young, highly aware, very astute guys arrived, but they did not succeed in functioning in a collective way with the older comrades (or the reverse, which boils down to the same thing). My interpretation is that these young guys – who had obviously come, like everyone else, as a result of their own personal motivations – were constantly expressing these motivations via their behaviour within the group. And given the situation, the group did not provide the terrain on which these initial motivations might have been transformed into something else; in a sense, the group was becoming a substitute for the family,

which led to feelings of ambivalence as strong as those in a real family. This, in turn, led to reactions on the part of the 'elders', and the functioning of the group, undermined by the resulting frictions, became less and less collective and less and less coherent.

Finally, the very character the review was tending to take on posed a grave problem. My last texts were challenging the Marxist conception as a whole and were attempting to return to the foundations of the conception of society and history. For this reason the review began to take a more and more 'abstract' or 'philosophical' turn. This remained solitary work, not only with respect to the writing, but because the group did not feel the need to discuss it. Other texts appeared in the review (those by Mothé or Châtel, for example), but the unity of the whole remained obscure. The review had become the group's main activity – and at the same time it no longer represented a truly collective effort. In the face of everything, it no longer made much sense to maintain the review and the group under these conditions. It was in the light of these observations that I proposed the suspension of publication of the review (see *GI* [1973] and *SP* [1967]). A comrade said to me at the time, 'But if it dies [*Si le grain ne meurt*] . . .' Its seed did indeed bring forth fruit later on . . .

Why didn't we try to reconstitute the group later on? Because there is, for the moment, an enormous difficulty in maintaining revolutionary activity as soon as one no longer leans upon a theoretical or allegedly theoretical *corpus* saying, 'Keep quiet, the answer is in Marx or in Mao', and as soon as one tries to face up in an honest way to real problems.

The experience of all the post-May '68 groups shows that one cannot avoid the questions, 'Who are we? How do we function? Who is we and who is not we? Is there a "we"? – and, especially, 'What is "we"? This question is very important, for this 'we' can be mystificatory and alienating. Moreover, most of the time in an organization one does not say 'we', one says 'the Party', 'the group', etc. But in any case, this 'party', this 'group' – or this 'we' – had been defined, at least ideally, by implicit or explicit reference to a finite and definite theory. Now, what I am saying is that this conception of theory is a mystificatory phantasm. People ought to join together because they share a project – the revolutionary project. It will be said that in this way the difficulty has simply been displaced. I would say more than that: It is considerably aggravated, for a project includes a dimension that involves a perpetual, never fully achieved, and open-ended elucidation and implies a completely different subjective *attitude* toward theorization. In short, it is to reject categorically the idea that there might be a complete (or indefinitely perfectible) theory and that theory is sovereign, but it is not to allow oneself, for all that, to say just anything at all. (This 'anything at all' is today the almost universal practice of those who believe they have broken down the traditional barriers but who are all the more, in

another way, merely the prisoners thereof. The 'reigning discourse' of a certain 'radical [*contestataire*]' circle today, this disgusting mish-mash that is Freudo-Nietzscheo-Marxism, is, strictly speaking, a *just anything*.) Now, such an attitude is difficult to uphold – I am not saying that it is impossible. But unless a sufficient number of persons who share it join together, I do not see how one could build up something that would have some possibility of surviving and of developing.

The Break with Marxism

QUESTIONER: What, according to you, makes it necessary to break with Marxism? In what way is this break tied to your analysis of the situation of the workers' movement?

C.C.: This question can be discussed on two planes: the theoretical tenor of Marxism and the way in which it poses the problem of theory, and the historical fate of Marxism.

On the theoretical plane, there is a Marxist metaphysics, a theory of history, and an economic theory, all three of them closely intertwined. All three are untenable. As Marxists consider the economic theory to be the cornerstone of the edifice, let us begin with the last of the three.

What is economic theory in Marx, what can it say, up to what point can it go, has it any limits? It is well known that, contrary to the spirit of certain expressions of the young Marx, in his systematic elaboration of theory the mature Marx aims at constituting a sovereign theory that has no limit, that defines the laws of the capitalist economy and shows that the functioning of the latter unavoidably leads to its collapse and to a new society. Now, such a theory is in principle impossible.

In short, all that is said in *Capital*, the theoretical elaboration carried out therein, is possible only by means of the elimination of two decisive factors in the functioning and evolution of the capitalist economy: the evolution of technique and the class struggle. And this is not by chance. It is an internal necessity of this type of theorization, for in the domain of the economy these two factors are expressive, *par excellence*, of the creativity of history, which ensures that there can be no question of establishing 'laws' of economic evolution other than in an always partial and passing sense.

The elimination of class struggle is absolutely flagrant. Marx posits that labour power is a commodity and treats it as such in his theory (starting from the idea that it is such in the reality of capitalism). Now, one knows that in the Marxist system a commodity has a definite exchange value and,

if it is a 'means of production', also a definite use value. But labour power has neither a definite use value nor a definite exchange value. It has no definite use value: the capitalist who buys a ton of coal knows, in terms of the current state of technique, how many calories he can extract from it, but when he buys an hour of labour, he does not know what amount of output he will be able to extract from it. Now, Marx constantly works from the postulate that, just as the capitalist will extract from the ton of coal the maximum calories the techniques of the time will allow him to extract from it (and coal is indeed passive), so can he extract from the worker the maximum output allowed by the state of technique (type and speed of machinery, etc.), since the worker can only be passive. But that is false. Practically never does Marx speak of the bitter struggle over output that unfolds daily within industry; he speaks of the workers' resistance to output only incidentally, in two places in the first volume of *Capital*, and both times he presents it as inevitably doomed to defeat – which means that the worker is a pure passive object of capital in production, that there is no *struggle* between classes in production but, rather, complete and uncontested – since incontestable – domination of one class over another.

The history of modern industry, however, is not only the history of great pitched union battles; it is also and especially the history that unfolds eight hours a day, sixty minutes an hour, sixty seconds a minute in production and apropos of production; during each of these seconds each gesture of the worker has two sides to it, one that conforms to the imposed production norms, the other combating those norms. Effective output is the result of the struggle that unfolds upon this terrain. Labour power, therefore, has no definite use value that one might grasp independent of this struggle and its effects.

Now, it is easy to see that at the same time this struggle codetermines to a decisive degree labour power's exchange value. That is so not only because it codetermines labour productivity (and thereby the unit value of commodities that enter into the working class's level of consumption) but especially because it alone sets effective wage levels. Wages are not 'X dollars an hour'. That is meaningless, since the capitalist does not in fact buy 'an hour'; he acts as if he is buying 'an hour', but in reality he is buying the effective output – the effective output which is, as a matter of fact, indeterminate – that he will try to determine by introducing new machines, by hiring time-study men, etc., and that the workers, for their part, will try to determine otherwise, by fooling the time-study men, by cutting corners, by organizing among themselves, etc. In reality, wages are a rate of exchange: so many dollars against the output achieved during an hour – and the second term is indeterminate. So many dollars for workers completely subject to the time-study men and so many dollars for workers who successfully resist them are not at all the same things.

And how does Marx think the determination of labour power's exchange value? Since labour power *is* a commodity, it is worth, like every other commodity, the 'labour' it contains, that is to say, the labour incorporated into the 'costs of production and reproduction of labour power', which is materially represented as the quantity of commodities a worker (or a working-class family) consumes in order to live and to reproduce a new generation of workers. If we call this quantity the working class's 'standard of living', the exchange value of labour power will be a mere function of two and only two factors: this 'standard of living' and the unit value of each of the commodities that make it up (in fact, the simple multiplicative product of the one balanced by the other). Now, this unit value of each commodity is only the inverse, roughly speaking, of labour productivity: the higher the latter is raised, the less labour time is incorporated into – and the lower the unit value of – each commodity produced. Therefore, *if* the working class's standard of living remains constant, the rise in labour productivity, tirelessly pursued and achieved by capitalism, signifies *ipso facto* a reduction in the value of the commodities that make up the working-class standard of living, *therefore* a reduction of the 'paid part' of the working day, therefore an increase in the rate of exploitation, assuming that the working day itself remains constant.

But can we postulate that the working class's standard of living remains constant? Marx does not have much to say on this topic; he posits that each time it is 'determined by historical and moral factors' and goes on to postulate in an implicit way that one must assume it is constant. But that is logically arbitrary and really false. For ease of presentation and as a first approximation, one can offer the hypothesis that the working-class standard of living remains constant if one is talking about the situation of the economy over a very short period. One absolutely cannot do so over a period of one or two centuries – and it is upon the latter that the Marxian theory of the capitalist economy bears. Now, it is obvious that there has been a considerable modification (a rise) in the real standard of living of the working class over the past 150 years. This rise has been the result of working-class struggles, both, as has already been said, informal, implicit struggles at the point of production and large or small overt struggles over wage demands. Marx abstracts from this struggle, and, as everything that follows in *Capital* necessarily rests upon this 'analysis' of the determination of the exchange value of labour power as a commodity, the whole edifice is built upon sand, the whole theory is conditioned by this 'forgetting' of class struggle. One must also reread the end of 'Wages, Price, and Profit' to convince oneself that, even when Marx grants that working-class struggle has had some influence over wage levels, for him this influence remains conjunctural and 'cyclical' and

unable to alter the basic long-term distribution of the product as regulated by the law of value.

There is even more. Starting at a certain moment, the capitalists themselves came to understand that the steady rise of the working class's standard of living was inherently necessary to the operation of the system. For, without a continual enlargement of the market in consumer goods there can be no capitalist expansion – in any case, not of the type of expansion we know. Obviously, in certain situations (Nazi Germany, the USSR over a long period, times of war, etc.) the system orients production especially toward the manufacture of armaments or toward accelerated accumulation, and the real standard of living of the working class finds itself blocked or even declines. But the 'normal' long-term evolution of the system is impossible without a continual expansion of the market in consumer goods; and this market, for the most part, is made up of solvent demand, therefore the incomes, of workers and wage earners in general. For this reason, if today one wants, for ease of presentation and as a first approximation, to offer a hypothesis, one is obliged to hypothesize that there is a stability to the *pace of increase* of workers' real income during the short-term period one is studying.

One can certainly imagine on paper a hypertheory that would attempt to quantify the intensity of the class struggle and its relation with wage levels and to insert it into a 'more general' schema (some academic economists have indeed made such attempts, where, as if by chance, it is the rate of unionization that is taken as the variable representative of 'wage pressures'). I shall not discuss this attempt, as I consider such an outlook fundamentally absurd.

All this goes to show that the idea of a 'law of the increase in the rate of exploitation' is a myth. Also mythical, more generally, is any idea of a 'law' that would determine the evolution of the distribution of the social product between capitalists and labouring people without regard to class struggle.

The alleged law of the rise in the organic composition of capital likewise rests on a fallacy. Because in terms of *volume*, and even more rigorously in *physical* terms, one notices an increase in the mass of constant capital (of the *quantity* of machines, raw materials, etc.) in relation to 'variable capital' (that is to say, in fact, in relation to the number of workers or of hours worked), one draws the conclusion that constant capital, in terms of *value*, increases in relation to variable capital, also in *value* terms. This is what in logic is called a *non sequitur*. The evolution of the physical mass of constant capital still says nothing about the evolution of the mass of its *value*, for the latter equals physical mass multiplied by unit value, and this last element *decreases* with the rise of labour productivity (which there is no reason to assume increases less rapidly in the sector producing

the means of production than in the economy as a whole). It is not because the quantity of machines, raw materials, etc. increases relative to the number of workers that the value of constant capital increases relative to that of variable capital. At the same time, Marx assumed that the value of variable capital decreases with time, with a constant number of workers, as a function of the increase in the rate of exploitation; and we have seen that the latter does not exist. One can therefore say nothing *a priori* about the evolution of organic composition.

As for the 'falling rate of profit', it is the very example of a nonproblem. Perhaps one day it will be necessary to write a psychoanalytic essay on the motives behind the fascination the idea of a long-term fall in the rate of profit exerted over Marx and the Marxists, and before them over classical political economy.

Marx's formula for profit is $sv/c + v$ (ratio of total surplus value to the sum of constant capital and variable capital). Sv is a function of the number of workers employed, since surplus value is extracted only from living labour. The 'law of the rise in organic composition of capital' says that c increases more rapidly than v . Therefore, sv depends only on v , and, the latter increasing less quickly than c , the numerator of the fraction should decrease over time, relative to the denominator. In this argument all the links are false. We have already seen that it is not necessarily true (and it is not true in reality) that organic composition rises. On the other hand, Marx states that the rate of exploitation (the ratio sv/v) increases over time; how do we know that this increase is not sufficient to compensate for an eventual increase in organic composition, or even for overcompensating it, in which case we would have for the rate of profit not a tendency to fall but a tendency to rise? Well, the formula itself is meaningless in relation to this 'problem': $sv/c + v$ is not a rate of profit on capital but a rate of profit on gross sales (capital is represented therein only by c , which is the portion productively consumed over a period, generally a small part of the capital engaged in production).

On the other hand, we may ask: In what way does all this have any interest or relevance? Let us grant that the rate of profit tends to decrease -- what then? If it were a matter of the rate of profit *on capital*, we would be able to conclude, everything else being equal (an in no way trivial postulate), that the pace of capitalist accumulation tends to slacken -- so what? (Let us note that, in reality, it is rather the opposite that, until now, has been observed.) For two centuries capitalist production has increased, let us say, at 4 per cent per annum on the average; in what way does it comfort us or affect our political outlook to think that *circa* 2175 its pace of annual growth will be only 2 per cent? And we are not even talking about the rate of profit on capital but about the rate of profit on gross sales, which does not have, as such, any direct relation to the pace of accumulation.

Finally, if one assumes that such a 'tendency to fall' does exist, why would it cease to exist in socialist society? The reasons that, according to Marx, the rate of profit tends to fall in capitalist society are of a technical character that have nothing to do with the social structure of capitalism; they boil down to this, that there are always more machines, raw materials, etc., for a given number of workers. Since we are not saying that in socialist society one will try to achieve reverse technical development (and in any case Marx and the Marxists would never say so), this factor will still be there; it will even worsen, since the other factor that can counterbalance it under a capitalist regime – the increase in the rate of exploitation – ought no longer to exist in socialist society. Well, is it that in socialist society there will be a fall in the rate of surplus production (since we can no longer speak of profit)? and what will be the consequences of that?

Now we come to what I have called Marx's elimination of the technological factor. Certainly, Marx saw with profundity the constantly repeated upheaval technical evolution introduces into capitalist society and into the capitalist economy, and he provided exemplary and incomparable sociohistorical analyses of this upheaval. But when he comes to construct his economic system, it is as though he had forgotten all that. The implicit postulate, without which everything said in *Capital* would have no meaning, is that there is technical progress (without which there would be no rise in labour productivity) but that this technical progress is represented by a continuous variable. There is a growing $f(t)$, a growing and continuous function of time, that determines output per hour of labour. That is all! If one wants to go further and take into account all that Marx saw when he spoke historically and concretely of technical progress, there is no longer anything that can be called the value of capital and that can be treated in economic theory as Marx treats it, namely, something *measurable* that corresponds to the piling up of buildings, machines, mines, etc.

Marx's conception presupposes, in effect, that one could *measure* the value of capital, represent it by a *number* of this heteroclitic *assemblage* of objects, add together apples and oranges, and this is the purpose of the theory of labour value. Each machine, for example, has a value in as much as it incorporates past labour, which can be counted (in hours, etc.). If there is no technical progress at all, which means that one produces and reproduces the same type of machine by the same methods, there is no problem: the (direct or indirect) labour actually spent in manufacturing the machine, its 'historical' cost, unambiguously measures the latter's value. If there is technical progress, that means *ipso facto* that manufacturing methods have changed; the machines formerly produced, and still in operation today, have a different (generally higher) 'historical' cost than

the cost of machines produced today by more efficient methods. It would nevertheless be bizarre to say that they have, for all that, 'more value' (disregarding depreciation, etc.). Logic (and the real practice of the capitalist economy) leads one to say that the value of this type of machine (as, moreover, that of every product) will have to be determined not by its effective 'historical' cost but by its present necessary cost (in other words, its cost were it to be reproduced).

If technical progress is continuous in the mathematical sense, that is to say, is made in infinitesimal increments, one can show, by means as well of other fairly restrictive conditions, that one can preserve a calculus of the 'value' of the machine according to its costs of production.

But if technical progress is made, as it is in the case of reality, by leaps and bounds, this possibility no longer exists. One will no longer have an infinitesimal 'obsolescence' (technical ageing) of each machine, which makes its value tend imperceptibly toward zero, but entirely new machines, others which, even if outmoded, continue to operate well but are no longer reproduced (and consequently one can no longer calculate in a meaningful way the cost of reproducing them), and others, finally, that suddenly lurch from being into nonbeing since, although still very good yesterday, they suffer from the effects of the invention of another machine that renders them positively and totally unprofitable, or because the final product they once served to produce is suddenly replaced by another whose manufacture is completely different. Under these conditions one can no longer establish a measurement of capital that would have some meaning over time; one can no longer say what *c* represents in the formulae and the alleged laws of development of capitalism, except in an absolutely 'instantaneous' sense.

Q: Doesn't this call all economic discourse into question?

C.C.: Of course.

Q: This would leave the science of economics only with a descriptive task?

C.C.: There is certainly more than that. Even in sociology, one can do much more than provide descriptions. In economics there are connections, repetitions, 'local' and partial regularities, general tendencies; there is an intelligibility of phenomena - provided, of course, one never forgets that, in order to understand anything about it, economics must be plunged back into the social-historical. But what does not exist is a political economy established on the model of a physicomathematical science. And it really is this model that Marx had in mind when he wrote *Capital*. Now, such a model presupposes invariants and conservations. The 'laws' of

physics are invariant relations in which appear some parameters that remain constant ('universal constants'); there is a relation, always the same, that connects the pressure, volume, and temperature of a gas, and a constant of perfect gases. And through all the changes in a physical system there is always 'something' that *is conserved*: mass-energy, electrical charge, etc. But what 'is conserved' in an economy? And where can one find therein invariant functional relations? Each time one tries to establish such relations (academic economics has been exerting itself in vain on this issue for decades), one sooner or later notices that their form changes, that their parameters change, that their very type of dependency, in relation to 'initial conditions' or to the 'exogenous' ones under which it was posited that they were valid, changes. To reiterate, the economy is full of 'locally regular' linkages that are not unintelligible, but there can be no question of integrating them into an exhaustive and permanent system of invariant relations, still less of formalizing them.

Q: You have just shown how Marxist economic theory is untenable. In what way is Marx's theory of history untenable?

C.C.: Already, what has just been said about the economy shows that one cannot consider capitalist society as obeying the theoretical schema of historical materialism (such as it is formulated, for example, in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). Still less can one understand the history of humanity previous to the bourgeois era on the basis of this schema. How, for example, can one understand 'archaic' societies in this fashion? These societies very often exhibit, on the basis of the same state of the forces of production and the same type of relations of production, an incredible variety of social organizational forms and forms of social life. Faced with that, one of the Marxist responses is to say, 'We could care less about this variety, which is only apparent; forms of organization and forms of life are but a sauce on top, the substance is in all these cases the same; some may be totemized, and others not, some may live in a matriarchal system and others in a patriarchal system, but the essential point is that they all live by hunting or gathering.'

But this boils down to eliminating history and society, to deciding in advance that the sole reality is that of the 'forces of production' and all the rest mere epiphenomenon, whose mere existence and the variations therein then become, moreover, totally unintelligible: Why the devil aren't these savages content to go hunting and instead go off representing *different* things to themselves, since all they all do is hunt? This attitude also boils down to judging the whole of the history of humanity according to the crudest and coarsest mentality a capitalist boss ever could have: What is so-and-so? Well, he earns so much a month. What is this tribe?

It's just some hunters at such-and-such a stage of technical development. The entire history of humanity is thus seen as a series of less and less imperfect attempts to attain that final perfection, the capitalist factory. And to the extent that they have not reached that point, these poor savages are wasting their time inventing 'absurdities' (as Engels wrote, black on white). Finally, all this refers us back to Marxism's 'rationalist-materialist' philosophy, which is only a variant of a twenty-five-centuries-old metaphysics that is almost completely meaningless.

We must also speak, however, about the historical destiny of Marxism. It is strange to see people who proclaim themselves to be Marxists or want to 'defend Marx' and who remain stubbornly ignorant of this question. Would I be able to discuss Christianity while saying, 'I couldn't care less about the Inquisition; the Pope is an accident; the Catholic Church's participation in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco, well that's just a matter of empirical priests. All that is secondary in relation to the essence of Christianity, which manifests itself in such-and-such verses from the Gospels'? Christianity is a social and historical reality that has been instituted for going on two thousand years; this reality, which is certainly infinitely complex and ambiguous, nevertheless has a signification that I can at no moment ignore: Christianity has been and remains the religion of power that teaches people to render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, etc.

I cannot do otherwise when Marxism is at issue. Here, certainly, two thousand years have not elapsed, only a hundred and twenty, but the last sixty of them have been, historically, quite ponderous. The *reality* of Marxism is first of all, to an overwhelming degree which takes precedence over all the rest, that it is the avowed ideology of totalitarian regimes of exploitation and oppression which exercise their power over a billion men and women. And it is also that it is the ideology of other countries' bureaucratic parties whose aim, we know, is to install regimes identical to the previous ones and whose daily practice is a series of infamies. That has not lasted two thousand years but it weighs two billion tons.

If someone says, 'Brezhnev is not Marxist but a mystifier who uses Marx; the true thought of Marx has nothing to do with all that' – then it is no longer Marxism we are dealing with but the 'true thought of Marx'. But the 'true thought of Marx' – an expression that, moreover, remains mysterious – has the same status as the true thought of Freud, the true thought of Hegel, the true thought of Kant, and so on. It is a great work. It is ambiguous. It is also contradictory: there are different strata. Immense labour is required to begin to make something out of it – that is to say, chiefly to discover in it some questions to be explored. What the faithful still believe is that there is a full and plain truth and that it is physically deposited in Marx's writings. That said, we may add

that of course Marx is very important. We could not hold this conversation for a second if we had not passed by way of his thought and if we were not living in a world that has been influenced by it.

Q: Is the proletariat still, as Marx said, the bearer of the revolutionary project?

C.C.: What we call the revolutionary project has been engendered in and through the struggles of workers, and this began before Marx (between 1790 and 1840 in England and in France). All the relevant ideas were formed and formulated during this period: the fact of exploitation and its conditions, the project of a radical transformation of society, that of a government by the producers and for the producers, the abolition of the wages system . . .

The history of the proletariat is a fundamental fact and an inexhaustible source. No other exploited class is known that has thus constituted itself as an active pole of society, that has engendered a project for such a radical sort of transformation, that has acted with such audacity, such heroism, that has achieved the following extraordinary thing: to have, as an exploited class, codetermined to a decisive degree the evolution of the social system. Everything that has happened in the Western world for the past 150 years is, in enormous part, the result of working-class struggles. These struggles have forced increases in wages, reductions in work time, the introduction of political rights, the 'true' bourgeois republic; and it is they, too, that have induced a certain type of technological evolution.

But at present, we have to acknowledge that in modern capitalist societies the proletariat is constantly decreasing as a percentage of the population and has by now become a minority in the most 'developed' countries. In the United States, manual workers represent barely a quarter of the labouring population; and the tendency is the same in the other countries of modern capitalism. Above all, for the past twenty-five years it has no longer, as it did in the past, posited itself as a class aiming at the radical transformation of society.

We therefore can no longer maintain the proletariat in the role Marx assigned to it, based on the idea that the process of capitalist accumulation was going to transform everyone (apart from a handful of capitalists and perhaps a few foremen) into industrial proletarians. That is not what happened. To say that everyone, or almost everyone, has become a wage earner does not mean that everyone has become proletarian with the content one used to give to this term. To be a wage earner is virtually the general condition in modern capitalist society; it is no longer the situation of a 'class'. Quite evidently, there are from several standpoints

sizeable differentiations among wage earners. But they do not furnish us with a division into classes. For example, the strictly 'economic' criterion, one's income (or wage) level, cannot really be used. If one used it in a consistent way and on a world scale, one would have to say that the lowest-paid wage earner in a developed capitalist country is still an exploiter of the two-thirds of humanity living in the nondeveloped countries. The other dividing line among wage earners, that of directors and executants, is tending to become less and less relevant, for the categories of pure directors and pure executants are, numerically speaking, becoming less and less sizeable; the bureaucratic pyramid is bulging, so to speak, in the middle, since there is a proliferation of production tasks whose agents cannot be said to have been reduced to the role of simple executants.

The sole criterion of differentiation within the mass of wage earners that remains relevant for us is their attitude toward the established system. That boils down to saying that one must abandon 'objective criteria', of whatever kind they may be. With the exception of the tiny minority at the summit, the whole of the population is just as open - or closed - to a revolutionary outlook. It is possible that, conjuncturally speaking, this or that strata or category plays a larger role; but one can no longer maintain the idea that the proletariat is 'the' depositary of the revolutionary project. This idea has become a sort of incantation that permits, on the one hand, the CP to pose as *the* party that speaks 'in the name' of labouring people, and, on the other, the left and extreme-left groupuscules to mystify themselves by repeating, 'We are ten, but we are the potential party of the proletariat', or 'We *are de jure* this proletariat that still does not know itself.' It is clear, too, that one cannot both proclaim oneself a Marxist and try to find a substitute for the proletariat in the person of Third World peasants.

The political privilege of the proletariat in Marxism was homologous with the theoretical and philosophical privilege granted to the sphere of production. We have seen that the latter cannot be maintained. And symmetrically, one cannot neglect the historical importance of the evolution in the struggles of young people, nor of all that happens within the female part of the population (after all, the condition for production is the reproduction of the species . . .). This refers us back to the disruption of the relations between the sexes, of the traditional family structure, and to the crisis in all authoritarian structures. For us, these manifestations ought to be as important as any others.

A last point on the relation between this idea of the proletariat and Marxist theory. A kind of discourse still frequently encountered today comes in the form of the following circular argument: The proletariat has a privileged historical role, as demonstrated in Marx's work (which is true); Marx's work has a (truth) status that sets it apart, because it is the

conscious expression of the movement of the proletariat (as a historically privileged class). This is not stated under that explicit form, but ten minutes of Socratic dialogue is all that is needed to bring these statements out from almost all Marxists. Thus, too: The proof of the truth of the Scriptures is Revelation; and the proof that there has been Revelation is that the Scriptures say so. This is a self-confirming system. In fact, it is true that Marx's work, in its spirit and in its very intention, stands and falls along with the following assertion: The proletariat is, and manifests itself as, the revolutionary class that is on the point of changing the world. If such is not the case – as it is not – Marx's work becomes again what in reality it always was, a (difficult, obscure, and deeply ambiguous) attempt to think society and history from the perspective of their revolutionary transformation – and we have to resume everything starting from our own situation, which certainly includes both Marx himself and the history of the proletariat as components.

The Revolutionary Project Today

Q: What you said shortly before about youths, women, etc. was like a beginning of a development of the formula, 'the revolutionary problematic today has to be extended to all spheres of social activity, and in the first place to everyday life'.

C.C.: Yes, certainly. The everyday is also the everyday life of the worker, for example. It is, therefore eight hours, or more, of daily work in the factory, with labour conditions as we know them, the implicit, informal, incessant struggle at the point of production; the struggle against the time-study men contains, germinally, the workers' tendency to determine by themselves their pace of work, which is of capital significance. But the everyday is also the home in the evening, the neighbourhood, the whole of people's lives in all their ignored, neglected aspects which have been considered to be secondary by those who are obsessed solely by strikes, 'political' events, or 'international' crises.

Q: Do we end up then with Marcuse's problematic in relation to the youth struggle?

C.C.: It is difficult to discern what Marcuse is thinking in this regard. Sometimes he expresses himself as if he were thinking that there can no longer be a question of a revolution, but just revolutionary struggles doomed to remain minoritarian, as if he were saying, 'Long live the students, long live the prisoners in revolt, but we know that the world

cannot change essentially. So much the better if people fight somewhere or other; this proves that human beings do not allow themselves to be enslaved and brutalized completely.' For my part, I categorically reject this attitude and the philosophy that corresponds to it.

Sometimes one has the impression that he is denying the revolutionary role of the proletariat, or more exactly that he is denying all possibility of a revolutionary attitude on the part of workers and reserves these possibilities for other categories (youth, etc.). This is Marx in reverse: there is a negative privilege on the part of the proletariat, and always a positive privilege on the part of a determinate someone. As for me, I say that it is from this universe of thought that we must exit.

Q: What can one say of revolutionary activity today?

C.C.: First, one must break with the imperialist conception that revolutionary activity is the doing of revolutionary militants alone. One cannot speak of *a* revolutionary activity, of *one type* of revolutionary activity. In contemporary society there is necessarily a plurality of potentially and effectively revolutionary activities. The activity of militants who organize themselves in a revolutionary organization is only one of the vectors of a multiform combat that unfolds in several spheres, potentially in all (and if such were not the case, the activity of revolutionaries would be intrinsically absurd). As such, the activity of revolutionary militants has no privilege; it is one component of a historical movement that outstrips it – that must outstrip it – to an infinite degree.

Q: But can one still speak of *a* revolutionary project?

C.C.: That is another thing, and perhaps we must specify what we mean here by *project*. We are not speaking about a 'programme', a set of concrete measures the masses in power, in France or in Venezuela, would do well to undertake. The revolutionary project is the historical aim of a society that would have gone beyond alienation; by alienation I mean a social-historical fact (instituted heteronomy), not a metaphysical given. In other words it is the aim of an autonomous society, one which is not *enslaved* to its past or to its own creations. I explicitly say 'enslaved'. One is certainly always 'determined' by one's past, and by one's own acts; but all that depends on what one means by 'determined' and up to what point this determination goes. Determination is not the same for a psychotic and for a 'normal' or neurotic person; neither is it the same for 'traditional' (archaic or Asiatic) societies, for the Greek cities, for the United States or France at the end of the eighteenth century.

What is an autonomous society? I had at first given to the concept of

autonomy, as extended to society, the meaning of 'collective management'. I have now been led to give it a more radical content, which is no longer simply collective management ('self-management') but the *permanent and explicit self-institution of society*; that is to say, a state in which the collectivity knows that its institutions are its own creation and has become capable of regarding them as such, of taking them up again and transforming them. If one accepts this idea, it defines a unity of the revolutionary project.

Q: It seems that you have defined overall reflection [*la réflexion globale*] as both indispensable and impossible. One can also ask if your analysis does not assign to struggles a regulative effect. It seems that the self-institution of which you are speaking is an overall project, a sort of *petitio principii* according to which this globality is viable and that the outcome of struggles is a sort of rationality.

C.C.: I am not saying that everyday struggles, as such, become global. Nevertheless, when we analyse a given struggle – workers against time-study men, students over the curriculum – we notice that it contests, at a precise moment and on a precise point, *the* capitalist system which, whatever its contradictions and its faults, really does have a 'globality' to it that is expressed, here as oppressive education, there as rules relating to time-and-motion studies.

When someone refuses to remain a passive object of the educational system or of the factory's management or of her husband after having been that of her father, there really is, whether one knows it or not, a 'positive underside' to this refusal, *another* principle that contradicts head-on the fundamental principle of capitalism. My interpretation of these struggles leads me to see in them a unity, or at least a homology, to their signification. If I am mistaken, one could no longer speak indeed of a revolutionary project during the present period, and one would have to return to positions like those just imputed to Marcuse. But if I am not mistaken, these homologous significations necessarily refer us back, due to the very fact that their homology is being affirmed across different sectors and activities of society, to the question of social globality and to its reality.

Obviously, when one speaks of the globality of society one is speaking of a problem that only the whole of society as acting society is in a position to address. And this is what creates the impression of an enormous gap. I believe that the imaginative and creative capacities of society will allow it to resolve problems that today may appear to us insoluble, and others whose formulation we cannot even suspect at this time. If such a capacity does not exist, it really serves no purpose to worry over this or that aspect of the organization of the first phase of a socialist society or to

talk about it. Such a discourse has meaning only if it aims at shedding the greatest possible light on the largest possible number of questions, at sweeping clear the terrain, at showing that certain difficulties are imaginary, that for such-and-such other ones this or that type of solution is already conceivable, etc. But all this still presupposes that one takes *people's determinative activity* to be capable of facing head-on the questions that will be raised – and presupposes that one takes such activity alone to be capable of doing so.

Let us take an example. For a very long time now I have perceived schooling not as an institution that must be reformed and improved upon but as a prison that must be destroyed. As the 'positive underside' of this negation, one can conceive of life in society taking on the task of reabsorbing the function of educating the younger generations. (I am thoroughly hostile to the mythology of the 'noble savage' which arose again a few years ago. This does not stop me from noting that, from this standpoint, archaic societies give us a glimpse of the real possibility of an 'education' – that is to say, an absorption of culture by the individual, as that individual grows up – that does not imply the institution of a separate sector of activity whose specialized purpose is to achieve this end.) But it is not a question of proposing a new utopia, for this utopia will always be hollow at its central point: the reabsorption of the educative function by social life has meaning only if people as a whole are capable of living their own children, and the children of others, therefore *children*, in another way than they now do. That implies thoroughgoing transformations in the organization and the nature of labour itself, as well as of people's habitat, their psychical apparatus, etc. – excuse me if I don't go on. That is to say, this refers back immediately to the globality of society – and to the activity and the very being of the collectivity as being capable of taking charge thereof.

Will society itself be capable of secreting from within a coherent response to these questions? We cannot demonstrate in advance through theoretical reflection that it will be so capable, still less that this response would have the meaning we are trying to sketch out in advance. Clearly, such a 'demonstration' would be a contradiction in terms.

What we do know, however, is that *all societies in history have been capable of giving coherent responses to the problem of their globality as such and to the (each time specific) particularities of this globality*. This coherency, let it be said in passing, leaves – or ought to leave – bewildered and speechless all sociologists, psychoanalysts, economists, etc. (I say 'ought to', because in fact they are hardly ever concerned with it at all), for it goes infinitely beyond all conceivable analytical abilities. Individuals' psychical apparatuses, the economic regime, social organization, the way in which objects are manufactured, the spirit animating one's mother tongue, etc. – all this

holds together; it is impossible for one to exist without the others and for the society to exist without any one of them. It is society that posits them, it is society that institutes itself as overall society.

An immense enigma – and a blinding fact – is that there is no failed society, there never has been one. There are biological monsters, there are psychical failures; there are no failed societies. The Chinese, the Athenians, the French, innumerable collectivities down through history have always been capable of instituting, without their knowing it, a coherent social life. To say that postrevolutionary society would be the only one not so capable can only be based on the idea that there is a radical absurdity or an impossibility in this aim of an autonomous society. Now, until this idea is ‘demonstrated’ (and I say that such a ‘demonstration’ is in principle impossible), I shall continue to affirm that it expresses only a practico-politico-philosophical decision on the part of the person who states it.

Q: What can be done at present? And what are the tasks of revolutionaries more particularly as intellectuals?

C.C.: The first task is to try to organize as revolutionary militants. As long as a revolutionary remains isolated, the question you have posed remains without great mystery and without great interest. Isolated individuals have to try to do what they can where they find themselves, but no general answer is possible.

The question that really matters is the following: How is one to go beyond the problems faced by a collective of revolutionaries, the ones that stand in opposition to its survival and development? As for the rest, we can do nothing: the workers will struggle or they won’t, the women’s movement will spread or it won’t, the high-school kids will persevere or they will return to the fold. But what one should feel responsible for is *that in France there are at least hundreds of people who are thinking nearly along the lines outlined by the framework of our discussion here, by the problematic that matters to us* (little matter if their responses may vary) – a framework and problematic that others reject. Nevertheless, each among them feels or knows that the plagues ravaging small revolutionary organizations have not disappeared, and they are no closer today than yesterday to believing that they could provide an answer to the problems that would arise again, were a [revolutionary] organization to be re-established at this time.

The only way to find out if you can swim is to get into the water. Of course, you might drown, but you can also choose to start at a place where you have a footing. One must first try to find out whether an embryo of an organization heading in the direction I alluded to right now is possible (whether people who would participate in it exist), then try to define a

certain number of points of agreement necessary and sufficient for a collective activity to commence. Starting from a common frame of reference of problems and ideas, one can begin to apply the principle that the organization self-determines itself constantly, with all that this implies. The people involved must be disposed toward assuming responsibility for a permanent collective activity that is long term in nature and at least somewhat general in import. They also must be ready to examine the relations they develop with one another, and more generally the internal problems of organization, in tandem with those that are posed in connection with the outside world. In other words, the people involved must have understood and accepted that a group is composed of flesh-and-blood individuals and not pure political consciousnesses.

Beautiful solutions to these problems can be given on paper, but they will serve no practical purpose, for what determines people's effective behaviour in the organization is, much more than their 'ideas', their life, their personality, their preoccupations, their experience, the relations they maintain with others in the organization, etc. All this is all the more influential as the field of activity of the revolutionary organization offers none of the 'objective' constraints other types of collective activity present. In the case of productive labour, for example, whether or not it is alienated, there exists an 'objective' constraint that tends to minimize the effects of the factors mentioned above. The same does not hold in the case of a collective that, in a sense, is floating somewhat in midair and that has to draw from within itself the essential elements of what it thinks, what it wants to do, how it wants and is to do it.

Now, if by your question you mean, 'Suppose this organization exists, what ought its tasks to be?', I would respond that it is for the group to define them and that they depend in good part on conjunctural factors. For my part, I think that immense tasks are to be accomplished on the level of elucidating the problematic of revolution, of denouncing falsehoods and mystifications, of spreading just and justifiable ideas, as well as relevant, significant, and precise information; it can also promulgate a new attitude toward ideas and theory, for the type of relation people at present entertain with ideas and theory, an essentially religious type, must be shattered, and it must be shown at the same time that one cannot for all that authorize oneself to say just anything whatsoever.

It seems to me obviously just as essential for the organization to participate in struggles, where they unfold, and to become an instrument of them, provided that this participation is not fabricated out of thin air or parachuted in. To establish a new relation between revolutionaries, in the sense we give to this word, and the social setting in which these revolutionaries find themselves begins with the conviction that the organization has as much to learn from people in the street as the latter have to learn

from it. But again, that does not mean anything unless it is made concrete, and here again an enormous field of invention opens for the activity of revolutionaries.

Note

- 1 *Telos* translator's note: *Si le grain ne meurt . . .* is the title of an autobiographical work by André Gide and is taken from John 12: 24: 'but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'.