

Chapter 1: Some Facts of Life

“We can comprehend this world only by contesting it as a whole. . . . The root of the prevailing *lack of imagination* cannot be grasped unless one is able to *imagine what is lacking*, that is, what is missing, hidden, forbidden, and yet possible, in modern life.”

—Situationist International¹

Utopia or bust

Never in history has there been such a glaring contrast between what could be and what actually exists.

It’s hardly necessary to go into all the problems in the world today — most of them are widely known, and to dwell on them usually does little more than dull us to their reality. But even if we are “stoic enough to endure the misfortunes of others,” the present social deterioration ultimately impinges on us all. Those who don’t face direct physical repression still have to face the mental repressions imposed by an increasingly mean, stressful, ignorant and ugly world. Those who escape economic poverty cannot escape the general impoverishment of life.

1 Ken Knabb (ed. and trans.), *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 81 [Revised Edition pp. 106-107]. Here and elsewhere I have sometimes slightly modified my original *SI Anthology* translations.

And even life at this pitiful level cannot continue for long. The ravaging of the planet by the global development of capitalism has brought us to the point where humanity may become extinct within a few decades.

Yet this same development has made it possible to abolish the system of hierarchy and exploitation that was previously based on material scarcity and to inaugurate a new, genuinely liberated form of society.

Plunging from one disaster to another on its way to mass insanity and ecological apocalypse, this system has developed a momentum that is out of control, even by its supposed masters. As we approach a world in which we won't be able to leave our fortified ghettos without armed guards, or even go outdoors without applying sunscreen lest we get skin cancer, it's hard to take seriously those who advise us to beg for a few reforms.

What is needed, I believe, is a worldwide participatory-democracy revolution that would abolish both capitalism and the state. This is admittedly a big order, but I'm afraid that nothing less can get to the root of our problems. It may seem absurd to talk about revolution; but all the alternatives assume the continuation of the present system, which is even more absurd.

Stalinist “communism” and reformist “socialism” are merely variants of capitalism

Before going into what this revolution would involve and responding to some typical objections, it should be stressed that it has nothing to do with the repugnant stereotypes that are usually evoked by the word (terrorism, revenge, political coups, manipulative leaders preaching self-sacrifice, zombie followers chanting politically correct slogans). In particular, it should not be confused with the

two principal failures of modern social change, Stalinist “communism” and reformist “socialism.”

After decades in power, first in Russia and later in many other countries, it has become obvious that Stalinism is the total opposite of a liberated society. The origin of this grotesque phenomenon is less obvious. Trotskyists and others have tried to distinguish Stalinism from the earlier Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky. There *are* differences, but they are more of degree than of kind. Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, for example, presents a more coherent critique of the state than can be found in most anarchist writings; the problem is that the radical aspects of Lenin’s thought merely ended up camouflaging the Bolsheviks’ actual authoritarian practice. Placing itself above the masses it claimed to represent, and with a corresponding internal hierarchy between party militants and their leaders, the Bolshevik Party was already well on its way toward creating the conditions for the development of Stalinism while Lenin and Trotsky were still firmly in control.²

But we have to be clear about what failed if we are ever going to do any better. If socialism means people’s full participation in the social decisions that affect their own lives, it has existed neither in the Stalinist regimes of the East nor in the welfare states of the West. The recent collapse of Stalinism is neither a vindication of capitalism nor proof of the failure of “Marxist communism.” Anyone who has ever bothered to read Marx (most of his glib critics obviously have not) is aware that Leninism

2 See Maurice Brinton’s *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control: 1917-1921*, Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution*, Ida Mett’s *The Kronstadt Uprising*, Paul Avrich’s *Kronstadt 1921*, Peter Arshinov’s *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, and Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* §§98-113.

represents a severe distortion of Marx's thought and that Stalinism is a total parody of it. Nor does government ownership have anything to do with communism in its authentic sense of common, communal ownership; it is merely a different type of capitalism in which state-bureaucratic ownership replaces (or merges with) private-corporate ownership.

The long spectacle of opposition between these two varieties of capitalism hid their mutual reinforcement. Serious conflicts were confined to proxy battles in the Third World (Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, etc.). Neither side ever made any real attempt to overthrow the enemy in its own heartland. (The French Communist Party sabotaged the May 1968 revolt; the Western powers, which intervened massively in countries where they were not wanted, refused to send so much as the few antitank weapons desperately needed by the 1956 Hungarian insurgents.) Guy Debord noted in 1967 that Stalinist state-capitalism had already revealed itself as merely a "poor cousin" of classical Western capitalism, and that its decline was beginning to deprive Western rulers of the pseudo-opposition that reinforced them by seeming to represent the sole alternative to their system. "The bourgeoisie is in the process of losing the adversary that objectively supported it by providing an illusory unification of all opposition to the existing order" (*The Society of the Spectacle*, §§110-111).

Although Western leaders pretended to welcome the recent Stalinist collapse as a natural victory for their own system, none of them had seen it coming and they now obviously have no idea what to do about all the problems it poses except to cash in on the situation before it totally

falls apart. The monopolistic multinational corporations that proclaim “free enterprise” as a panacea are quite aware that free-market capitalism would long ago have exploded from its own contradictions had it not been saved despite itself by a few New Deal-style pseudosocialist reforms.

Those reforms (public services, social insurance, the eight-hour day, etc.) may have ameliorated some of the more glaring defects of the system, but in no way have they led beyond it. In recent years they have not even kept up with its accelerating crises. The most significant improvements were in any case won only by long and often violent popular struggles that eventually forced the hands of the bureaucrats: the leftist parties and labor unions that pretended to lead those struggles have functioned primarily as safety valves, coopting radical tendencies and greasing the wheels of the social machine.

As the situationists have shown, the bureaucratization of radical movements, which has degraded people into followers constantly “betrayed” by their leaders, is linked to the increasing *spectacularization* of modern capitalist society, which has degraded people into spectators of a world over which they have no control — a development that has become increasingly glaring, though it is usually only superficially understood.

Taken together, all these considerations point to the conclusion that a liberated society can be created only by the active participation of the people as a whole, not by hierarchical organizations supposedly acting on their behalf. The point is not to choose more honest or “responsive” leaders, but to avoid granting independent power to any leaders whatsoever. Individuals or groups may initiate radical actions, but a substantial and rapidly

expanding portion of the population must take part if a movement is to lead to a new society and not simply to a coup installing new rulers.

Representative democracy versus delegate democracy

I won't repeat all the classic socialist and anarchist critiques of capitalism and the state; they are already widely known, or at least widely accessible. But in order to cut through some of the confusions of traditional political rhetoric, it may be helpful to summarize the basic types of social organization. For the sake of clarity, I will start out by examining the "political" and "economic" aspects separately, though they are obviously interlinked. It is as futile to try to equalize people's economic conditions through a state bureaucracy as it is to try to democratize society while the power of money enables the wealthy few to control the institutions that determine people's awareness of social realities. Since the system functions as a whole it can be fundamentally changed only as a whole.

To begin with the political aspect, roughly speaking we can distinguish five degrees of "government":

1. Unrestricted freedom
2. Direct democracy
 - a) consensus
 - b) majority rule
3. Delegate democracy
4. Representative democracy
5. Overt minority dictatorship

The present society oscillates between (4) and (5), i.e. between overt minority rule and covert minority rule camouflaged by a façade of token democracy. A liberated

society would eliminate (4) and (5) and would progressively reduce the need for (2) and (3).

I'll discuss the two types of (2) later on. But the crucial distinction is between (3) and (4).

In representative democracy people abdicate their power to elected officials. The candidates' stated policies are limited to a few vague generalities, and once they are elected there is little control over their actual decisions on hundreds of issues — apart from the feeble threat of changing one's vote, a few years later, to some equally uncontrollable rival politician. Representatives are dependent on the wealthy for bribes and campaign contributions; they are subordinate to the owners of the mass media, who decide which issues get the publicity; and they are almost as ignorant and powerless as the general public regarding many important matters that are determined by unelected bureaucrats and independent secret agencies. Overt dictators may sometimes be overthrown, but the real rulers in “democratic” regimes, the tiny minority who own or control virtually everything, are never voted in and never voted out. Most people don't even know who they are.

In delegate democracy, delegates are elected for specific purposes with very specific limitations. They may be strictly mandated (ordered to vote in a certain way on a certain issue) or the mandate may be left open (delegates being free to vote as they think best) with the people who have elected them reserving the right to confirm or reject any decision thus taken. Delegates are generally elected for very short periods and are subject to recall at any time.

In the context of radical struggles, delegate assemblies have usually been termed “councils.” The council

form was invented by striking workers during the 1905 Russian revolution (*soviet* is the Russian word for council). When soviets reappeared in 1917, they were successively supported, manipulated, dominated and coopted by the Bolsheviks, who soon succeeded in transforming them into parodies of themselves: rubber stamps of the “Soviet State” (the last surviving independent soviet, that of the Kronstadt sailors, was crushed in 1921). Councils have nevertheless continued to reappear spontaneously at the most radical moments in subsequent history, in Germany, Italy, Spain, Hungary and elsewhere, because they represent the obvious solution to the need for a practical form of nonhierarchical popular self-organization. And they continue to be opposed by all hierarchical organizations, because they threaten the rule of specialized elites by pointing to the possibility of a society of *generalized self-management*: not self-management of a few details of the present setup, but self-management extended to all regions of the globe and all aspects of life.

But as noted above, the question of democratic forms cannot be separated from their economic context.

Irrationalities of capitalism

Economic organization can be looked at from the angle of work:

1. Totally voluntary
2. Cooperative (collective self-management)
3. Forced and exploitive
 - a) overt (slave labor)
 - b) disguised (wage labor)

And from the angle of distribution:

1. True communism (totally free accessibility)
2. True socialism (collective ownership and regulation)
3. Capitalism (private and/or state ownership)

Though it's possible for goods or services produced by wage labor to be given away, or for those produced by volunteer or cooperative labor to be turned into commodities for sale, for the most part these levels of work and distribution tend to correspond with each other. The present society is predominately (3): the forced production and consumption of commodities. A liberated society would eliminate (3) and as far as possible reduce (2) in favor of (1).

Capitalism is based on commodity production (production of goods for profit) and wage labor (labor power itself bought and sold as a commodity). As Marx pointed out, there is less difference between the slave and the “free” worker than appears. Slaves, though they seem to be paid nothing, are provided with the means of their survival and reproduction, for which workers (who become temporary slaves during their hours of labor) are compelled to pay most of their wages. The fact that some jobs are less unpleasant than others, and that individual workers have the nominal right to switch jobs, start their own business, buy stocks or win a lottery, disguises the fact that the vast majority of people are collectively enslaved.

How did we get in this absurd position? If we go back far enough, we find that at some point people were forcibly dispossessed: driven off the land and otherwise deprived of the means for producing the goods necessary for life. (The famous chapters on “primitive accumulation”

in *Capital* vividly describe this process in England.) As long as people accept this dispossession as legitimate, they are forced into unequal bargains with the “owners” (those who have robbed them, or who have subsequently obtained titles of “ownership” from the original robbers) in which they exchange their labor for a fraction of what it actually produces, the surplus being retained by the owners. This surplus (capital) can then be reinvested in order to generate continually greater surpluses in the same way.

As for distribution, a public water fountain is a simple example of true communism (unlimited accessibility). A public library is an example of true socialism (free but regulated accessibility).

In a rational society, accessibility would depend on abundance. During a drought, water might have to be rationed. Conversely, once libraries are put entirely online they could become totally communistic: anyone could have free instant access to any number of texts with no more need to bother with checking out and returning, security against theft, etc.

But this rational relation is impeded by the persistence of separate economic interests. To take the latter example, it will soon be technically possible to create a global “library” in which every book ever written, every film ever made and every musical performance ever recorded could be put online, potentially enabling anyone to freely tap in and obtain a copy (no more need for stores, sales, advertising, packaging, shipping, etc.). But since this would also eliminate the profits from present-day publishing, recording and film businesses, far more energy is spent concocting complicated methods to prevent or

charge for copying (while others devote corresponding energy devising ways to get around such methods) than on developing a technology that could potentially benefit everyone.

One of Marx's merits was to have cut through the hollowness of political discourses based on abstract philosophical or ethical principles ("human nature" is such and such, all people have a "natural right" to this or that) by showing how social possibilities and social awareness are to a great degree limited and shaped by material conditions. Freedom in the abstract means little if almost everybody has to work all the time simply to assure their survival. It's unrealistic to expect people to be generous and cooperative when there is barely enough to go around (leaving aside the drastically different conditions under which "primitive communism" flourished). But a sufficiently large surplus opens up wider possibilities. The hope of Marx and other revolutionaries of his time was based on the fact that the technological potentials developed by the Industrial Revolution had finally provided an adequate material basis for a classless society. It was no longer a matter of declaring that things "should" be different, but of pointing out that they could be different; that class domination was not only unjust, it was now *unnecessary*.

Was it ever really necessary? Was Marx right in seeing the development of capitalism and the state as inevitable stages, or might a liberated society have been possible without this painful detour? Fortunately, we no longer have to worry about this question. Whatever possibilities there may or may not have been in the past, present material conditions are more than sufficient to sustain a global classless society.