'Workers must become dialecticians':
Alienation, class, and praxis in Guy Debord’s La
Société du Spectacle (1967).

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Preface.

Guy Debord has become, in the years that I have spent on this project, a strange, and sometimes unwelcome, companion to my joys and sorrows. Through the years, I have tried as best I can to see into his mind. In 2007-2008, I began translating La Société du Spectacle for myself in a belle époque café in Lille, Nord-Pas-de-Calais. The work of translation was halting, but the seeds of this project had already been sewn. What then motivated me was the distance in meaning between the original work in French, and its translation(s) into English. The Black & Red facsimile edition of The Society of the Spectacle (1983) which I had purloined from a shop in Paris, raised many questions, and offered few answers. Something seemed to have been lost in the translation, something of the Hegelian, or Marxian character of the work, and indeed, much of its clarity. I did not, unfortunately, come to Donald Nicholson-Smith’s much improved translation until I had already embarked on this project, or perhaps I’d have saved myself a great deal of pain. Nevertheless, in its original intention, this project was an attempt to recover Debord from his translators. My wish, in the main, was to translate Debord with the works of those writers he had détourned in mind, to probe more deeply the layers of meaning in SduS, and where possible, to construct a critical translation which could account for the intended meaning of passages, their depth of quotation, and to preserve their literary style. While an annotated translation may have sustained a Masters thesis, I had many – often jejune – questions of my own for Debord, and I began to explore the Marxian categories which appeared throughout the book, and in his work more broadly.

As I embarked on this current project, I had in mind a recovery of Debord’s Marxism through his theory of class. The real Debord, I believed then, was a class theorist at heart, and SduS an explosive manifesto. My engagements with the increasingly vast secondary literature on Debord dispelled the false image that I had, somewhat immaturely, entertained: that I would be the first to recognise what nobody else had in Debord, that he was a Marxist, and a Hegelian one at that. As I commenced with this thesis, I found myself to be extremely fortunate that Les fonds Debords had been recently acquired and made accessible by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Believing Debord’s fiches de lectures, and annotated manuscripts to be an undiscovered treasure horde, I set off in 2011, with grand hopes of returning as Schliemann did from Mycenae, to announce that I had uncovered
the tomb of Guy Debord’s Marxism. The archives raised only further questions about Debord’s intellectual development, his engagement with the Marxian project, and his reception of Marxist literature, but it also pointed the way forward.

This project commenced in earnest in 2012-13, as an archaeological excavation of Debord’s reading habits. This idiosyncratic archaeology has now sustained my own very profitable, and sometimes penurious, education in the classical texts of Marx, and the Western Marxists. As I delved more deeply into SoduS, and into the works which had informed and inspired it, I found myself faced with an increasingly immense project. This thesis is an attempt to survey the Hegelian Marxist, or Western Marxist, elements in Debord’s work, to catalogue and describe the currents of Marxian thought which he inherited, and interpreted. I have taken as its subject—three points of reference: alienation, class, and praxis. In each case, I have prepared a study of the Marx whom, I believe, Debord read, and the Marx that he understood. I have also tried to demonstrate the trajectory of Marx’s thought through the Western Marxist milieu inaugurated by Lukács and his contemporaries, and finally, the reception of these intellectual artefacts in postwar France, where Debord finally set his own eyes on them. Whether this has been a success or not remains for the fates to decide, and there remain many sealed passages, and untouched treasure hordes in both Debord’s work, and the archives, for others still to uncover.

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without a great deal of help and support. Above all, I must thank my family, who have provided me with love and care in often very difficult times. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my very patient, supportive, and long-suffering supervisor, Prof. Rob Stuart, whose own enlivened interest in French Marxism was one of my first inspirations as a callow undergraduate. My hope has always been that I might, in my own work, live up to his rigour, dedication, and impeccable scholarship. I thank my friends: N.A., G.F., and C.L., who have endured some long hours listening to my descriptions both of the mechanics of my writing, and of Debord’s; I also hope that they will forgive me the occasional flight of Hegelian fancy into the ether of Marxian cosmology. Finally, I must thank Dr. Caroline Marsh, who has read this manuscript several times over; offered feedback sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly; and without whose constancy and support I would never have reached the end of this very long road.

Toute ma vie, je n’ai vu que des temps troublés, d’extrêmes déchirements dans la société, et d’immenses destructions; j’ai pris part à ces troubles. De telles circonstances suffiraient sans doute à empêcher le plus transparent de mes actes ou de mes raisonnements d’être jamais approuvé universellement. Mais en outre plusieurs d’entre eux, je le crois bien, peuvent avoir été mal compris.

Guy Debord, *Panégyrique*.

Une telle théorie critique n’a pas à être changée; aussi longtemps que n’auront pas été détruites les conditions générales de la longue période de l’histoire que cette théorie aura été la première à définir avec exactitude. La continuation de développement de la période n’a fait que vérifier et illustrer la théorie du spectacle dont l’exposé, ici réitéré, peut également être considéré comme historique dans une acceptation moins élevée: il témoigne de ce qu’a été la position la plus extrême au moment des querelles de 1968, et donc de ce qu’il était déjà possible de savoir en 1968. Les pires dupes de cette époque ont pu apprendre depuis, par les déconvenues de toute leur existence, ce que signifiaient la « négation de la vie qui est devenue visible »; la « perte de la qualité » liée à la forme-marchandise, et la « prolétarianisation du monde ».


Guy Debord certainly did live through troubled times and his thought critically probed both the times and the troubles. Moreover, he acted upon them such as to alter their course. Debord has attained a mythological status in the pantheon of Twentieth Century intellectuals, even as his place in that pantheon has remained uncertain. Even less certain is his place in, and contribution to, the Marxian legacy, and in particular, the heterodox tradition of Western Marxism. As he said himself in *Panégyrique*, his arguments and interventions were never universally approved, understood or correctly interpreted. While any work of critical theory which is among the first to accurately define its historical conditions need not be revised, it should be examined, as should the conditions which made it and the traditions which informed it. *La Société du Spectacle* is just such a work. The task, and the ultimate goal, of this thesis is threefold: to present an analysis of Debord’s *SdS* in relation to its time; to lay bare the Marxian inheritance which not only informed, but is explicit in, its construction; and finally to demonstrate the meaning of Debord’s work as a

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critical reception of Marxism, and as a Marxian critical theory of his epoch.

Debord has posthumously been subject to a number of biographical treatments of variable quality and accuracy, as well as a slew of capricious journalistic commentary. Few biographers, and fewer in the media, have considered deeply Debord’s intellectual formation or relationship to Marxism, but these aspects have nonetheless warranted some attention. This aporia is arguably a by-product of the peculiar interpretations of Debord’s life and work, on the one hand in the French rehabilitation of Debord, and on the other in his Anglophone reception.

The co-optation of Debord by the French media establishment had begun prior to, and intensified after, his death (as dissonant as the voices in the eulogising chorus may have been). This process has been the subject of robust criticism:

No sooner were Guy Debord’s ashes safely cast from the Pont du Vert-Galant into the Seine … than an emboldened pack of commentators bounded from their kennels, all desperately eager to position themselves, pro, con, or otherwise with respect to Debord’s person, writings, and faits et gestes … the Debray piece was irksome because it really did manage to plumb new depths, even in such a hotly contested field. Certainly we never expect to see it bettered for oily chat-show authoritativeness plus bare-faced amnesia about the writer’s own part in the period and debates referred to; not to mention the more or less lunatic (but of course calculated) “esteem” that Debray ends by confessing for Debord “as an individual”—and as that rarity, “a professional moralist” who actually had “a personal moral code.”

Clark and Nicholson-Smith’s sentiments are echoed with as much force by Tom McDonough who scorns the “effort to cast [Debord] as a moralist, as a lone voice of virtue and ethics in a corrupt world”, as well as the disappearance of any “suggestion of a critical project of transformation, never mind a Marxist critique of bourgeois society.” The rescue operation carried out by post-soixante-huitards – to save Debord from his own ideas – in the wake of his death, laid the foundations upon which he could be...

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erected as “un trésor national” when his personal papers were acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2009.5

The Anglophone obituaries’ of Debord walked a different path to those in French, one upon which they would be joined by a generation of Debord scholarship and biography in English. Plant noted Debord’s influence on “the anarchist cultures of punk, cyberpunk, and some of the more wayward elements of the arts and post-modern theory”. Imrie painted Debord as a prophet who foresaw a “ubiquitous and despicable social order, and the distractions of pulp fiction, cyber-stupidities and national lotteries.” These portrayals of Debord have fundamentally shaped contemporary popular understandings. McDonough identified such “simplifications and misreadings” as one of the crucial problems of the early writing on Debord in English. This vulgarisation pervades the revival of Debord, and of SdU in particular, in response to recent crises.9 As such, it has been said of SdU that its “title alone is now used as a shorthand for the image-saturated, comprehensively mediated way of life that defines all supposedly advanced cultures”, and that Debord’s ideas “describe the way we live now.”10

At the same time, English commentators now more clearly recognise that the “ideas in The Society of the Spectacle drew on obvious antecedents – Hegel, Marx, Engels, the Hungarian Marxist George Lukacs”, while maintaining the contradictory argument that SdU pointed to the same “hyperreality” diagnosed by Jean Baudrillard.”11 This misinterpretation likely stems from “an analysis that [became] virtually canonical in the anglophone scholarship … Debord was cast as the mirror image of Jean Baudrillard.”12 As the column inch affords little room for intellectual history, Debord’s ideas have been largely consigned to the broadsheet

8 McDonough, “Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists,” 5.
10 John Harris, “Guy Debord predicted our distracted society.” The Guardian, March 30 2012. Such a decontextualisation of SdU is challenged by, for example, Shipway: “The situationists were thus acute observers of the world around them. This was the source of many perceptive insights, but, paradoxically, it was also the source of their greatest weaknesses; they mistakenly projected the specific conditions of post-war France onto every other part of the contemporary world, and they mistook a temporary period of economic boom for a permanent state of affairs … Situationist theory – based on an exaggeration of tendencies in the advanced capitalist heartlands - did not appear to address this reality in any relevant way.” Mark Shipway, “Situationism,” in John Crump and Maximilien Rubel, eds. Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1987, 168.
11 Harris, “Guy Debord predicted our distracted society.”
For that matter, biographers have shone insufficient light into these dark spaces, illuminating neither Debord’s thought in general, nor the intellectual formation of his most recognisable work, _SdUS_.

In the preponderance of lives of Debord, there remains little of his intellectual life in its fullest sense. At best the extant biographical portraits have sought to dismiss popular myths and conspiracy theories surrounding the obscure figure, while at worst they have perpetuated those same myths, or proceed from axiological premises which foreclose more nuanced understandings of his thought. In the first case, each major biography sharpens its teeth on the bones of one or other aspect of Debord’s legend. Hussey “knew” that the Situationists “had been the most ferocious participants in the Paris events of May 1968, and that the term ‘Situationist’ had something to do with the Sex Pistols and punk rock ... Certainly they were extremists if not cranks.”¹³ This interpretation does not preclude his consideration of Debord’s ideas, but neither does it serve any analysis thereof. Kaufmann mythologises Debord – an “angel of purity”¹⁴ – as a “melancholy warrior ... a man in love with emotion and an expert in pleasure, who creates international organizations to experience those emotions”,¹⁵ even as he hopes to “dispel some of the more tenacious myths about Debord’s life.”¹⁶ Regardless, the available biographies do, at their best, offer some insights into Debord’s intellectual formation, even if they fall short of grasping its breadth as a whole, or the particular depth of his engagement with Marxism.

Emerging from the idiosyncracies of either the French or English reception of Debord, his biographers recognise that he was a Marxist; whether or not they agree with one another about the colour of his Marxism is another matter. Bracken notes Debord’s “Hegelian Marxist roots”¹⁷ and the influence of Korsch, Lukács, and Lefebvre on Debord’s conception of reification, alienation and daily life.¹⁸ He points out that “Debord explicitly ties his concept of the spectacle to Marx’s critique of

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¹³ Hussey, _The Game of War_, 3.
¹⁴ Vincent Kaufmann, “Angels of Purity,” _October_ Vol. 79 (Winter 1997), 49-68. This suggestion has drawn criticism from Tom McDonough, who countered that “Debord and the SI were not, at their best, “angels of purity,” as Vincent Kaufmann has so eloquently argued in the past ... curiously enough, Debord had already responded to precisely this sort of interpretation over thirty years earlier. Reacting to one review of _The Society of the Spectacle_, he noted that the misinterpretation is complete”: where the reviewer saw “a sort of Mallaméan purity”. Tom McDonough, _The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968_ (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 20071, 8.
¹⁶ Kaufmann, _Guy Debord_, xvi.
¹⁷ Bracken, _Guy Debord_, 239.
¹⁸ Bracken, _Guy Debord_, 87-97.
commodity”, suggesting a Marxian analysis of *SduS*. Unfortunately, Bracken’s understanding is ultimately a reductive one: “I’ll try to describe the spectacle to those readers who fail to understand the spectacle as Debord’s update of Lukács’ interpretation of reification and fetishism.” By reducing *SduS* to a mere update of Lukács’ work, while insufficiently historicising either thinker, Debord’s own Marxism may well be viewed as a historical footnote in the preface to *History and Class Consciousness*. This is one thread of thought which unravels even some contemporary Debord scholarship.

Where Bracken’s biography aspires to the political, Hussey and Kaufmann’s ambitions were popularising — albeit clothed in scholarly garments. For his part, Hussey appears more aware of the intellectual milieu of French Marxism:

Debord’s reading of Hegel was in some ways closer to the original source than his understanding of Marx. The reason for this was that during the period of Debord’s earliest intellectual development, Hegelian studies were in the ascendant in France … via the work of Hyppolite [and] Kojève … As Debord was formulating the concept of ‘spectacle’, it was of central import that this term was not only a metaphor for modern life, but also, in a lesson learned from Kojève, that the formulation of a concept in entirely negative terms was also a dialectical weapon.\(^{21}\)

Debord’s reading notes show that he had read Hyppolite,\(^{22}\) but while he may have read Kojève, he did not belong to the era of ascendant Hegelian studies. He arrived later, and he inherited a great deal from the two decades of work carried out in its wake. Finally, Hussey offers the conclusion that Debord’s overall intention in *SduS* was “firmly in the Marxist tradition in the sense that it was conceived as a work of theory which aimed at a direct impact and intervention in the world.”\(^{23}\) This is no more or less than Debord himself wrote about the work,\(^{24}\) and does little to explain which Marxian ideas Debord evoked.

Kaufmann is more circumspect – “Do we know exactly what Debord means by ‘spectacle’? Can we know?”\(^{25}\) As far as he is concerned, an intellectual

\(^{19}\) Bracken, *Guy Debord*, 129.
\(^{21}\) Hussey, *The Game of War*, 114-5. Hussey also highlights the Marxian legacy found in Surrealism as one of Debord’s influences. This argument becomes tenuous, however, in light of the archival evidence of Debord’s formation as a Marxist: “Debord had understood enough in his readings of pre-war Communists allied to Surrealism, such as Boris Souvarine and Jean Bernier, to be able to use Marxian concepts such as ‘super-structure’ and ‘historical materialism’ with fluency. Despite his well-advertised contempt for the French Communist Party, Debord had also been impressed by PCF-sponsored translations of Marx’s pamphlets, including most notably Marx’s text on the Paris Commune, *Civil War in France*.”
\(^{23}\) Hussey, *The Game of War*, 218.
\(^{25}\) Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, 73.
history of Debord, or of his seminal work would not “account for its singularity”, because, in the “academic view ... it is as if it were at best an accident, and at worst a form of cheating that readers should take an interest in The Society of the Spectacle rather than the many books by Lefebvre or Lukács.”

Any attempt to situate the work therefore becomes a rhetorical exercise, and should remain as such:

Is it enough to refer to the young Marx, the author of the Theses on Feuerbach, for example, rather than the theorist of scientific socialism? Can we simply retrace the genealogy of the concept of the spectacle by noting that it is present in Nietzsche or some derivative of alienation, fetishization, or reification? Have we understood The Society of the Spectacle once we realize that Debord read Hegel and the young Marx along with dissident Marxists such as Georg Lukács and, later, through his contacts with the theoreticians of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Karl Korsch, Anton Pannekoek, and Paul Mattick, or even typically French authors such as Lucien Goldmann and the inevitable Henri Lefebvre? We can ask, and it may even be useful to do so, which Marx Debord was inspired by and which other thinkers.

Despite a concession to the usefulness of these queries Kaufmann remains unconvinced that they would account for the “singularity” or “reputation” of SdS, and that neither “the intellectual”, nor the “political context of the time of that situationist adventure can fully account for” the existence of a book which remains “inexplicable.”

No work of theory is wholly explicable either on its own terms or in relation to the traditions which inform it. Any work of theory can, however, be situated intellectually and historically and to do so contributes a great deal to understanding, particularly understanding of a work’s so-called singularity. Kaufmann sets aside the question of an intellectual history of Debord, and in so doing, reaches ultimately unhistorical conclusions which subordinate Debord’s ideas to his personality and to his poetics.

Apostolidès has presented perhaps the clearest attempt at intellectual biography. His recent book on Debord, which makes use of the fonds Debord, explores the substance of Debord’s relationship to his contemporaries in greater detail than the previous works. It is not without its flaws, however, as Apostolidès risks parochialism by concentrating almost solely on the French milieu to the exclusion of other important influences. While Debord’s debt to Lefebvre or SouB cannot be easily overestimated, Apostolidès deploys the newly available archival material primarily to demonstrate that the metamorphosis of Debord into a « penseur marxiste » came about through

26 Kaufmann, Guy Debord, 74.
27 Kaufmann, Guy Debord, 73-4.
28 Kaufmann, Guy Debord, 74.
29 Kaufmann, Guy Debord, 271-5.
30 Apostolidès, Guy Debord, 224.
his encounter with Lefebvre and the Arguments group,31 and was completed as upon his passage through Soub.32 Apostolidès neglects other archival material which demonstrates the full breadth of Debord’s formation as a thinker, and while an understanding of the French context is vital, it must itself be situated in the wider context of the intellectual history of Marxism.33

As posthumous, popularly conceived works, biographies are the eddies produced by the tides of scholarship, and while there has been a great ebb and flow of such work where Debord is concerned, he has more often than not been dragged along in the undertow. Surveying the literature which appeared following Mai-68, Richard Gombin “counted more than 100 books on the subject of the ‘events’ of May and June 1968, and that was only six months after the extinction of the revolt. Since then, the committed or descriptive literature must have grown in exponential proportions.”34 In spite of this general abundance of contemporary accounts, Debord and l’I.S. remained conspicuously absent from early scholarship. Where they appear, it is often in the context of the pro-Situ writing which emerged in the period immediately following Mai-68, and continued until well after the official dissolution of l’I.S. in 1972.

These works, primarily in French, were conceived in close proximity to l’I.S.35 Élaine Brau constructed a history of situationism from interviews with members of the group and from a wide knowledge of its various publications and provocations. Interviewing Debord, for example, Brau asks « Etes-vous marxistes? », his answer: « Bien autant que Marx disant « Je ne suis pas marxiste ».

While she offers a useful diagram,37 situating l’I.S. in relation to Marxism and various historical avant-gardes, as well as a discussion of Debord’s Marxian ideas in SduS as they related to Mai-68,38 Brau’s work is general. She considers these problems from a vantage point

31 Apostolidès, Guy Debord, 224-9.
32 Apostolidès, Guy Debord, 229-232. He also notes the influences of French literature, of Roland Barthes, of the Surrealists and others.
33 Gianfranco Sanguinetti, who co-authored the theses on the dissolution of l’I.S. with Debord, has made similar criticisms of Apostolidès. Sanguinetti argues that Apostolidès’ archival work is partisan and tendentious – “resembling a police investigation” - as well as stating that historiography and honesty are absent from the biography. Gianfranco Sanguinetti, Argent, Sexe et Pouvoir: A Propos D’une Fausse Biographie de Guy Debord (Marseille: centre international de poésie, 2016), 5-18.
36 Brau, Le Situationnisme, 19.
37 Brau, Le Situationnisme, 56.
38 Brau, Le Situationnisme, 152-8.
altogether too near its subject to bring it into sharp focus. Like Brau, Viénet was a fellow traveller with l’I.S. and his work concentrates more strictly on the role played by the situationists in the CMDO (Conseil pour la maintenance des occupations) at the Sorbonne. He does not furnish a discussion of Debord’s ideas per se, but does explicate the broad thinking of l’I.S. as he understood it:

The situationists ... had denounced and fought the “organization of appearance” of the spectacular stage of commodity society, had for years very precisely foreseen its consequences ... The Situationist International readily affirmed, as the precondition of any revolutionary program, that the proletariat had not been abolished; that capitalism was continuing to develop its own alienations; and that this antagonism existed over the entire surface of the planet ... The bureaucracy was constituted as a class in Russia and subsequently in other countries, by the seizure of totalitarian state power ... The situationists asserted that the permanent falsification necessary to the survival of those bureaucratic machines, a falsification directed first and foremost against all revolutionary acts and theories was the master-key to the general falsification of modern society.  

These points align in large part with the ideas expressed by Debord in *S du S*. Such a restatement, however, does not elucidate their specific meaning or significance. Finally, the documentary anthologies compiled by Raspaud and Voyer, and Berreby, are primarily concerned with l’I.S. as an avant-garde movement, and like so many of these works, offer little insight into Debord’s political philosophy.

Debord began to appear in French scholarship by the 1970s, associated primarily with *gauchisme*. In this period, Debord as a thinker in his own right remained largely subordinate to l’I.S., even his name eluded Henri Arvon: « C’est à partir des démonstrations de Marx et de Lukàcs que Georges Debord jette les bases d’une critique de la culture capitaliste. »

Regardless, Arvon recognised *S du S* as a Marxian work, albeit one seeking to bring about « l’action politique dans la sphère esthétique ». He likewise

41 Arvon, *Le Gauchisme*, 98.
noted the relationship between Debord’s Marxism and psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{43} Chalumeau’s general intellectual history of the epoch,\textsuperscript{44} situates Debord in the existentalist milieu:

Les situationnistes sont surtout connus grâce à leur revue et par les livres de Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de Savoir-Vivre à l’Usage des Jeunes Générations* et de Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*. Les objectifs de ce groupe intellectuel quasi clandestin sont les suivants : 1ère) Relayer les puissances révolutionnaires politisées considérées comme pourries et déviées, et en tout cas aussi dangereuses pour la liberté de l’individu que le sont les forces de conservation sociale ou de tradition morale et religieuse. 2ème) Créer un parti sans chefs : une libre association d’individus dont l’accord ne repose que sur un seul point : détruire une société essentiellement inhumaine qui repose sur l’économie politique (aussi bien à New York qu’à Paris, Moscou ou Pékin) et qui sécrète partout le travail forcé, l’artifice, le mensonge et la contrainte. Partout, la société inhumaine détruit les conditions du bonheur naturel, qui ne peut se trouver que dans la liberté et la fête.\textsuperscript{45}

In this reading, Debord is concerned with existentalist notions of individual liberty – equally perverted by the old revolutionary forces as by bureaucratic capitalism – and the recovery of authentic subjectivity.\textsuperscript{46} By contrast, Richard Gombin’s analysis of l’I.S., and of Debord, remains one of the most insightful.

Gombin was one of the first to perceive the nuanced position of Debord without reducing it to a simple re-articulation: “this critique marked a complete break with all that had gone before: it aimed at being the critical theory of the modern world, and the surpassing of that world.”\textsuperscript{47} He is also one of the few writers on l’I.S. to effectively historicise its relationship to the traditions of the artistic avant-gardes in France, avoiding a dichotomous classification between early “artistic” ideas and later “political” ones:

The influence of H. Lefebvre is undeniable (and reciprocal), but that of the Dadaists, the surrealists, the lettrists and other avant-garde groups was also apparent. This current, cultural in origin, was to take up the Marxist critique once more, in particular the portion of Marx that was Hegelian in origin, as interpreted by Lukács.\textsuperscript{48}

Gombin grasped the multi-valent sources of Debord’s thought better than any other early commentator. He argued that Debord (encompassing his work with Lefebvre and l’I.S.) had not claimed “to have made the only correct exegesis of Marx: in fact they go beyond Marx, and are not Marxists in the modern sense. Their notions of Marxian theory follow the patterns first

\textsuperscript{43} Arvon, *Le Gauchisme*, 77-8.
\textsuperscript{44} Jean-Luc Chalumeau, *Où en est la France? La pensée en France de Sartre à Foucault* (Nevers: Éditions Fernand Nathan, 1974).
\textsuperscript{45} Chalumeau, *Où en est la France?*, 33-4.
\textsuperscript{46} Chalumeau, *Où en est la France?*, 35-6.
laid down by K. Korsch.”49 And further, that their “complete reversal of Lenin or even of the older Marx”50 re-asserted the historical significance of proletarian subjectivity. For several decades, few works in any language attained this level of clarity regarding Debord’s ideas.

Writing in 1987, Edward Ball addressed the seeming absence of works on Debord and l'I.S. in English, suggesting that they were perhaps, “too extreme for much academic debate.”51 A longlasting lacuna was the result:

[the] problem of their historical representation may be more onerous in view of the fact that so few critical writings have gathered around the Situationist International since the group disbanded in 1972 ... there is very little commentary on the group, in either the academic or the critical press ... few Anglophones are at all familiar with the some fifteen years of situationist activity in France, and to a lesser degree, in other parts of Europe and the United States.52

This led Ball to conclude that the “history of the Situationist International” had yet to be written, and that one could not “begin with the usual secondary source material” as it did not then exist.53 This statement is not entirely accurate - there existed, as in French, a corpus of pro-(and anti-)Situ literature, as well as a number of minor, yet important, engagements with Debord by prominent scholars.

Christopher Gray and Ken Knabb are well known for having introduced much of Debord’s work to an English-speaking audience.54 McDonough cites Gray’s “notably poor translations” and the “redaction of Debord’s “cultural politics”55 by Knabb. Translation has proved a seemingly interminable barrier to engagement with Debord in any other than his native tongue; Debord himself acknowledged the shortcomings of the first rendition of SudS in English: « Le titre est Society of the Spectacle aux éditions Black and Red (Detroit, 1977). Mais la traduction est médiocre et vous pouvez la refaire à votre gré. »56 Despite the general flaws in Gray’s work, his differentiation between Vaneigem’s Traité de savoir-faire and Debord’s SudS

49 Gombin, The Origins of Modern Leftism, 63.
51 Edward Ball, “The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International,” Yale French Studies No. 73 (1987), 22. Ball highlights the exceptions as being those “academic or quasi-academic accounts written by ex-members of the Situationist International ... Jean-Jacques Raupaud and Jean-Pierre Voyer ... and René Viénot.” As these writers produced their works in the French post-Situ milieu, it demonstrates an even deeper gulf in English writing in the period.
as treatments of the “subjective and objective aspects of alienation,” is valuable. In the period following the dissolution of l’I.S., the most direct engagements with Debord’s ideas were commenced by Jean Barrot, a French ex-Situ, as well as by Jacobs and Winks, “two American ex-pro-Situationists”.

Barrot’s What is Situationism? collects a range of writings on the situationists by the one-time fellow traveller. The translator’s introduction states that Barrot traces “the influences which formed and deformed” the theory and practice of l’I.S. Barrot criticism of Debord is scathing:

Debord’s book The Society of the Spectacle presents itself as an attempt to explain capitalist society and revolution, when in fact it only considers their forms, important but not determinant phenomena. It robes the description of them in a theorization which gives the impression of a fundamental analysis, when in fact the method, and the subject being studied, remain always at the level of social appearances. At this level, the book is outstanding. The trouble is that it is written (and read) as if one were going to find something in it that isn’t there … The Society of the Spectacle is superficial. Its contradiction, and, ultimately, its theoretical and practical dead-end, is to have made a study of the profound, through and by means of the superficial appearance. The SI had no analysis of capital: it understood it, but through its effects. It criticized the commodity, not capital—or rather, it criticized capital as commodity, and not as a system of valuation which includes production as well as exchange.

He further argued that Debord had neglected the “moment of production”, and ignored the critique of political economy as did “the utopians before him”. At best, this argument fails to comprehend the dialogic relationship between Schus and the Marxian corpus with which it is critically engaged; at worst it is a misreading. Barrot concluded that l’I.S. bore the same relation “to classical revolutionary marxism … the same function, and the same limits” as Feuerbach’s anthropological vision, the suggestion being that Debord’s return to the humanism of the early Marx led him into an intellectual cul-de-sac.

Most striking in Jacobs and Winks’ pamphlet is their unconcealed drive to dismantle the ideas of both l’I.S. and Debord from the standpoint of an

58 Jean Barrot, What is Situationism? (London: Unpopular Books, 1987). According to Jappe, this work was first published (in English) "in Red Eye I (Berkeley, California, 1979)."
60 Barrot, "Translator’s Introduction to the ‘Critique of the SI’", What is Situationism?, 3.
61 Barrot, What is Situationism?, 16.
62 Barrot, What is Situationism?, 16-7. Jappe pours scorn on this argument: "Barrot upbraids Debord for speaking not of capital but merely of commodities, which are said to be a phenomenon exclusive to the stage of circulation and consumption. The writer has clearly read neither Debord nor Marx.” Jappe, ‘Bibliography 2,’ Guy Debord, 177.
63 Barrot, What is Situationism?, 44.
unreflexive, empirical Marxian analysis dominated by ostensibly Althusserian concerns:

the unoriginality of the S.I.’s theses consisted primarily in their appropriation of ideas from Socialisme ou Barbarie (whose contributions have not been fully recognised)... The situationists inherited a Marxist legacy by default, and this heritage involved the Marx which emerged from the historical polemics of anti-Stalinism. 64

While the conclusion is not incorrect, the characterisation is specious; neither Debord nor his peers inherited Marxism de facto. Further, the authors’ relocation from the theoretical terrain of Situationism to that of a hostile, structuralist Marxism, is evident in their assertions that “The essential failure of situationist criticism as social theory is its failure to establish the structural dynamics of spectacular society”; 65 “the spectacle is certainly not empirically verifiable – it does not succeed in constituting the spectacle as a valid theoretical construction”; 66 “the theoretical axes of the S.I. did not correspond to the developmental axes of modern social history”. 67

The noteworthy scholarship of this era includes Mark Poster’s intellectual history of the intertwined threads of existentialism and Marxism in France, which demonstrates an awareness of Debord and l’I.S. Poster situated them within the political ecology of “Lefebvre’s existential Marxism”, which provided a “direct stimulus to a new radicalism”. 68 Hirsh presents Debord’s ideas, in similar fashion to Chalumeau, as an existentialist critique of modern society: a “spectacle of inauthenticity”, obviating “creativity and authenticity.” 69 On the other hand, Dick Howard detects the deeper roots of situationism in the soil of French “Western Marxism” and an attempt to hybridise this tradition with forms of practice inherited from the Surrealists. 70 Jay, in a footnote on Lefebvre’s influence over certain elements of the French New Left, points to Debord’s “Society of the Spectacle ... originally written in 1967” as an attack on the “spectacular” totality as false and in need of total revolution.” 71 In this sense, Debord and l’I.S. became a recessive trait in

64 David Jacobs and Christopher Winks, At Dusk: The Situationist movement in historical perspective (Berkeley, CA.: Perspectives, 1975), 22.
65 Jacobs and Winks, At Dusk, 45.
66 Jacobs and Winks, At Dusk, 48.
67 Jacobs and Winks, At Dusk, 50.
the historiography of Western Marxism, which would remain mostly dormant in the following decades.

Finally, the most incisive assessment in English of Debord’s thought appeared in the same year that Ball declared there to be almost no valuable secondary source material. Shipway was not the first to identify the varied intellectual inheritances of Debord, but he was the first to relate them in a properly historical fashion to the traditions from which they emerged. As such, he identifies the basis of Debord’s thought not in the Western Marxism inaugurated by Lukács, but beginning with Marx himself:

the SI set itself the project of ‘rediscover[ing] the history’ of ‘the first workers’ movement’, i.e. from the ‘first linking up of communist groups that Marx and his friends organised from Brussels in 1845’ through to ‘the failure of the Spanish revolution ... after the Barcelona May days of 1937’.

Not only Marxism, but also ‘the anarchist positions in the First International, Blanquism, Luxemburgism, the council movement in Germany and Spain, Kronstadt, the Makhnovists etc.’ were to be re-examined and re-assessed ‘with the aim of contributing toward the formation of a new revolutionary movement’, the basis of which would be ‘the new proletariat’ in ‘the industrially advanced countries’.

He located l’I.S. in relation to the major currents of so-called non-market socialism. While Shipway does not engage in a thoroughgoing analysis of SduS, he provides a crucial framework for understanding its relationship to the valences of contemporary Marxian thought.

The publications of Commentaires sur la société du spectacle (1988), and Panégyrique (1990), as well as Debord’s suicide in 1994, precipitated an inundation of popularising commentaries. McDonough drew attention to the shortcomings of this nascent body of literature, arguing that its proximity to those attempts at rehabilitation which saturated post-mortem consideration of Debord in the French and English spheres created a “near-universal tension between the desire to situate the S.I. at a particular historical juncture and the opposing wish to separate their works from the specific circumstances in which they were produced”.

72 Shipway, “Situationism,” 151–72. Of passing interest is the fact that Shipway wrote this study under the editorial guidance of Maximilien Rubel, one of the translators of Marx’s manuscripts and other works into French during his tenure at the Arguments journal. As a stalwart of the era, and undoubtedly aware of Debord, his presence lends credence to Shipway’s interpretation.

73 Shipway, “Situationism,” 152.


75 n.b. The prior discussion of journalistic sources from the period.


77 McDonough, “Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists,” 6.
is said to typify the “post-Commentaires analysis of Debord, which identifies the latter’s spectacle-thesis with Baudrillard’s diagnosis of contemporary society.” McDonough located the failure of these works in in their inability to place l’I.S. in the spectrum of “postwar cultural producers” - thereby allowing them to be “assimilated into Greil Marcus’ “secret history of the twentieth century”. This schema should be extended to encompass Debord’s critical theory.

Plant and Sussman were not the only writers to take an interest in the linkage between Debord’s ideas and those of Baudrillard. While Kellner identified anticipations of later postmodern social theories in Lefebvre’s explorations of everyday life, and in Debord’s critiques of spectacular society, he noted Baudrillard’s rejection of “Debord’s notion of the society of the spectacle in a society which continues to thrive on commodity, media and political spectacles.”

Gane, by contrast, argued that there is a clear affinity between Baudrillard’s ideas and the theses of SSD, suggesting that “something of the decisive duality of Baudrillard’s own position can be seen in Debord. On the one hand, a conception of historical development largely influenced by Marx, leading to a conception of modern society as alienated, characterised by commodity production and which gives rise to a proletariat, itself living in the form of commodity alienation and irreversible time.” His conclusion that Debord’s project envisaged the recovery of “reversible time ... of primitive societies” as a result of his inability to identify a “principle of time within

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78 McDonough, “Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists,” 8. McDonough is further critical of her relating Debord to a “loosely defined “postmodernism,” which for the author basically coincides with the works of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.” Elisabeth Sussman is likewise criticised for viewing the ideas of Debord and l'I.S. as “proto-postmodernism”, McDonough, “Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists,” 9, fn. 23.

79 McDonough, “Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists,” 13. For his part, Greil Marcus was aware of some of Debord’s influences, such as that of Henri Lefebvre on Debord’s critique of everyday life - a mutual exchange which culminated in their joint writings on the Paris Commune. Marcus, A Secret History of the Twentieth Century, 144-7. James Trier finds much to recommend the same works (Plant: Sussman) criticised by McDonough. His suggestion that “For those who have seen the film The Matrix ... substituting “the matrix” for “the spectacle” should reveal the great resonance between Debord’s concept of the spectacle and the cinematic science fiction representation of a world of near total separation and passivity”, casts some doubt that he is not himself part of the popularising current. James Trier, “Guy Debord’s “The Society of the Spectacle”, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy Vol. 51 No. 1 (September 2007), 68-73.


81 Kellner, Jean Baudrillard, 213-4. When Kellner later returned to Debord, he restated with greater clarity his understanding that Debord was a Marxian thinker of the Unorthodox milieu inhabited by Lefebvre and Lukács: “We interpret the emergence of Debord and the Situationist International as an attempt to update the Marxian theory in the French post-World War II conjuncture—a project that was also deeply influenced by French modernist avant-garde groups and we believe these currents ultimately helped generate the postmodern turn in France - Unorthodox Marxists like Henri Lefebvre influenced Debord, as did groups like Socialism or Barbarism and Arguments, both of which attempted to create an up-to-date and emancipatory Marxist theory and practice.” (82) Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “From the Society of the Spectacle to the Realm of Simulation: Debord, Baudrillard, and Postmodernity”, The Postmodern Turn (New York: The Guldford Press, 1997), 79-123.


83 Gane, Baudrillard, 32.
contemporary society" which might form the basis for critique, suggests a misinterpretation of Debord in order to downgrade his thought in relation to that of Baudrillard. Nevertheless, the reading of _SudS_ as a prolegomena to postmodernism has not gained wide currency, and in some cases Debord has been exiled from postmodernism altogether.

Wollen noted no such links in his writings on _l'I.S._ Wollen has also drawn criticism from McDonough, as well as Clark and Nicholson-Smith, for establishing an "epistemological (and practical) break in the S.I.'s history, taking place in the early 1960s, by which 'art' gave way to 'politics' ... a crude model shedding about as much useful light on the difference between 'early' and 'late' Situationists as Althusser's does on 'early' and 'late' Marx." While the creation of an artificial rupture in the development of any thinker may lead to reductive conclusions, Wollen does contribute one of the richest analyses of Debord's intellectual formation:

His thought was marked in turn by Sartre (the concept of situation), Lefebvre (the critique of everyday life), the Arguments group, and Lukács (the subject-object dialectic and the concept of reification) ... From situation Debord enlarged his scope to city, and from city to society. This, in turn, involved an enlargement of the subject of transformation from the group (the affinity-group of Lettrists or Situationists with shared goals) to the mass of the proletariat, constructing the totality of social situations in which it lived ... Debord was forced to think beyond the sphere of possible action of himself and his immediate associates and engage with classical revolutionary theory. This, in turn, radicalized him further and sent him back to Western Marxism to reinterpret it on a new basis ... The theory, it followed, must be the theory of contemporary (even future) society and contemporary alienation (the key idea for Lefebvre).

84 Gane, Baudrillard, 34.
85 Debord subjects to critique all forms of non-historical time: the cyclical time of agricultural societies (here named reversible), the irreversible and pseudo-cyclical time of commodity production, and the spectacular time of contemporary society. Against this he asserts a Hegelian conception of time as historical, dynamic, and human, as the realisation of the irreversible time of individual life. The discussion is esoteric, but appropriate to the theory. See §125-164.
86 Scott Lash, Sociology of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1990). Lash, for example, attributes the concept of 'spectacle' to Laura Mulvey's writings on film, cutting ties to Debord altogether (187).
89 McDonough recognizes this himself. However, he views it as the source of Wollen's thesis of an epistemological break in Debord's thought: "Wollen sees the S.I. as the fruit of two distinct legacies of the interwar years: that of Western Marxism (communicated to Debord via Lefebvre and the Socialisme ou Barbarie group) and that of Bretonian Surrealism (communicated via Lettrism and CoBrA)." "Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists," 12-3.
Wollen's subsequent overview of Western Marxism and its reception by Debord is also instructive. Unfortunately, Wollen did little to explicate the precise ways in which this tradition informed Debord's work, or how Debord interpreted and transposed it to produce a Marxian theory of contemporary society and alienation.

At the same time as Wollen's articles, there appeared two important critical studies of l'I.S. in French by Jean-François Martos and Pascal Dumontier respectively. Considered “orthodox” accounts of l'I.S., both works were published by éditions Lebovici, and both authors corresponded with Debord while preparing their manuscripts. Nevertheless, each offers key insights into Debord's thought which cannot be ignored. Martos' summation of _SduS_ is particularly valuable; judging it a « critique du spectacle du froid point de vue de l’histoire … [qui] rassemble tout ce qu’il faut savoir pour différencier le bleu du vécu du gris subi. Une telle perspective ne peut certes pas surgir d’un quelconque questionnement universitaire, comme perception fragmentaire de la sociologique, de la psychologie ou de l’économie. » By taking _SduS_ as a critical theory – a « critique totale du monde existant » – Martos emphasises its nuances, specifically the multiple meanings of Debord’s terminology.

Martos is thus able to consider the concept of the spectacle introduced in the first chapter as a “rejuvenation of the analysis carried out by Marx on the fetishism of the commodity,” which returns in the second chapter as a “moment in the development of the world of commodity.” Further, Martos notes that Debord’s method employed, above all, the “historical thought … of Hegel and of Marx; and the historical use of the

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91 Wollen, “Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International,” 30-8. Wollen further describes some of the internal relations of Western Marxist thinkers such as Lukács, Korsch, the council communists (Pannekoek, for example), _Socialisme ou Barbarie_, and _Arguments_, as well as the Althusserian camp in France.
93 Jappe, _Guy Debord_, 177.
95 Martos, _Histoire de l’Internationale Situationniste_, 183-6. Martos here interprets the intention of each chapter individually, including the contextual meanings of terminology such as spectacle.
97 Martos points up that it was Debord who developed a critique of the subjective dimension of alienation – a sphere “vacated by the revolutionary politics of the epoch” – when he introduced the concept of spectacle to l’I.S. Martos, _Histoire de l’Internationale Situationniste_, 62.
dialectic”, in order to elaborate a critique of society, and a revolutionary theory of praxis founded on a councilist thesis. Martos’ discussion of Debord’s relationship with Arguments, and Socialisme ou Barbarie, sheds light on the schism between l’I.S., Debord and these groups. He does not, however, delve deeply into the nature of the exchange of ideas which took place between them either at an individual or broader intellectual level.

By contrast, Dumontier’s approach is less general: focusing on the period from 1966 until 1972, in particular the role of l’I.S. in Mai-68 and the formation of its revolutionary theory. While standing at a greater historiographic distance than Brau or Viénet in his description of events, Dumontier retraced many of the arguments presented by Gombin. This is evident in his description of the situationists’, particularly Debord’s, critique of capitalism:

La critique du monde moderne reprend essentiellement la critique du capitalisme telle qu’elle avait été esquissée par Marx et les philosophes marxistes d’inspiration hégélienne. Ainsi sont reprises la critique de la division de la société en classes, la critique de l’exploitation du travail salarié, la critique du félichisme (chez Marx) et de la réification (chez Lukács), etc. Cependant, les situationnistes développent ces notions pour porter la critique des nouvelles formes d’aliénation, apparues dans la société de consommation. L’originalité des situationnistes tient justement dans cette critique où le capitalisme est perçu dans toute sa modernité.

Although Dumontier contributed a more rigorous historical analysis of l’I.S. and Mai-68, his outline of SduS – which he considered one of the principal theoretical works produced under the banner of l’I.S. – merely re-articulates existing scholarship on its intellectual content, foregrounding alienation in its various permutations as the lynchpin of Debord’s theory.

The scholarship produced in the years since the struggle over Debord’s corpse - a bizarre intellectual funeral rite - has inherited the triumphs and failings of what came before. It is not without irony that McKenzie Wark depicts the contemporary view of situationism, and of Debord in particular, as:

100 Martos, Histoire de l’Internationale Situationniste, 186.
103 Pascal Dumontier, Les Situationnistes et mai 1968: théorie et pratique de la révolution (1966-1972), 40-1. Dumontier cites Lukács, Histoire et conscience de classe, éd. de Minuit, Paris 1960, and Korsch, Marxisme et philosophie, éd. de Minuit, 1964 as the particular Hegelian Marxist influences on these ideas, fn. 2. For the similarities to Gombin’s argument, see paragraph above, and footnotes 42-4.
After 1989 it became obvious that the Situationists were part of the context for post-punk music, as the sleeve notes for the reissues rarely fail to mention. Meanwhile, various attempts have been made to write them into art history. The writings of the Situationists’ one consistent presence, Guy Debord, now have recognized literary value. His film works are now available in a boxed set. There is a consistent attempt to make the Situationists precursors to one or other species of contemporary leftism. Last, they play some curious roles in contemporary philosophy.106

It is unclear if Wark is himself critical of the historiographic position of l’I.S., given that he prefers “to see them through the prism of the groups who attempted to continue their legacy, and to overcome it.”107 And while the popular perception of Debord has perpetuated a distorted or incomplete image,108 the body of critical scholarship has grown and developed in equal proportion.

The most significant piece on Debord during this period, Jappe’s Guy Debord, was written in Italian before Debord’s death.109 It passed seemingly without notice until it appeared in French (1995), and subsequently in English (1999).110 Nicholson-Smith called it “far and away the best book [on Debord] we have so far”.111 Jappe was certainly not the first to recognise the Marxian character of Debord’s thought, but he was the earliest writer to argue that “Debord’s theories cannot be properly grasped unless they are first properly located within Marxist thought in general.”112 Jappe seized upon the necessity to critically interrogate Debord’s ideas, and the significance of their relationship to, and place within, the traditions of

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107 Wark, 50 Years of Recuperation, 8-9.
108 For example, see some of the recent glossy editions containing more images than analyses: Laurent Chollet, L’insurrection situationniste (Paris: Editions Degorno, 2000) and Laurent Chollet, Les situationnistes: L’utopie incarnée (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Simon Ford, the situationist international: A User’s Guide (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005). As both books by Chollet are similar, citations are taken from the most recent, which represents a reversion to the same themes in an abridged, paperback format. On SduS both authors offer the same points: Debord had conceived the concept of spectacle, defining it as the “totality of social relations and modes of production, directly linked to the development of modern society” (Chollet, 56); The society of the spectacle was “born in the 1920s” (Ford, 102) (Chollet, 56); Debord was influenced by “Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness… the philosophy of Georg W. F. Hegel, the young Karl Marx, and later theorists such as the Dutch Marxist, Anton Pannekoek” (Ford, 102-3), or alternatively he was “under the influence of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Lukács, Koschat, Castoriadis and Lefebvre.” (Chollet, 57). These are not new arguments, and the repetition of supposedly common sense interpretations has done little to improve understanding of Debord as a thinker.
109 Another Italian work by Perniola provides a synopsis of SduS focusing, as did Jappe and some of the earlier French writers, on the conceptual links between the spectacle and alienation: Mario Perniola, I Situazionisti: Il movimento che ha profetizzato la «Società dello spettacolo» (Roma: Castellvecchi, 1998), 51-65. For example, Perniola begins: «La critica della società moderna è condotta in modo più oggettivo nel libro di Debord, La società dello spettacolo. In questo carattere fondamentale dell’alienazione contemporanea viene individuato nello stato di passività contemplativa prodotto dal neocapitalismo, » (Perniola, 50-1). In this way, he forms part of a long line of interlocutors who describe and summarise Debord’s work.
110 Not even Perniola cites Jappe when discussing the influence of Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness on Debord’s conception of alienation. (Perniola, 53).
112 Jappe, Guy Debord, 2.
Marxism. The central pillar of Jappe’s study is alienation, which he considered to be the principal concern for “a minority tendency within Marxism” since the First World War. Debord, he argues, not only belonged to this tendency but “hews narrowly to the Lukácsian tradition in Marxism, refining certain aspects of it and sharing certain of its problems.” While this excludes too much of the intellectual material crucial to the construction of Debord’s thought, which culminated in SdS, it provides a locus for deeper inquiry.

Jappe noted many of the same concerns in SdS as Lukács had explored in History and Class Consciousness: totality, alienation, reification, the “contemplative aspects” of capitalism (for example the fetishism of the commodity), the role assumed by the party (of which Debord was critical), false and class consciousness, and the subject-object relation, among others. Moreover, he identified Debord’s “relevance” as a thinker in his own right in his having been among the first to interpret the present situation in light of the Marxian theory of value, whereas his shakier contentions are made at points where his thinking is still under the influence of the Marxism of the workers’ movement. One of the last voices of an old kind of social criticism, Debord was at the same time one of the first voices of a new stage.

Jappe viewed Debord as “almost alone among observers in the nineteen-sixties” in his insistence on the continued existence of the proletariat. In spite of this ostensibly unique position, Debord remains tethered to Lukács in Jappe’s analysis: conjoined in their emphasis on the “condition of the proletarian” in modern society; in their assumption that “reification clashes with a subject [the proletariat] that is in its essence immune to it”; and in their assertion, in the last instance, that “the proletariat must inherit the world created by the bourgeoisie.”

More reductionist arguments of this type have subordinated Debord to a number of other thinkers. Michael Gardner, for example, argued that Debord’s theory of the spectacle essentially stemmed from his acceptance of Lefebvre’s argument in Everyday Life in the Modern World that late capitalism was qualitatively different from its laissez-faire

113 This is in stark contrast to the vast majority of prior scholarship which has most often acted as a relay for Debord’s ideas without critical distance.
114 Jappe, Guy Debord, 4.
115 Jappe, Guy Debord, 5.
120 Jappe, “Debord and Lukács”, Guy Debord, 27.
121 Jappe, “Debord and Lukács”, Guy Debord, 42.
predecessor." Lefebvre himself considered the relationship to be mutual and that the production of their ideas was "corollary, parallel", stemming from "completely different sources." Hastings-King traced the development of the Situationists' politics over the landscape of new revolutionary movements typified by Socialisme ou Barbarie, stating that Debord had simply mapped "SB's notions of the history of the workers' movement, bureaucratic capitalism and socialism as direct democracy onto a Marxist framework closer to Lefebvre and Althusser in its abstract relation to the working class and revolution." Here, Socialisme ou Barbarie is presented as the pivot around which Debord transitioned from cultural to revolutionary politics, only reverting to "dialectical Marxism [in] response to the implosion of SB", and thus becoming an "actor within and symptom of the crisis of the Marxist imaginary." These arguments, of course, leave little room for any of the other significant influences on Socialisme ou Barbarie and even less for Debord's own unique contributions.

Nevertheless, the comprehensive analysis of Debord's intellectual formation conducted by Jappe opened the way for the re-emergence of a properly historical approach. McDonough returned by this path to Sollers' argument that Debord must be read and reread, inaugurating a project "to complete the record of the historical avant-garde, and to reassess the role of Debord, one of its most complex figures." Clark and Nicholson-Smith

123 Kristin Ross, "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview" trans. Kristin Ross, October Vol. 79 (Winter 1997), 76-7. See also Stuart Eiden, Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible (London: Continuum, 2004). Eiden also noted the mutual exchange of ideas between Lefebvre and Debord: "Following Guy Debord, Lefebvre suggests that everyday life has been 'colonized' by new technology and 'consumer society'. It is therefore the extreme point of alienation - Hegel's 'system of needs' has been shattered ... Lefebvre's use of Guy Debord alerts us to the links between his work of this period and that of the Situationists." (116-7) Eiden does not elaborate further on the relationship. Hirsh stated that "The situationists publicly acknowledged their intellectual debt to Lefebvre. Debord participated on a study group on everyday life setup by Lefebvre", he does not expand on this further. Hirsh, The French New Left, 145-6. Of those shackling Debord to Lefebvre, the most ironic case appears in the index of Alan D. Schrift, Twenty-First-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 289: "Debord, Guy see Lefebvre, Henri."
124 Stephen Hastings-King, "L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary", SubStance Vol. 28 No. 3 Issue 90 (Special Issue: Guy Debord, 1999), 26. The gulf between Lefebvre and Althusser notwithstanding.
125 Hastings-King, "L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary", 26-7. The mutual relationship between Debord and Socialisme ou Barbarie includes the brief but productive collaboration between Debord and Canjuers, as well as Castoriadis' misapprehension of Debord is discussed with greater historical awareness by Philippe Giroux, "Socialisme ou Barbarie: Un engagement politique et intellectuel dans la France de l'après-guerre" (Paris: Payot-Lausanne, 2002), 199-254. Jappe also notes the contributions made by Socialisme ou Barbarie but appears to consider them of minimal importance: Jappe, Guy Debord, 91-94. Debord is placed under the banner of Socialisme ou Barbarie "and their New Left disciples [who] sought to escape the paranoid dualisms of traditional revolutionary culture" (28-9) in Peter Starr, Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
126 McDonough, "Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists," 3.
127 Clark and Nicholson-Smith
proceeded under the same banner of historicisation, demonstrating the failure of the Left to confront the history of l’I.S. and its theory (to which a Marxian understanding of totality was key). This project would encompass Debord’s political and intellectual life, evoking the relationship of his ideas to their milieu — something Jappe did not entirely accomplish:

What Debray produced in 1967, the year the Debord book appeared (SduS), was Revolution in the Revolution, which does for Fidel Castro what Sidney and Beatrice Webb did for Stalin. Fashions in cybernetics and hard-line structuralism had then just promoted (or given new prominence to) the discipline of semiotics. This was the moment, in other words, when the very word “totality,” and the very idea of trying to articulate those forces and relations of production which were giving capitalism a newly unified and unifying form, were tabooed (as they largely still are) as remnants of a discredited “Hegelian” tradition. These things were on Debord’s mind. One of us remembers him at the Collège de France in 1966, sitting in on Hyppolite’s course on Hegel’s Logic, and having to endure a final session at which the master invited two young Turks to give papers. “Trois étapes de la dégénérescence de la culture bourgeoise française,” said Debord as the last speaker sat down. “Premièrement, l’érudition classique”—he had in mind Hyppolite himself, who had spoken briefly at the start of things—“quand même basé sur une certaine connaissance générale. Ensuite le petit con stalinien, avec ses mots de passe, ‘Travail,’ ‘Force’ et ‘Terreur.’ Et enfin—dernière bassesse—le sémiologue.” In other words, The Society of the Spectacle was conceived and written specifically as a book for bad times. It was intended to keep the habit of totalization alive … to express in every detail of its verbal texture and overall structure, what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing … that project would now involve.

It is crucial to remember the context in which Debord formed his theories, which are irreducible to an appendage of any one or other antecedent thinker. His attendance at Hyppolite’s lectures, discussed here, would seem an unimportant anecdote had Debord not read Hyppolite’s Études sur Marx et Hegel as part of his extensive preparations for SduS.

McDonough extended this historical project through his investigation of détournement, which he assessed as a form of deeply political aesthetic practice. Presenting SduS as a practical intervention in the class struggle, McDonough sought to historicise the work from the standpoint of Debord’s use of language. He located the foundations of détournement in the writings of Soviet linguist Vološinov, wherein “the sign was theorized as a

the heritage of the ‘council communism’ of the 1920s, developed in France by theoretical journals such as Socialisme ou Barbarie” (91). Alternatively, Andreotti maps the influence of Johann Huizinga’s anthropological theories of play to the cultural and political tactics of l’I.S., and of Debord in particular: Libero Andreotti, “Play-Tactics of the ’Internationale Situationniste’, October Vol. 91 (Winter, 2000), 36-58.


See footnote 22.

site of intersection of “differently oriented social interests” whereby it became precisely “an arena of class struggle.”\textsuperscript{132} Moreover, McDonough understood the immediate context for the strategy of détournement as a negative response to Barthes’ notion of the “morality of form”, necessitating a strategy of “appropriation and plagiarism, of theft within the realm of literature.”\textsuperscript{133} He charted this strategy by its relation to the avant-garde practices of Lautréamont, Duchamp, and Brecht,\textsuperscript{134} and in contrast to Lenin’s “triadic conception of the vanguard party’s tasks ... as a practice which merged theory, propaganda, and agitation into a single, transformed whole.”\textsuperscript{135} McDonough seemingly agreed with Debord and Wolman’s conception of détournement as the “first outline of a literary communism”,\textsuperscript{136} and arguably considered 	extit{SduS} to be the most precise articulation of this concept.\textsuperscript{137}

Unfortunately, the historicist approach did little to exorcise the phantoms of Debord who continue to haunt the literature produced since the turn of the last century. Rasmussen, who situated Debord within the tradition of “ultra-leftists like Karl Korsch”,\textsuperscript{138} hedged his bets: Debord “was updating the tradition of Western Marxism [but] despite the many references to Council Communism and Western Marxism, the Situationist International remained dependent on an artistic understanding of reality.”\textsuperscript{139} This recalls Wollen’s analysis, while making a stronger art historical case for Debord’s work. Wark returned once more to Debord, suggesting that 	extit{SduS} – “Debord’s masterpiece” – resulted from Debord’s having connected SouB’s “consistent critique not only of capitalism and colonialism, but also of the socialist states” with his readings in “left wing communist thought”: Lukács, Korsch, and Pannekoek.\textsuperscript{140} Merrfield called 	extit{SduS} a “brilliant prose poem” which had tapped “the parts nobody – Marx

\textsuperscript{132} McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century, 26. McDonough noted, however, that this “constituted a precocious rediscovery of [Vološinov’s] insights, almost a decade before his work and thought began to be available to a French audience.”
\textsuperscript{133} McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century, 25.
\textsuperscript{134} McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century, 29. The connection to Brecht’s Unfunktionierung had already been pointed out in Martin Jay, Donzetz Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1993), 424.
\textsuperscript{135} McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century, 42.
\textsuperscript{136} McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century, 35; 49.
\textsuperscript{137} Martin Puchner, considering 	extit{SduS} in a similar light, assessed it as a new form of avant-garde ‘Manifesto’: a refinement and re-definition of the form which had been neglected by the socialists and taken to excessive extremes by the avant-gardes. Thus, for Puchner, 	extit{SduS} represented a “new ‘poetry’ of the revolution.” Martin Puchner, “Debord’s Society of the Counterspectacle”, Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 221-240.
\textsuperscript{139} Rasmussen, “Counterrevolution, the Spectacle, and the Situationist Avant-Garde,” 9-13.
\textsuperscript{140} McKenzie Wark, The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International (London: Verso, 2011), 76.
included – could ever have imagined",141 in its turn "vividly Marxian, uniting youthful humanism with mature political economy, a left-wing Hegel with a materialist Feuerbach, a bellicose Machiavelli with a utopian Karl Korsch, a military Clausewitz with a romantic Georg Lukacs."142 The relative insights of these authors aside, such taxonomies fail to call forth the spirits which animated SduS, least of all Debord himself, in order to interrogate them.

These formulations remain broadly accepted in the most recent scholarship. Amorós, while exploring the relationship between Situationism and the anarchist tradition,143 finds that between 1962 and 1968 – the period following Debord’s departure from SouB – Debord began the immense theoretical task of elaborating a critique of the spectacle from the standpoint of Marx’s revolutionary theory, and within the framework of Hegel’s dialectical method.144 Amorós’ analysis of the relationship between anarchist theory and Debord’s ideas extends Gombin’s observations. Gombin argued that Debord had rejected the “separation between theory and practice” in anarchist theory, condemning it to the status of an ideological ideal rather than a “logically deduced practice”.145 Amorós historicises the reception of anarchist ideas by l’I.S., particularly Debord, who was deeply critical of anarchism.146 Examining the critique of anarchism presented by Debord in SduS, Amorós suggests that Debord considered only the anarchistic factions of the First International and the Spanish anarchist tradition;147 thus Debord’s critique of anarchism, as understood by Amorós, derived largely from his readings of the early Marx.148 Finally, Amorós identifies the irony that by 1970, l’I.S. was subject to the same “Leninist disqualification for leftist ‘immediacy’ [and] millenarianism” as Bakounin had been for Debord.149 This is not merely a scenic diversion; Debord’s position on anarchism – ostensibly emerging

142 Merrifield, Guy Debord, 58.
143 This has already been touched upon in Richard Gombin, “The Ideology and Practice of Contestation seen through Recent Events in France”, in David Apter and James Joll, eds. Anarchism Today (London: Macmillan, 1976), 14-33.
144 Miguel Amorós, Les situationnistes et l’anarchie, trans. Henri Mora (Paris: Éditions de la Roue, 2012), 19-21. Amorós then presents a similar schematic of the ideas received from Lukács, Korsch and councilism. 145 Gombin, “The Ideology and Practice of Contestation seen through Recent Events in France”, 26. This in contrast to Debord’s conception of the workers’ councils as the political for of the economic liberation of labour.
147 Amorós, Les situationnistes et l’anarchie, 93. This is to the exclusion of the American, Russian, Italian, French, German, and Swiss anarchist traditions.
149 Amorós, Les situationnistes et l’anarchie, 94.
from his readings of Marx - is an additional point of reference for his place in the Marxian landscape.

Returning to the path of Marxism, Marcolini has travelled the farthest, locating the origins of Debord’s task of revising Marx’s concepts in the years between 1955 and 1958 – a project which came to fruition between 1959-63 as he was by then engaged with the works of Lukács, Lefebvre, Castoriadus, and Marcuse.150 Marcolini extended this exploration in an article for the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition of Debord’s archives at the BnF in 2013. His is the first rigorous engagement with the newly available archival material.151 “La méthode Debord” reposes Braun’s question to Debord – “Debord a-t-il été marxiste ?”152 That he was not an ‘orthodox’ Marxist has been well established. The archival material, cited by Marcolini, demonstrates some of the richness of Debord’s engagement with material ranging from psychoanalysis to sociology to philosophy. Further, Marcolini attempts to contextualise the development of Debord’s ideas – and his place in the “Nouvelle Gauche à la française”153 – from his readings in classical Marxism, to his “rediscovery of authentic Marxian thought” under the tutelage of Henri Lefebvre.154 Unlike some of the earlier French scholars, however, Marcolini does not wholly contextualise or scrutinise SduS in light of this newly available material.155

Clearly, the historiographic consensus is that Debord, at least during his most active theoretical period, culminating as it did in the writing of SduS, belonged to the system of heterodox Marxism – of which the New Left may be considered a tributary – called, by Merleau-Ponty, Western Marxism. Debord has most often in scholarly interpretations, however, been swept along in its currents or at times submerged entirely. SduS is Debord’s contribution to Western Marxism, and also his understanding and interpretation of that tradition. By virtue of its syncretic construction, SduS is something more than a work of critical theory, it is a history of Marxism – orthodox and heterodox – and a critique of contemporary society.

151 Apostolidès made use of some of these materials, but neglects the majority.
153 The use of “Nouvelle Gauche” suggests a reborrowing by Marcolini of the particularly Anglophone term “New Left”.
In order to situate the work in this Western Marxism, the tradition and its particular development in France merit more sustained explanation.

Western Marxism flowed from the same headwaters as its ‘orthodox’ counterpart; in France the two met to form a muddy estuary. The histories of the milieu of postwar French Marxism, at least those which consider the PCF as its mainstream, tend to exclude dissident Marxists.\(^{156}\) David Caute addressed the troubled relationship between the PCF and its intellectual wing, citing the resignation of Pierre Naville as early as 1927, the intellectual struggles which followed the German occupation primarily between Sartre, the PCF, and Merleau-Ponty, and finally the resignations of Georges Friedmann and Lefebvre in the fifties.\(^{157}\) Adereth’s “critical history” of the PCF, on the other hand, notes Lefebvre’s role in the Revue Marxiste of the twenties while neglecting his later criticisms of, and split from, the Party.\(^{158}\) Les événements, the euphemistic epithet assigned to Mai-68, are given little attention,\(^{159}\) least of all as the culmination of a Marxian trajectory implicit among the Party’s perennial detractors.

While the role played by “anti-Stalinist” factions within the PCF, and of the “extreme left”, is acknowledged by Tiersky,\(^{160}\) Gaffney’s work declines to name the “New Left” as such, nor to consider its intellectual predecessors: “When the [Gaullist] regime was eventually faced with a major demonstration of social unrest, in May–June 1968, this was expressed through the trade unions and through student groups, and not through political parties identified with republican values.”\(^{161}\) Similarly, Ross viewed Mai-68 primarily as a problem for the PCF, CGT, and CFDT: “Talented student militants, who earlier would have begun political careers in the PCF, had moved on to a universe of New Left groups, mainly ‘Third Worldist’ in inspiration (Maoists, Trotskyists, and so on). The PCF thus lost contact with student events.”\(^{162}\) What unites these works is the near-universal absence of Western Marxism and its acolytes.

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\(^{156}\) Biard, Dreyfus, Gombin, and Touraine’s writings on the postwar period, the “New Left”, and Mai-68 have already been taken into account.


\(^{159}\) Adereth, The French Communist Party, 184-197.


\(^{162}\) George Ross, Workers and Communists in France: From Popular Front to Eurocommunism (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1983), 168-211.

\(^{163}\) Ross, Workers and Communists in France, 172-3.
This absence is typified by Kelly, whose survey of postwar French Marxism revealed to him a multiplicity of groups and ... variety of opinion [which] created a highly diversified and dynamic process of collective reflection, most of which lay within or on the margins of Marxism. Communists, Maoists, Trotskyites, anarchists, situationists, existentialists and others thrashed out their differences and agreements with vehemence and often violence.\textsuperscript{164} By dredging up the ideological confusion of these conflicts without seeking their source, Kelly obscures their importance, leaving Debord and l’I.S. to be subsumed in the “ephemeral ‘New Left’ interpretations” of Marxism, which descended from “those of the greatly overestimated ‘Arguments’ and ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’ groups.”\textsuperscript{165} These groups are not overestimated by Hazareesingh; he highlights the significant conflicts between the dissenting Marxist intellectuals and the Party over Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as the PFC’s suspicions of nascent gauchisme,\textsuperscript{166} as crucial elements in the formation of this intellectual milieu. Hazareesingh also historically contextualises aspects of the work of SouB, the unaligned Marxian sociologists such as Gorz, Belleville, Mallet,\textsuperscript{167} and Henri Lefebvre,\textsuperscript{168} as responses to the PFC’s failure to confront Raymond Aron’s appeal for a sociological understanding of the modern working class.\textsuperscript{169} Khilnani cast a still wider net:

The gauchiste criticism brought together two distinct strands: those intellectuals who desired a return to the pristine idea of revolution (the Maoists, the Trotskyists, the Althusserians), and those (such as Henri Lefebvre, Cornelius Castoriadis, André Gorz and Guy Debord) who confronted the revolutionary ideal with the consequences of the spectacular growth of the economy in the postwar decades, growth which had produced an apparently pacified and distinctly unrevolutionary consumer society.\textsuperscript{170}

The arbitrary division of this milieu into two discrete camps made up of thinkers who were individually as divergent as these broad groupings is

\textsuperscript{164} Michael Kelly, Modern French Marxism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 176. For his complete overview of the period, see 145-74.
\textsuperscript{165} Kelly, Modern French Marxism, 98. These works are not the only ones to excise the influence of Western Marxism or the roles of Debord and l’I.S. in the New left during the period. See: Vladimir Claude Fillera, “The French New Left and the left-wing regime”, in Stuart Williams, ed. Socialism in France: From Jaurès to Mitterand (London: Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France, 1983), 155-164. Perry and Renaut located the “common ground” of French Marxian philosophy of the time in the structuralist strands which Althusser developed. Luc Perry and Alain Renaut, French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism, trans. Mary H.S. Cattani (Peterb: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 4. Gutting excluded Debord from both the history of Mai-68, and French philosophy more broadly, suggesting instead that Lyotard, formerly of SouB, was the “instigator of protests at Nanterre in May 1968” (320). Garry Gutting, French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
\textsuperscript{167} On the ‘new’ working class.
\textsuperscript{168} Lefebvre’s writings on the working class as an objet insaisissable and new categories of urban alienation.
\textsuperscript{169} Hazareesingh, Intellectuals and the French Communist Party, 172-3.
problematic. And yet, it outlines – as do the aporias in the PCF historiography – some figures and intellectual bonds pivotal to the development of Western Marxism in France.

Western Marxism has thus far been taken as a given: a concept to chart Debord’s relative position within – and to navigate more generally – a constellation of thinkers whose ideas were reciprocally related and coherent. This was not the case historically. The thinkers were often remote from one another, and their ideas mutually exclusive or contradictory. McInnes framed the tradition as a “doctrine, or nexus of doctrines … derived directly from Marx’s writings [which] came to be known as le marxisme occidental, Western Marxism, in contrast to the lucubrations of the orthodox dialectical materialists.” 171 Anderson considered Western Marxism to be “an entirely new intellectual configuration within the development of historical materialism. In their hands, Marxism became a type of theory in certain critical respects quite distinct from anything that had preceded it.” 172 Each agreed that the development of Western Marxism was a response to the shortcomings of orthodox Marxism, in particular, to the failures of the Russian revolution, 173 and more broadly to the tendency of the Second and Third Internationals to ignore “certain essential assertions of Marxism.” 174 Jacoby extended this argument further, pointing out that it was common for all dissident Marxisms of the epoch to define themselves, or to be defined by, “their distance from Soviet Marxism.” 175 Both of the former scholars were sceptical of Western Marxism: McInnes argued that its philosophical trajectory constituted a remystification of a Marxism which had originated as an attempt to demystify metaphysics. 176 Anderson believed its “first and most fundamental … characteristic [to have been] the structural divorce of this Marxism from political practice.” 177 On the other hand, Jacoby viewed the “predominance of philosophical works … not as a retreat but an advance to a reexamination of Marxism.” 178

It is imprecise to say that Western Marxism was christened by Merleau-Ponty; it had already received that name much earlier. He adopted it from

173 Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, 16-21.
174 McInnes, The Western Marxists, 10.
176 McInnes, The Western Marxists, 10.
177 Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, 29. This remains an odd assertion in light of the historical responses of the orthodox Party organs to the claims of Western Marxism, and the treatment of its luminaries.
178 Jacoby, The Dialectic of Defeat, 6-7.
Korsch who, with Lukács and others, had come into conflict with the orthodoxy, the Russian Marxist-Leninists; the attempts by Lukács and Korsch to "develop the Marxist dialectic ... as a revision and criticism of Marxism" proved incompatible with Lenin's philosophical ideas.\(^{179}\) The crisis of Marxism that had been identified by Korsch led to an intractable struggle:

The conflict between "Western Marxism" and Leninism is already found in Marx as the conflict between dialectical thought and naturalism (64) ... Thus Marxism could not resolve the problem that is presented and from which we started. It could not maintain itself at that sublime point which it hoped it could find in the life of the Party, that point where matter and spirit would no longer be discernible as subject and object, individual and history, past and future, discipline and judgement: and therefore the opposites which it was to unite fall away from one another. Someone will say that it is difficult to enter into the positive and to do something while keeping the ambiguity of the dialectic. The objection confirms our reservation because it amounts to saying that there is no revolution which is critical of itself. Yet it is through this program of continual criticism that revolution earns its good name.\(^{180}\)

For Merleau-Ponty then, Western Marxism was the fountainhead of this program of criticism, a countervailing intellectual force opposed to the official Marxism of the Bolsheviks. Its key concerns were rooted in Marx, and expressed the need to assert the proletariat against the Party,\(^{181}\) total man against economic man,\(^{182}\) dialectical subject against historical object.

The broad historical strokes of Western Marxism have been limned in a number of intellectual histories,\(^{183}\) and almost all have sketched out the central figures of the movement: "the major figures of Western Marxism have been philosophers."\(^{184}\) They include, depending on the historian: Lukács; Korsch; Luxemburg; Gramsci; the Frankfurt School; variably, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; Lefebvre and the Arguments group; and Socialisme ou Barbarie.\(^{185}\) The philosophical core of Western Marxism, the animating principle common to all of these thinkers, was the Hegelian dialectic:


\(^{180}\) Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 64 and 72-73. Merleau-Ponty was not without reservations concerning early Western Marxism: "The Marxism of the young Marx, as well as the "Western" Marxism of 1923 lacked a means of expressing the inertia of infrastructure, the resistance of the economic and even natural conditions, the swallowing-up of 'personal relationships' in 'things' ... They had to learn the slowness of mediations." (64)


\(^{182}\) Mark Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 56-7.


\(^{184}\) Jacoby, The Dialectic of Defeat, 6-7.

\(^{185}\) See Anderson, Howard, Jacoby, and Jay, among others. Anderson includes Althusser in this list; Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, 51-2: "Althusser's initial essays - still performe took them [the Paris manuscripts of 1844] as the starting point for any discourse within contemporary Marxism ... Western Marxism as a whole thus paradoxically inverted the trajectory of Marx's own development itself." Debord, as demonstrated, has been considered a perennial candidate for inclusion in this pantheon as well.
Western Marxism demanded a revolution “against Capital,” that is, against the false belief that the objective economic laws would automatically bring about the collapse of capitalism and the victory of the proletariat... The recovery of Marx’s early writings in the late 1920s and the subsequent publication of the *Grundrisse* a generation later helped strengthen this equation, as they demonstrated for many that Marx had indeed been what Lukács and others had said he was: a radical Hegelian. Accordingly, such terms as alienation, mediation, objectification, and reification were understood to have a special place in the lexicon of Western Marxism. Culture, defined both widely as the realm of everyday life and narrowly as man’s most noble artistic and intellectual achievements, was also a central concern of the tradition, which tended as a result to neglect the economy and, at times, politics. Western Marxism, therefore, meant a Marxism that was far more dialectical than materialist, at least as those terms were traditionally understood.186

The significant themes plotted out by Jay – alienation, mediation, objectification, reification, and culture – were the colours mixed by these thinkers upon the shared palette of the dialectical method. It was a method that the intellectual canvas of postwar France had been primed for.

France had long nurtured a Marxist tradition, and, until the nineteen-thirties it had done so mostly without a great deal of Marx’s work.187 Howard described the period between 1927 and 1932 as that during which «[l]a lutte pour le ‘vrai’ marxisme a commencé ... période qui vit la publication des premiers manuscrits de Marx et l’ascension du stalinisme dans le mouvement communiste mondial.» 188 Burkhard argued that introduction by the *Revue Marxiste* in 1929 of selections from Marx’s manuscripts of 1844 was revelatory, prefiguring by “a half-dozen years ... the most sophisticated French commentators on Marx and Hegel, exploring questions that did not become common intellectual fodder until after 1945.” 189 While the Revue did not last, Hegel, and by extension the young Marx, would re-enter France by other means.

Hegelian Marxism re-entered French intellectual life, like Lenin arriving at the Finland station, by the closed train of academic philosophy. Kojève’s lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology* between 1933-39 ushered in a Hegelian renaissance;190 in the first instance, Hegel was for

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186 Jay, Marxism and Totality, 2-3.
187 For the history of Marxism prior to the First World War, see: Robert Stuart, Marxism at Work: Ideology, class and French socialism during the Third Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For the history of French Marxism between the wars, including the struggle to introduce the early Marx into France by the *Revue Marxiste*, organ of the *Philosophes* group of which Henri Lefebvre was part, see: Bud Burkhard, French Marxism Between the Wars: Henri Lefebvre and the “Philosophes” (Albany, NY: Humanity Books, 2000).
189 Burkhard, French Marxism Between the Wars, 105-8.
the French intellectuals an antidote to the conservatism of contemporary European social theory. Kojève introduced Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, the concepts of work as a rational activity; the incarnation of spirit in things; and perhaps most importantly, alienation in the guise of the unhappy consciousness. In the hands of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty these ideas nourished the development of existentialism in France, while Hyppolite fused Hegel once more to Marx. For uncertain adherents to the official Marxism of the PÇ, which by 1939 had degenerated into dogmatism in the “crudest form of ‘dia-mat’”, the “emphasis on the historicity of reason and conversely the rationality of history” in Hegel’s Phenomenology, imbued many wavering Marxists with the strength to reject Stalinism. The French Marxism of the period, which had to that point been shaped by the “political context of Stalin’s International and the belated introduction of the corpus of Marx’s writings”, was thus thrown into the crucible to be recast.

A renewed Hegelian Marxism was by no means the only by-product of this process; during the three decades following the Second World War, as Aron put it, “les modes idéologiques parisiennes s’accompagnèrent à chaque fois d’une réinterprétation du marxisme.” Alongside the development of a particularly French Western Marxism – centred around Arguments and Socialisme ou Barbarie – must be added the existentialist Marxism of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the non-dogmatic ‘Trotskyism’ of Pierre Naville and Boris Souvarine, the quasi-Catholic Marxism of Garaudy, the structuralist Marxism of Althusser, and of course, les gauchistes: the

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193 Among many others.
194 Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 18-35.
195 Burkhardt, French Marxism between the Wars, 120.
196 Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 5-6.
197 Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 36-42.
199 See: Jay, Marxism and Totality, 189-90 on Socialisme ou Barbarie: 295-6 on Lefebvre.
201 See: Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 179-83 on Naville’s critique of Sartre and others.
New Left. Almost all of these thinkers or groups espoused anti-Stalinism in some form. Western Marxism and the New Left in France, which are of most immediate concern, arguably developed in response to the hoary Stalinism of Thorez’s PCF, to the philosophical (ab)uses of Marx, and above all, to meet the need for:

a critical theory [which] would have to account for the development of capitalism since 1900 - oligopolistic concentration, the state’s entry into the market, advanced technology leading toward automation, the transformation of the workforce toward increasingly skilled mental labour, the direct manipulation of needs through advertising, the pacification of the traditional proletariat, and the transformation of the areas of gratification from work to consumption and leisure.

The historical context for the development of Western Marxism in France was not merely a conflict of esoteric political and philosophical ideas, it was writ large in the sweeping changes which marked the trentes glorieuses, in particular, the introduction of Taylorism into the French mode of production.

The radical transformation of everyday life, and of the conditions of production, posed new questions and demanded new answers: “The interest in the early Marx because of what he offered to the proletariat, rather than what he could do for philosophers, distinguished the marxist humanism of 1963 from the Hegelian Marx who so fascinated the previous generation.”

This humanist Marxian project was invigorated by the translation into French of classical Western Marxist texts, among them: Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness in 1960; many of the works by the early Marx in the Arguments review; Marx’s Grundrisse, “which showed the continuity of Marx’s thought from the 1844 Manuscripts to Capital”, in 1967. This Western Marxist humanism was expressed in significant works by Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Socialisme ou Barbarie’s Castoriadis and Lefort, and ultimately, Guy Debord. Moreover, this project was complemented by the race to theorise the “new working class” undertaken by Friedmann, Gorz,
In contrast to the more strictly Hegelian concerns introduced by Kojève, the fundamental problems for this Marxism were those as outlined earlier by Jay: the shortcomings of the proletariat and the role of the Party; the rationalisation of work within conditions of automation, and the consumer society; “the swallowing-up of ‘personal relationships’ in ‘things’,” or reification as Lukács termed it; and alienation, no longer as simply the unhappy consciousness, but as a condition suffusing history and everyday life which must be overcome.

The end-game of this Marxian humanism was precipitated as much by its own paradoxes as by its confrontation with Althusser’s structuralist Marxism. The so-called “New Left” was heir to all of these developments, and to the contradictions, of what had gone before. In Gombin’s words, the groups which made up the New Left had broken [the] vicious circle, broken cheerfully with Marxism-Leninism, and has assumed the role of inquisitor in its turn. To enhance further the novelty of its new departure, its propagation has coincided with the coming of age of a whole generation of militants who have not had to suffer the traumas of Stalinism, with its absolutist pretensions that elevated it to the status of an eternal truth. Consequently, the theoretical initiative has found a sociological base in a living movement.

Debord and l’I.S. formed a vital link between humanist Western Marxism and the New Left, whose irruption into French political life in Mai-68 may have shaken the foundations of the state, but ultimately presaged the obliteration of the Western Marxist project. This led H. Stuart Hughes to note the fatal similarities – the febrile desire to revolutionise everything – between Mai-68 and the revolutions of 1848.

This dissertation is not, however, a history of Western Marxism as a whole, nor of its articulation in France, nor of the New Left and Mai-68. It is a study of Debord’s seminal work, La Société du Spectacle (1967), and its place within this intellectual history. Debord himself considered SdS to be more than a work of critical theory, it was one of intervention:

Une telle théorie critique n’a pas à être changée; aussi longtemps que n’auront pas été détruites les conditions générales de la longue période de l’histoire que cette théorie aura été la première à définir avec exactitude. La continuation de développement de la période n’a

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210 “alienation, mediation, objectification, and reification”, and culture. Jay, Marxism and Totality, 2.
211 Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 64.
212 For Sartre, the praxico-inert.
216 Jay, Marxism and Totality, 298-9 fn. 80; Keller, Jean Baudrillard, 89.
217 H. Stuart Hughes, Sophisticated Rebels, 7.
fait que vérifier et illustrer la théorie du spectacle dont l’exposé, ici réitéré, peut également être considéré comme historique dans une acceptation moins élevée: il témoigne de ce qu’a été la position la plus extrême au moment des querelles de 1968, et donc de ce qu’il était déjà possible de savoir en 1968. Les pires dupes de cette époque ont pu apprendre depuis, par les déconvenues de toute leur existence, ce que signifiaient la « négation de la vie qui est devenue visible »; la « perte de la qualité » liée à la forme-marchandise, et la « prolétarianisation du monde ».

Even twenty-five years after its initial publication, Debord highlighted in SduS, those Hegelian themes which so vitalised Western Marxism: the visible negation of life, the loss of quality linked to the commodity form, and the proletarianisation of the world. These are the core concerns of alienation, reification, and class. And Debord’s praxical project was for the radical transformation of society, and the abolishment of these conditions: the « mission historique d’instaurer la vérité dans le monde » (SduS §221).

This is an intellectual history and analysis of SduS which aims to establish Debord’s understanding, interpretation, and transposition of the Western Marxist tradition in order to locate him in that tradition. The methodology is idiosyncratic, as it describes a history, more than anything else, of Debord’s reading habits. Debord read widely, more than any previous writer on his life or work has suggested. The reading notes made available in the fonds Debord reveal something of the depth of his studies. The folders containing these fiches de lectures are divided under the broad headings of “Historique”, “Marxisme”, “Philosophie and Sociologie”. Moreover, there are the preparatory manuscripts for SduS which shed greater insight into his selections for détournement. Debord’s readings in Marxism contain much which might be expected – Lefebvre, Lukács, Korsch, Pannekoek, and of course, a great deal of Marx and Engels – and more beside, ranging from Bernstein to Luxemburg, or Labriola to Wittfogel. He was a student of the contemporary political economy of Galbraith and Hook, the new American sociology of Packard and Riesman, of Freud, and the Freudo-Marxisms of Gabel, Marcuse, and Reich. The goal of this project is to restore the depth of colour and texture of Debord’s ideas, tarnished as they have been by the vicissitudes of historiography.

219 Save perhaps Marcolini.
This will be accomplished through a close analysis of *SduS*, structured as an exploration of the themes outlined above: class, alienation and reification, and praxis. Each chapter will present an exegesis of the development of these themes in Western Marxism – offering an explication of their meaning in the works of Marx, and the evolution of their meaning in the works by his epigones in that tradition. These ideas will then be situated in *SduS*, through an examination of Debord’s reception and transposition of the concepts. As such, chapter two will provide an overview of Debord’s understanding of the society of the spectacle as a class society founded on capitalist social relations; chapter three will investigate the ontological underpinnings of the spectacle from the standpoint of history; chapter four will complete this formula by outlining the praxical function of *SduS*, and Debord’s theory for the sublation of spectacular social relations.
II. Anti-History and False Consciousness.

History does nothing, it "possesses no immense wealth," it "wages no battles." It is man, real, living man, who does all that, who possesses and fights; "history" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims. Karl Marx, The Holy Family.

Lukács’ philosophical reading of history brought to light, behind the prose of everyday existence, a recovery of the self by itself which is the definition of subjectivity. But this philosophical meaning remained tied to the articulations of history, undetachable from them; and finally the operation of philosophical focusing had its ballast, its counterpart, in a historical fact, the existence of the proletariat. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic.

The concept of alienation is the original idea – the seed – of all Marxian thought, not least that of Debord. The germ borne within this seed sprouts forth “man’s active historical struggle against every mode of alienation of his nature”, blossoming only in the season of man’s ultimate self-realisation: human emancipation. For Marx, this historical struggle, which characterises the Marxian telos, is no less than “the activity of man pursuing his aims” in defiance of, and seeking to overcome, those “conditions of man’s existence [which] divorce him from his essential function.” Marx located the most acute expression of alienation in the historical conditions of capitalist production – typified by wage labour and the fetish character of the commodity form – and perceived its immanent sublation in a historical fact: “the existence of the proletariat.” Debord inherited the concept of alienation from Marx through his acolytes, chiefly those whose interpretations of the concept gained currency in the intellectual milieu of post-war France. For Debord, late capitalism represented an “immense accumulation of spectacles”[SduS §1]: a society wherein “diverse forms of the same alienation confront one another”[SduS


2 This has been highlighted to some degree by Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1999), 6-19.

3 Hyppolite, Studies on Marx and Hegel, 130.


§63]. Arguing that a dual and reciprocal alienation constituted the “essence and anchor of the existing society”[SduS §8], Debord opposed to the is of the spectacle, the ought of Marx’s project for a conscious history[SduS §80]. By establishing that alienation is the cornerstone of the philosophic system adopted by Debord, it is possible to understand the foundational elements of SduS: the essence, activity, estrangement, and anticipated self-realisation of man. This chapter surveys the ground on which Debord constructed SduS, and the Marxian blueprint of what he termed the spectacle.

It would be difficult to understand Debord’s concept of spectacle without firmly grasping the extent to which he had assimilated Marx’s dialectical method, and more significantly, his theory of alienation into SduS. Debord read and made use of Marx at both first and second hand. Debord’s fiches de lecture, the majority of which predate the publication of SduS, present a clear picture of those works which informed this theoretical trajectory. From these notes, it is evident that Debord studied critically those writings of Marx engaged with alienation: the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, The German Ideology, and The Holy Family. Further, the extensive quotation of the so-called ‘early’ Marx, as well as of Hegel, throughout SduS is ample evidence that Debord had deployed these concepts with Hegelian Marxist aims. Thus, it is crucial to survey the multivalent meanings of alienation which Debord located in Marx’s writings, in order to comprehend their complex transposition into SduS.

Alienation is neither axiomatic, nor isolated from the rest of Marx’s thought. Ollman, for example, conceived of Marx’s philosophic system as an organic whole, comprised of internally related factors, and mediated by reciprocity rather than by causality. These factors express both their internal relations, as well as their relationship to the whole, and

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7 Because historically conscious.
8 While this is not a given, it is clear from the archives these pieces are primarily based on Debord’s preparatory readings for the writing of SduS.
12 Debord’s list of “détournements, with their origin” indicates a number of citations from Hegel and Marx. Of relevance to the present discussion are those from Hegel’s Phénoménologie: §7, 8, 9, 107, 121, 128, 189, 206; and from Marx and Engels’ L’Idéologie Allemande: §163; Manuscrits de 1844: §30, 43, 125, 126, 215; and La Sainte Famille: §18, 21. Guy Debord, La Société du Spectacle (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967); (Paris: Éditions Champs Libre, 1971). Box 1, Folder 6: 2. “Exemplaire annoté”, La Société du Spectacle: Manuscrit autographe. Les Fonds Debord, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. November 2011. This “Provisional review of citations and détournements from La Société du Spectacle” has also been reproduced, albeit with less detail as to the origins of the citations in the more recently published Guy Debord, Œuvres (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006), 862-872.
ultimately, each expresses an aspect of the whole itself. In this system, alienation primarily describes "the internal relation it underscores between the present and the future" – the is and the ought – and can be best understood as "the absence of unalienation." Therefore, both alienation and its Aufhebung – or supersession – the process of disalienation, "denote an ontological necessity in the Marxian system." Aufhebung is not, however, the mere shedding of a travel-worn garment at the end of mankind's historical exodus from alienation to realisation; the concept expresses "the abolition, transcendence, and preservation ... on the higher level" of all existing alienated forms of being and consciousness. This framework accentuates those factors which lend content to the conceptual form of alienation.

While Marx owed a well known debt to Hegel and Feuerbach concerning the original concept, he extended the definition of alienation and drew out its consequences. In the Hegelian dialectic, alienation is an inexorable element of the relationship between human (self-)consciousness and the world. Hegel's notion has been summarised as "the state of consciousness as it acquaints itself with the external, objective, phenomenal world. At this stage objects appear to man as external and alien, and consciousness feels itself estranged and alienated in this otherness (Anderssein)." Alienation is here composed of multiple facets: Entäußerung (externalisation), Vergegenständlichung (objectification) and

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17 Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 37. See also David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17: "[Marx's] use of the term ... 'Aufhebung' (sometimes translated, rather archaically, as 'sublation' in English) ... connotes a distinctive and complex combination of cancellation, preservation, and elevation." Leopold also links the notion of a dialectical progression culminating in Aufhebung to the thought of Schiller and Hölderlin, as an elementary principle of the German idealism which influenced Marx.
Entfremdung (estrangement)\textsuperscript{21} which, taken as a whole, pose the problem of the alien object-world and the negation of human consciousness. Marx criticised Hegel’s schema of the relationship between consciousness (Spirit) and the world as speculative and idealist, ultimately denying Hegel’s “negation of the negation”\textsuperscript{22} which foresaw the transcendence of alienation in the recognition of the object-world as a mere “projection ... a phenomenal expression of consciousness.”\textsuperscript{23} Marx asserted a materialist position\textsuperscript{24} and sharply distinguished “objectification, the premise of material existence,” from “alienation, a state of consciousness resulting from the relationship between men and objects.”\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, Marx sought to preserve what he considered Hegel’s chief discovery while casting off its idealist trappings:

Hegel conceives labour as man’s act of self-creation (though in abstract terms); he grasps man’s relation to himself as an alien being and the emergence of species-consciousness and species-life as the demonstration of his alien being.\textsuperscript{26}

This prefigured the Marxian ontology and the foundation of his philosophy of history, for which alienation is the key.

Marx’s philosophy of history rests firmly upon a humanist ontological foundation, conceiving of man as the sole being engaged in a process of continual self-creation and recreation. As such, this ontology buttresses a precise vision of history:

The Marxian ontology is dynamically historical and objectively dynamic. Marx does not “deduce human society from the “categories” but, on the contrary, sees the latter as specific modes of existence of the social being. He does not “add” historicity to an originally static vision; for if historicity is merely added at a certain point it can also be taken away at another. Instead he defines the ontological substance of his conception as “the self-mediated being of nature”, i.e. as an objective being who cannot help being inherently historical.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{21} For the present usage, see: Georg Lukács, The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 537-59. For further use of these terms in translation, see: David McLellan, Karl Marx: Early Texts (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), and T.R. Bottomore, Karl Marx: Early Writings (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). These terms have also been used interchangeably, for example David Leopold refers to Entäußerung as estrangement, The Young Karl Marx, 91; Mészáros refers to “Entäusserung”, “Entfremdung”, and “Veräusserung.” Marx’s Theory of Alienation, 73; Finally, Bertell Ollman writes that “For most purposes, ‘alienation’ (Entäusserung) and ‘estrangement’ (Entfremdung) may be taken as synonymous.” Ollman, Alienation, 132.

\textsuperscript{22} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 97: “This famous ‘negation of the negation’ – the negation of the existence of objects that negate consciousness – recognizes that the objects are merely alienated, reified consciousness ... Since such a negation of the existence of the objective world as external to consciousness is unacceptable to Marx, he reconsiders the resulting identification between objectification and alienation.”

\textsuperscript{23} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 96-97.

\textsuperscript{24} Marx’s central criticism of Hegel was that alienation would not cease with the supposed abolition of the external world.” David McLellan, The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction (London: MacMillan, 1972), 105.

\textsuperscript{25} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 97. For further discussion, see Hyppolite, Studies on Marx and Hegel, 81-83.

\textsuperscript{26} Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, Early Writings, 213-4. See also: Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 31; John Plamenatz, Karl Marx’s Philosophy of Man (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 61.

\textsuperscript{27} Mészáros, Marx’s Theory of Alienation, p. 251.
For Marx then, man is historical by virtue of his reciprocal relationship to the external world, and to his species; 28 man identifies himself as active in opposition to inanimate nature - his object - and as a communal being through the social and historical character of his productive activity. 29

The unfolding of human potential at both the level of the individual and of the species hinges on this relationship between man and nature. This notion of development underpins the teleology of Marx's philosophy of history:

The Marxian system, is organized in terms of an inherently historical - "open" - teleology which cannot admit "fixity" at any stage whatsoever ... The "goal" of human history is defined by Marx in terms of the "immanence of human development ... namely as the realization of the "human essence", of "humanness", of the "specifically human" element, of the "universality and freedom of man", etc. through man's establishment of himself by practical activity first in an alienated form, and later in a positive self-sustaining form of life activity established as an "inner need". 30

Framed in this manner, history is driven by the unfolding of human potential toward the establishment of man as the free, self-mediating and self-creating being of nature.

The primary activity whereby man acts upon, and in, the object-world - externalising and objectifying his consciousness 31 - which defines man in Marx's thought, is labour: "the fundamental ontological determination of 'humaness' ('menschliches Dasein', i.e. really human mode of existence)." 32

Labour distinguishes man - "Activity, for Marx, is the role; it is man interacting with nature with his body as well as his mind" 33 - as the unique

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28 For an outline of species-being, see: Mészáros, Marx's Theory of Alienation, 80-1: "A 'Gattungswesen' - i.e. a being that has the consciousness of the species to which it belongs, or to put it another way, a being whose essence does not coincide directly with its individuality." See also Avineri on Gattungswesen: The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 84-5.

29 This "communal being" (Gemeinwesen) contrasts slightly with the notion of species-being, Mészáros, Marx's Theory of Alienation, 73. See also Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 31-3; Plamenatz, Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man, 61-2.

30 Mészáros, Marx's Theory of Alienation, 118.

31 For Marx, consciousness is, like labour, social and determined by its relationship to practical activity: "... we find that man also possesses 'consciousness'; but, even so, not inherent, not 'pure' consciousness. From the start the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men ... Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. Consciousness is at first, of course, merely consciousness concerning the immediate sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connected with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, trans. S. Ryazanskaya (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), 41-2.

32 Mészáros, Marx's Theory of Alienation, 78. See also: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 78, 85. See also Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 36: "A living being which has once begun to make nature his own through the work of his hands, his intellect and his imagination, will never stop. Every achievement opens the door to unconquered territory."

33 Olmian, Alienation, 97. See also: Ernest Mandel, Marxist Economic Theory, trans. Brian Pease (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 2: "Labour, an activity at once conscious and social, born of the possibility of communication and of spontaneous mutual aid between the members of this species, is the means whereby man acts upon his natural environment."
being who reproduces the world in his own image by means of his sensuous and conscious action.\textsuperscript{34} This process, by which man creates himself and his community – his species-being\textsuperscript{35} – becomes a historical process “when it leaves an impression on a world external to human self-consciousness.”\textsuperscript{36} Consequently, it is human being which is reproduced socially and historically.\textsuperscript{37} By acting on the world – transforming it in accordance with his social needs, and according to his vision – man humanises nature and is himself humanised to the extent that he is a part of nature.\textsuperscript{38} In this view, man “emerged from nature … representing both nature and anti-nature at the same time, different from all other species by conscious activity.”\textsuperscript{39}

Purposeful activity is, for Marx, the clearest expression of man’s essential powers: first as conscious action on the world, secondly as it extends the boundaries of nature, and finally, as it meets and consequently brings into existence ever more sophisticated human needs.\textsuperscript{40} The fundamental purpose of labour is, however, considered to be more immediate and material: “the production of use-values.”\textsuperscript{41} Use-value is the characteristic of those products which serve the satisfaction of a human need, at first primitive, and increasing in sophistication as the cycle of production and consumption drives the development of productive forces.\textsuperscript{42} Marx argues that labour comprises three facets: “purposeful activity, that is the work itself … the object on which that work is performed, and … the instruments of that work.”\textsuperscript{43} Further, labour manifests the dual relation between man and nature – qua object – of production and consumption:

Labour uses up its material elements, its objects and its instruments. It consumes them, and is therefore a process of consumption. Such productive consumption is distinguished from individual consumption by this, that the latter uses up products as means of subsistence for the living individual; the former, as means of subsistence for labour, i.e. for the activity through which the living individual’s labour-

\textsuperscript{34} Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, Early Writings, 127-8. See also Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 97. Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 36-7.
\textsuperscript{35} Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, Early Writings, 126.
\textsuperscript{36} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 79.
\textsuperscript{37} Hence, Mészáros’ notion of man as the “self-mediating being of nature”, Marx’s Theory of Alienation, 251. See also Rappaport, Studier on Marx and Hegel, 132-3.
\textsuperscript{38} See: Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 32-3; Georges Friedmann and Pierre Naville, Traité de Sociologie du Travail (Paris: Libraire Armand Colin, 1961), 12.
\textsuperscript{40} Ollman, Alienation, 99.
\textsuperscript{41} Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 290.
\textsuperscript{42} See: Mandel, Marxist Economic Theory, 24-5; Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 290-1; Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 959. “With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase.”
\textsuperscript{43} Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 284.
power manifests itself. Thus the product of individual consumption is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption is a product distinct from the consumer.\textsuperscript{44}

As such, there exists a tension between man’s productive activity and nature. Nature not only presents immanent potentialities for transformation by labour, but imposes limitations on labour. Therefore, to unleash its full potential, human labour had necessarily to “become a multiple activity divided into many separate ones; for no individual and no community limited in place and time is capable of doing what mankind as a whole is called upon to do.”\textsuperscript{45}

Above all, labour is a social activity, and one which portends social consciousness. It produces a human world, and reproduces man in the world “on an even larger scale, in a form which continually approximates a generic universality.”\textsuperscript{46} The universality of man unfolds in practice as “the universality which makes the whole of nature into his inorganic body”, first as the “direct means of life” and secondly, “as the material object and instrument of his life activity.”\textsuperscript{47} Ironically, for Marx, the universalisation of human powers hinges on a process of division; the social division of labour. This division, he argued, proceeds through “various stages of development”, which “are just so many different forms of ownership, i.e. the existing stage in the division of labour determines also the relations of individuals to one another, with reference to the material, instrument and product of labour.”\textsuperscript{48} It is the division of labour which separates material from mental labour, town from county,\textsuperscript{49} and creates the conditions within society, and between social formations (tribes, nations), for the exchange of commodities.\textsuperscript{50} Ultimately, it is this division which transforms the “self-production of the self” – the conscious, sensuous, and social activity of man – into a “macro-process” which, from the individual standpoint appears “to be a harsh objective reality, a strange and even hostile power to which the self is submitted.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{44} Marx, \textit{Capital}, vol. 1, 290.
\textsuperscript{45} Fischer, \textit{Marx in His Own Words}, 37-8.
\textsuperscript{47} Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, \textit{Early Writings}, 126-7.
\textsuperscript{48} Marx and Engels, \textit{The German Ideology}, 32-3.
\textsuperscript{50} See: Marx, \textit{Capital}, vol. 1, 470-2; Marx and Engels, \textit{The German Ideology}, 32-43. Moreover, it is from this moment, for Marx, that consciousness (as “pure” theory; theology, philosophy, ethics) separates itself from, and comes into contradiction with, existing – “real” – social relations, 43-4.
\textsuperscript{51} Hyppolite, \textit{Studies on Marx and Hegel}, 132.
The division of labour and the encumbent devolution of “enjoyment and labour, production and consumption” onto different individuals or social formations - typified in the relation of town to country, or material to mental labour - manifested as “the division of the population into two great classes ... directly based on the division of labour and on the instruments of production.” In the first instance, Marx viewed the division of labour and its instruments as a necessary alienation in the process whereby man expanded his material productive capacities to surmount the tyranny of necessity. While integral to the humanisation of nature and to the unfolding universality of mankind, this process represented at the same time, the wellspring of class divisions, private property, and the alienation of labour:

Marx located the highest expression of this alienation in the historical conditions of bourgeois society. Founded on the social and economic relations of capitalist private property, wage labour, and commodity production, the division of labour here assumed the form of two great social classes - the bourgeoisie and proletariat - as a division between the owners of the means of production and those whose labour is coerced by them.

Industrial capitalism represented for Marx, the “most developed and the most complex historic organization of production.” Marx argues that the capitalist mode of production maintains and reproduces the social relations of “the capitalist class and the working class, and hence the capitalist character of the entire production process.” He considered the prevailing condition of labour in bourgeois society to be one of manifold alienation: “in modern society, man is alienated from nature, from himself

52 Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 43.
55 Ollman, Alienation, 169.
56 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 122-3. See also Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 259-60.
and from humanity.” Marx’s analysis of capitalist political economy emphasises that the “alienating circumstances” constituting this stage of development, typified by wage labour and its relationship to private property, transformed man’s self-creative activity – objectification – into a “process of de-humanisation.” This process, he argues, is rooted in the very performance of labour, which

appears in the sphere of political economy as a vitiation of the worker, objectification as a loss and as servitude to the object, and appropriation as alienation ... The worker puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the less he possesses. What is embodied in the product of his labour is no longer his own. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.

As such, the activity which structures the daily life of the working class – labour – and which Marx believed inextricable from the essence of man – menschliches Dasein – is transformed into an activity of alienation.

The capitalist mode of production demands that the species life of all mankind be transformed under the sign of commercial exchange into a society of tradesmen in competition. Thus all members of society are alienated from one another. For Marx, however, it is the working class which, by the very nature of its relationship to the mode of production as the “class of concrete labour”, experiences alienation in “the most extreme form.” Marx considered the alienation of the proletarian to be the most extreme because his labour under capitalism neither belongs to, nor fulfills, his essential species being. Firstly, work is not the freely determined, self-creative activity of the worker, but the product of coercion: “His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs ... it is not his own work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to

59 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 105.
60 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 102. See Marx, Grundrisse, 831-2: "To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity – that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital – to that extent, this twisting and inversion [Verdrehung und Verkehrung] is a real [phänomenal], not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists."
62 Marx, ‘Alienated Labour,’ Early Writings, 134.
63 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 26.
64 Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 46.
65 See Ollman, Alienation, 136-140.
Moreover, the products of labour do not belong to the worker in any tangible sense: "The worker's products are alien to him in that he cannot use them to keep alive or to engage in further productive activity ... all his products are the property of another." Finally, the worker is himself transformed into a commodity by the sale of his labour: "Production does not only produce man as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the form of a commodity; in conformity with this situation it produces him as a mentally and physically dehumanized being ... Its product is the self-conscious and self-acting commodity." For Marx, the exploitation of wage labour and the accumulation of capital are the defining characteristics of the capitalist mode of production. These phenomena sustain the circulation of commodities - qua commodity capital - and of money - as money capital - on the capitalist market. In these conditions of production and exchange, the use value of a commodity is superseded by its exchange value; its value in exchange with other commodities or money - "the most advanced form of exchange value." The ultimate determinant of a commodity's value, however, corresponds to the total quantity of abstract social labour, or labour-time, necessary for its production. The capitalist mode of production necessitates that such labour be transformed into wage labour: labour sold by the worker to the capitalist for use in the process of production. In exchange, the worker obtains his means of subsistence, and inversely, his labour power is preserved for use by the capitalist. Capitalist production, or the cycle of reproduction, is composed of a relationship between constant capital - the instruments of and materials consumed during production - and variable capital, the sum of wage labour required for production. By its nature, this process consumes a quantity of labour power greater than what is required for the maintenance of the wage labourer, generating a surplus value to be extracted by the capitalist and consequently, no value for the labourer. Surplus value is a new value resulting from surplus labour,

66 Marx, 'Alienated Labour,' Early Writings, 125.
67 Ollman, Alienation, 143.
68 Marx, 'The Relationship of Private Property,' Early Writings, 138-9. Author's italics. Italics in quotations are the author's or translator's own unless otherwise indicated.
69 This summary draws upon the following: Bottomore, Karl Marx, 11-19; Bottomore and Goode, eds. Readings in Marxist Sociology, 45-86, 233-242; Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 239-241; Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 61-124; Ollman, Alienation, 166-194; David McLellan, The Thought of Karl Marx, 82-90.
70 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 240.
71 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 129.
72 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 711-724.
73 Marx, Capital, vol. 1; Karl Marx, Wage Labour and Capital (London: Martin Lawrence, 1939), 31-35.
“which has all the charms of something created out of nothing.”\textsuperscript{74} This value represents profit for the capitalist, and consists “in the excess of the total sum of labour contained in the commodity over the sum of labour that is actually paid for.”\textsuperscript{75}

The precondition for the “existence of exchange value, and of commodities themselves”,\textsuperscript{76} is labour in the form of a commodity. Thus labour - which implies a social relationship between men, between man and nature, and between man and himself - becomes not merely a commodity with an exchange value, but the wellspring of all commodities, and of all exchange value. Marx identifies the phenomenon arising from this inverted relationship between man and his objects, as the fetishism of the commodity form:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social ... the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.\textsuperscript{77}

This fetishism underpins the conceptual system of capitalist political economy. And moreover, the fetish character of the commodity comes, in Marx’s view, to typify the social relations of the bourgeois epoch.

By the insistence that its concepts have an “objective, ontological reality ... external to the specific human relations whose organizational principles they try to express”,\textsuperscript{78} capitalist political economy masks human reality. It obscures the source of alienation, which lies not in production itself, but in the transformation of production by means of “‘objective’ laws which regulate human activity.”\textsuperscript{79} As such, the forms of consciousness of bourgeois civil society develop in accordance with, and mediate, the relations of production of an economic system, directed towards the

\textsuperscript{74} Marx, Capital, vol. 1 325.
\textsuperscript{75} Marx, Capital, vol. 1 133.
\textsuperscript{76} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 108.
\textsuperscript{77} Marx, Capital, vol. 1 165.
\textsuperscript{78} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 107.
\textsuperscript{79} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 107.
production and exchange of commodities on a massive scale. Marx held that the “anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy.” This anatomy has already been probed, revealing the skeletal structure of the “real process of production”, and its development from the “simple material production of life” to the basis for forms of social intercourse – relations of value – determined by the capitalist mode of production, and bearing complex forms of alienation. In this view, civil society is the flesh: the site of history, where the actions of the State as the abstract representation of bourgeois property relations are rendered effective. It is from the body of civil society that “all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics … trace their origins”, and it is the flesh upon which they leave their scars.

Marx considered bourgeois civil society – bürgerliche Gesellschaft – to be the sphere of private property, embracing “the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces … it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality and inwardly must organise itself as State.” Civil society comprises different forms of social intercourse, among them relations between classes – the bourgeoisie and proletariat – as well as relations of family, nationality, and religion. From Hegel, Marx educed the family and civil society to be systems of particular interest – dependent upon, yet opposed to, one another – while the state laid claim to the expression of a system of general interest. In contrast with the family and civil society, Marx argues that the state comes to represent “an external necessity, an authority relative to which the laws and interests of the family and civil society are subordinate and dependent.” As the independent form of common interest, the state is the social formation through which “the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests, and in which the whole civil society of an epoch is epitomised.” Nevertheless, Marx viewed the state’s “claim to appear as the general interest … to be a cloak for class

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81 Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 49.
84 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 25. See also Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 187-188.
86 Karl Marx, ‘From the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1843),’ in Joseph O'Malley, ed., Early Political Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 5
87 Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 5.
88 Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 45.
89 Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 78.
interests,“ and further held that the political sphere of the State merely reflected the class differences of civil society – a rationalisation of property relations – and that the class differences of civil society engender political differences.\textsuperscript{91}

Civil society and the state account for the social and political processes of life, but not wholly the spiritual or ideological. Marx argued that forms of consciousness – “the production of ideas, of conceptions ... the mental intercourse of men”\textsuperscript{92} – are also determined by the mode of production of material life. Through its power in the economic domain, whether manifest in civil society or state, the ideas of the bourgeoisie – epitomised in bourgeois political economy – become, for Marx, the ruling ideas of the age. These ruling ideas dominate the ideological sphere of bourgeois civil society and are reflected in the material behaviour and relations of that society:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.\textsuperscript{93}

Thus, the forms of consciousness which emerge under the reigning conditions of capitalist production are to some extent determined by and, moreover, mediate and reflect those conditions. Above all, bourgeois ideology functions to rationalise, and to render normative, the alienated and dehumanized social being of the working class. From the standpoint of bourgeois thought, “a definite social relation between men” must ever assume “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”\textsuperscript{94}

The diverse forms of alienation – economic, social, political, and speculative (religious and philosophical) – which manifest in these social structures are most keenly experienced by the working class. Moreover, the working class is a product of the social division of labour and the historical expansion of the productive forces of mankind. For Marx, it is the last such product, as man “cannot be reduced to the status of a mere

\textsuperscript{90} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 25.
\textsuperscript{91} Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 72. See also Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 25.
\textsuperscript{92} Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 37.
\textsuperscript{93} Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 60.
\textsuperscript{94} Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 165.
object ... but possesses that reflexiveness of self-consciousness which enables him to recoil from the most extreme state of alienation.” As the class of labour, whose labour is so mired in exploitation and alienation, whose human being – qua menschliches Dasein – is so thoroughly dehumanised, the proletariat stands both in the centre of bourgeois society, and wholly outside of it. Denied their place at the table of history, the proletariat is a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society, an estate that is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it; a sphere that can claim no historical title but only a human title.

Because capital reproduces itself both as a social relation between men, and as an ideological force, because it transforms the face of society as a whole – universalising a particular mode of production, and particular sets of social relations – it brings into existence everywhere, a working class which everywhere experiences alienation. The proletariat becomes, for Marx, the only class capable of achieving a state of disalienation – Aufhebung – of instaurating the universality and freedom of mankind: “he sees in the proletariat the contemporary, and final, realization of universality.”

As the philosophical kernel which Marx had inherited from Hegel, the concept of alienation – containing within it the notions of objectification, mediation, and reification – bore the fruit of Western Marxism. Largely inaugurated by Lukács, who sought to extend Marx’s concept of alienation, the historical self-realisation of the working class became its goal. Western Marxism was differentiated from the so-called Orthodox, Soviet Marxism by the Western Marxists’ reception of Hegel as well as Engels. The intellectual soil of interregnum France during the 1920s and 30s proved particularly fertile; Hegelian seeds had already been sewn there by Kojève, for whom alienation as “an essential moment” of the “authentic individual”, and as a stage of becoming in the journey of the

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95 Hippolyte, Studies on Marx and Hegel, 136.
96 Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction, Early Political Writings, 69.
97 Avirneri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 59.
99 See Victor Zizza, Georg Lukács’ Marxism: Alienation, Dialectics, Revolution: A Study in Utopia and Ideology (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 144: “The concept of ‘alienation’ is not only central to Lukács’ entire thinking, it is also essential toward a more profound understanding of Marxism which Lukács’ views have been significantly instrumental in mediating.”
“unhappy consciousness” had been key. Kojève intertwined Hegel with Marx, re-asserting the importance of labour and self-consciousness to both thinkers, and further preparing the ground for a renewed reception of Marx’s philosophic writings. The result was an abundant harvest, with the “recovery of Marx’s early writings in the late 1920s and the subsequent publication of the Grundrisse ... [which] demonstrated for many that Marx had indeed been what Lukács and others had said he was: a radical Hegelian.”

It was precisely this tradition, and its development in France, which nourished Debord’s understanding of Marx and the concept of alienation.

For Lukács, Marxism as a critical philosophy implied a method of historical criticism with the power to dissolve the “rigid, unhistorical, natural appearance of social institutions”, and to reveal “their historical origins and [show] therefore that they are subject to history.”

Lukács saw in the concept of commodity fetishism the process whereby the commodity form came to occupy and influence the “total outer and inner life of society”, becoming the dominant form in society with the advent of modern capitalism. He describes as reification this phenomenon whereby the commodity form attains a universality and becomes “responsible both objectively and subjectively for the abstraction of the human labour incorporated in commodities.”

This process results from historical shifts in the mode of production, specifically the rationalisation of work and the further division of labour within work processes, which further degrade the relationship between the worker and his product. On the one hand, the production process is no longer determined by human measures, but by seemingly objective laws with purely quantitative demands. On the other, the fragmentation of the object of production through a series of

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105 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 84.
106 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 86.
107 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 87. Zitta suggests that “reification [is] expressive of the commodity-condition of man - the proletarian form of alienation.” Zitta, Georg Lukács’ Marxism, 152-3. Jacoby calls reification a “form of unconsciousness, a form specific to capitalism. The capitalist commodity structured the consciousness of society by burying the human and historical relations under neutral and quantitative relations: This was the primal bourgeois myth that repelled insight.” Jacoby, Dialectic of Deception, 119.
108 Taylorism.
mechanical work processes, engenders the fragmentation of the labouring subjects and the previously ‘organic’ relations between them:

In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalised and mechanised his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.\(^{109}\)

As the commodity form becomes universally dominant, the systematic rationalisation of commodity production leads to the extension into every facet of social life of the objective laws of capitalist production. Time is one such facet which is crucial for Lukács. In the process of reification, time itself is subordinated to things: “Time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’ (the reified, mechanically objectified ‘performance’ of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space.”\(^{110}\) Every member of society, Lukács argues, thus becomes an “atomised individual”, subjected to a “unified economic process ... determined by unified laws.”\(^{111}\)

If the progressive development of capitalism implies the gradual integration of social forms – the socialisation of society\(^{112}\) – then capitalist society “places all who live in it under the common denomination of work and in this sense is homogeneous. Even the wage system places all those who participate in it within a single market.”\(^{113}\) For Lukács, this resurrects the question of alienation and its historical supersession by the self-conscious, self-creating subject of history, the sole class who Marx himself believed capable of fulfilling this historical mission:

Only when a historical situation has arisen in which a class must understand society if it is to assert itself; only when the fact that a class understands itself means that it understands society as a whole and when, in consequence, the class becomes both the subject and

\(^{109}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 89.

\(^{110}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 90.

\(^{111}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 89-92.


the object of knowledge ... Such a situation has in fact arisen with the entry of the proletariat into history.\(^{114}\)

In the historical situation identified by Lukács, dominated as it is by the universality of the commodity, the “fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole; indeed this fate must become universal as otherwise industrialisation could not develop in this direction.”\(^{115}\) The gulf separating the ‘is’ from the ‘ought’ – universal commodity relations from the flourishing of man’s fully human being, i.e. the restoration of totality – can, for Lukács, only be bridged when the “subject of history, the proletariat” objectifies its “ethical principles in the concrete mores of Communist society. Recognizing itself in the world it [has] created ... no longer ... subjected to the moral alienation plaguing bourgeois culture.”\(^{116}\)

The problems of alienation, reification, and the historical subjectivity of the proletariat gained particular traction in the intellectual milieu of postwar France. In spite of the penetration of some of Marx’s early writings in the preceding two decades,\(^{117}\) the suppression of Marxist writings during the war and occupation, as well as the ideological reach of the PCF – whose official philosophy, diamat, was a Stalinist confection – made any “real reading of Marx [im]possible in France until after the Second World War.”\(^{118}\) The problem faced by Marxists in the West was twofold; they were confronted by the so-called scientific, official Marxism of the Communist Parties,\(^{119}\) and also required a critical theory which could

account for the development of capitalism since 1900 – oligopolistic concentration, the state’s entry into the market, advanced technology leading toward automation, the transformation of the workforce toward increasingly skilled mental labour, the direct manipulation of needs through advertising, the pacification of the traditional proletariat, and the transformation of the areas of gratification from work to consumption and leisure.\(^{120}\)

Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness had a profound influence on the course of French Marxism after the war, vitalising thinkers such as those among the Arguments group, some of whom had been grappling with these same issues since the thirties. Merleau-Ponty was one of the first in France who

\(^{114}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 112.

\(^{115}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 91. Further, Lukács describes the proletariat as the only class able to “see society from the centre”, recalling the notion that its labour is the concrete foundation of bourgeois civil society, while the proletariat remains exterior to civil society. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 69.

\(^{116}\) Jay, Marxism and Totality, 109-10.

\(^{117}\) Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 42: the 1844 Manuscripts and The German Ideology in 1937; the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in 1935; the Grundrisse did not appear until 1967.

\(^{118}\) Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 36-42.

\(^{119}\) See: Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 41: “diamat reflected the dualism and the materialism of a society that was ‘conquering nature’ under the leadership of a small elite.”

\(^{120}\) Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 41.
drew attention to the importance of Lukács’ ideas, suggesting that they presented the "basis for the reintegration for the world with man."\textsuperscript{121}

Those involved with Arguments - particularly Henri Lefebvre, who had been among the first transmitters of the early Marx in French - were some of the most receptive to, and critical of, Lukács’ Marxism.\textsuperscript{122} The Argumentistes were almost all concerned with the problem of alienation, and in different ways, wished to answer "the charge of economic determinism"\textsuperscript{123} laid against Marxism by detractors who perceived it through the mechanical materialism and economic determinism of Kautsky, Lenin and Stalin.\textsuperscript{124} Both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, influenced by the existentialist reading of Hegel introduced by Kojève, as well as by Heidegger’s phenomenology, critically confronted the same problems.\textsuperscript{125} The founders of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Castoriadis and Lefort, were likewise drawn to the humanism of the early Marx, and the problematic of proletarian subjectivity re-introduced by Lukács.\textsuperscript{126} History and Class Consciousness heralded a philosophical renewal for unorthodox French Marxists,\textsuperscript{127} and threw down the gauntlet to the shibboleths of diamat by "[restoring] man as the subject of history",\textsuperscript{128} and by treating alienation as the central critical category for Marxists.

In his search for the internal movement of a humanist, Hegelian dialectic in Marx, Lefebvre had challenged the orthodoxy of the PCF well before the appearance in France of "Western Marxism".\textsuperscript{129} In Dialectical Materialism (1939), Lefebvre identifies the ideological character of political economy which analyses "given reality ... [through] 'general abstract relations': division of labor, value, money, etc."\textsuperscript{130} The analytic standpoint of bourgeois thought, he argues, leads only to a misunderstanding of concrete conditions presupposed by economic categories,

\textsuperscript{121} Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 33.

\textsuperscript{122} Kostas Axelos, for example, participated in the translation of Lukács History and Class Consciousness into French.


\textsuperscript{124} See: Howard, The Marxian Legacy, 153-221; Jay, Marxism and Totality, 331-384; Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 109-205.


\textsuperscript{127} See: Howard, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 44-5. See also: Judt, Marxism and the French Left, 219: "In the meantime, a renewed faith in the active human subject, taken together with a reading of Marx’s texts on alienation and the nature of ideology, cast an uncomfortable light on the distinctly unawoken consciousnesses of contemporaries."

\textsuperscript{128} See: Jay, Marxism and Totality, 294-6. See also Judt, Marxism and the French Left, 221: “Following the movement interne of Marx’s research in preference to the formalized (published) statements (Lefebvre).”

\textsuperscript{129} Henri Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, trans. John Sturrock (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 87.
as being the product of abstract determinations: a “one-sided [relation] of
an already given concrete and living whole.” Against such total
abstraction, Lefebvre seized on the humanist ontology of the early Marx,
seeing in Marx’s conception of Man,

both the subject and the object of Becoming. He is the subject who is
broken up into partial activities and scattered determinations and who
surmounts this dispersion. He is the subject of action, as well as its
final object, its product even if it does not seem to produce external
objects. The total man is the living subject-object, who is first of
all torn asunder, dissociated and chained to necessity and
abstraction. Through this tearing apart, he moves towards freedom; he
becomes Nature, but free. He becomes a totality, like Nature, but by
bringing it under control. The total man is ‘de-alienated’ man.

For Lefebvre, the concept of total man indicated the supersession of
alienation in all of its extant forms, the restoration of a “normative
totality”, and moreover fulfilled the open, dynamic teleology outlined by
Marx in his early writings.

Sartre, despite numerous intellectual contortions, also looked to Marx
to strengthen his own conceptions of consciousness and freedom, desiring
to “preserve the concept of freedom and still account for the actual
distortions of man in society.” Drawing from the well of phenomenology,
Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) proposed a model of freedom which
was not only at the “centre of human existence”, but also absolute, and
individual, rather than historically and socially contingent. As such, he
proposed a non-dialectical ontology in which existence precedes essence:
“Man is the being who is not what he is, and is what he is not.” By
turning a form of alienation into a consequence of freedom, Sartre’s early
thought offered no antidote other than embracing the unhappy consciousness
as an absolute condition of freedom. Sartre pursued this notion of freedom,
continuously modifying his thought in the face of criticism, as he entered
into and escaped from the orbit of the PCF. Unable to combine
existentialism and Marxism effectively even after his encounter with
Lukács, the Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) is
resigned:

Sartre ... did attempt to include an ‘anti-dialectic’ of passivity, in
which groups constituted by collective subjective praxis were
transformed back into serial relations of the practico-inert, in his

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131 Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, 87-8.
definition of historical intelligibility. But even if history might be seen as meaningful in these terms, the results were a far cry from the normative model of fulfilled totality that had inspired earlier Western Marxists. For Sartre, as most commentators have remarked, there seemed to be no really basic difference as there had been for Hegelian Marxists, between objectification and alienation. All praxis, he implied, leads to the practico-inert; subjective élan always turns into reified institutions.\(^\text{139}\)

The practico-inert is a pessimistic fulfillment of reification, whereby neither human consciousness nor activity can overcome alienation in history.

The trajectory of Merleau-Ponty quickly diverged from that of Sartre as he grasped more firmly the Hegelian element in Marx. Viewing Marx’s thought in light of Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty realised “that existence was an historical phenomenon in which concrete situations always enveloped individual subjectivities.”\(^\text{140}\) He saw in Capital a concrete manifestation of Hegel’s phenomenology, concerned with “the working of the economy and the realization of man”,\(^\text{141}\) and accounting for the Hegelian conception of historical movement toward truth, culminating in the unity of being and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty disavowed the Leninist “Marxism of antitheses” prevalent in Russia, and which was virulently opposed to the “German language Marxist synthetic philosophy” of Lukács and Korsch, among others.\(^\text{142}\) He embraced the humanist dialectic of Marx:

Marx’s innovation is that he takes this fact [the reintegration of the world with man] as fundamental, whereas, for Hegel, alienation is still an operation of the spirit on itself and thus is already overcome when it manifests itself. When Marx says that he has put the dialectic back on its feet or that his dialectic is the ‘contrary’ of Hegel’s, this cannot be simply a matter of exchanging the roles of the spirit and the ‘matter’ of history, giving to the ‘matter’ of history the very functions Hegel accorded to the spirit ... In Marx, spirit becomes a thing, while things become saturated with spirit. History’s course is a becoming of meanings transformed into forces or institutions. This is why there is an inertia of history in Marx and also an appeal to human invention in order to complete the dialectic. Marx cannot therefore transfer to, and lay to the account of, matter the same rationality which Hegel ascribed to spirit. The meaning of history appears in which he calls ‘human matter,’ an ambiguous setting where ideas and rationality do not find the de jure existence which in Hegel they owed to the dogma of totality as completed system and to the dogma of philosophy as the intellectual possession of this system.\(^\text{143}\)

Merleau-Ponty recognises that the historical process outlined by Marx relies on the “devenir-société de la société” – Vergesellschaftung der

\(^{139}\) Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 335.


Gesellschaft - or the becoming social (socialisation) of society.\textsuperscript{144} Human consciousness is suffused in the social formations, institutions, and things created to serve human needs; human society is the result of a continuous, historical process of socialisation - a growing relationship of man to man\textsuperscript{145} - at the end of which lies a form of universality and freedom rooted in man's own being.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of History and Class Consciousness, into which he weaves his own considerations on Marx, was significant for that work's reception in France. In spite of his praise for the Marxian dialectic, Merleau-Ponty remained pessimistic about its prognostications: "Merleau-Ponty's unwillingness to make reason a guarantor of the coherence of history as a longitudinal totality extended as well to his normative notion of totality. Whether or not the perfect unity of subject and object posited by Hegel and Hegelian Marxists like Lukács could ever be fully achieved, [he] refused to say."\textsuperscript{146} He did, however, draw out the logical consequences of reification as a phenomenon: "The marxism of the young Marx as well as the "Western" Marxism of 1923 lacked a means of expressing the inertia of the infrastructures, the resistance of economic and even natural conditions, and the swallowing-up of 'personal relationships' in 'things'. History as they described it lacked density and allowed its meanings to appear too soon. They had to learn the slowness of mediations."\textsuperscript{147} In the last analysis, Merleau-Ponty did not believe that the anti-historical inertia of institutions could be overcome by proletarian subjectivity as Lukács had: "when Marxism focuses everything through the perspective of the proletariat, it focuses on a principle of universal strife and intensifies human questioning instead of ending it."\textsuperscript{148} Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's notion of inertia was a critical counterpoint to Sartre's practico-inert, and a crucial contribution for the thinking of alienation.

French Western Marxism was refined in response to the challenges posed by existentialism, and many of its thinkers relit "on some form of existentialism, with its concern with the human subject, its concept of freedom, and, above all, the primacy it gave to time or historicity as the ground of human reality."\textsuperscript{149} Lefebvre rejected both Sartre's vacillations

\textsuperscript{144} Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 35-38.
\textsuperscript{145} Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 39.
\textsuperscript{146} Jay, Marxism and Totality, 369.
\textsuperscript{147} Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 64. See also: Jay, Marxism and Totality, 369.
\textsuperscript{148} Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 57-8.
\textsuperscript{149} Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 43.
and Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophy of ambiguity”, and sought a way forward in the new France which had begun to emerge; a France described variously as a “consumer society … a post-industrial society … a technological society … [or as] an affluent society.” In the notion of the quotidienne, Lefebvre encapsulated a new stage in the development of alienation – in the context of what he later called the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption – wherein “superstructure and base interpenetrated each other and lost their distinct otherness”, and the masses viewed society with “boredom and passivity.” In his Critique of Everyday Life, which he revised in 1958, he outlines the dialectical movement of the subject:

The proletarian ‘condition’ has a dual aspect – On the one hand it tends to overwhelm and crush the (individual) proletarian under the weight of the toil, the institutions, and the ideas which are indeed intended to crush him. But at the same time, and in another respect, because of his incessant (everyday) contact with the real and with nature through work, the proletarian is endowed with fundamental health and a sense of reality which other social groups lose in so far as they become detached from practical creative activity.

This echoes Marx’s view that, as the class of concrete labour, the existence of the proletariat imbricated their fundamental humanity, and so opposed them to the alienating conditions of their work. Moreover, Lefebvre presupposes a movement of the self-realisation of man which to some extent accounts for the problems raised by the existentialist thinkers: “The movement of self-realization of the human proceeds from the subject (desires, aspirations, ideas) to objects, to the world – and equally from the object to the subject … this realization may be described equally as a deeper subjectivization – a more lucid awareness – and as an objectification, a world of material, controlled objects.” This unity of subject and object recalls the humanisation of nature, as being a humanisation of man himself.

Lefebvre pursued alienation in all categories of everyday life. His identification of the semantic field, for example, revealed within language an abstraction of one sector of lived experience from totality. As a form of mediation, language (including the visual) is, for Lefebvre, saturated

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150 Jay, Marxism and Totality, 382-4.
152 Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 244-5.
153 Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 247.
with concepts which are communicated both consciously and unconsciously.

The "signal" is the most important such element in Lefebvre's formulation:

In everyone's experience, two lights (red and green) are the prototype of the signal. Binary and disjunctive, they obey strictly logical laws, 'all/nothing', 'either/or'. They do not allow for intermediaries, transitions, or evolution. They open a way forward or they close it. They indicate a fork in the road or points on the railway line. They offer an operation and suppress another ... Signals are entirely external to consciousness and leave the active 'subject' externalized and passive, like an inert object at their command. Signals must be simple and obvious ... but they must also have a perfect stability ... constant and repetitive in essence, the signal is automatic, it is always there.157

The significance of the signal as the dual expression of "perfect rationality and perfect meaninglessness"158 is revealed when Lefebvre points to its birth with the advent of industrialisation. Under the auspices of industrial society, the signal invades everyday life, which becomes "peopled by innumerable signals. Each one programmes a routine, exactly like a calculator, regulating patterns of conduct and behaviour."159 The reality of such a situation is the transformation of everything - consumption and production included - into signals: "the repetitive gestures of labour and its technical organization,"160 and, it might be added, the repetitive gestures of consumption and its technocratic organisation.

Another crucial, but under-examined contribution to French Marxism in this period emerged from the camp of psychoanalysis. Joseph Gabel had been, like his contemporaries, motivated by the appearance in French of Lukács' History and Class Consciousness. Gabel drew parallels between "a reified, non-dialectical perception in the socio-political sphere (false consciousness) and the clinical-psychiatric sphere (schizophrenia)."161 Reification, Gabel asserts, creates "above all, a world of quantity. The values of exchange and of socialized work are quantitative."162 The experience of reified reality translates, for Gabel, into a "particular logic ... naturally situated at the opposite extreme to dialectical logic."163

Recalling that in the process of reification, the qualitative element of

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162 Gabel, False Consciousness, 148.
163 Gabel, False Consciousness, 149.
time as the sphere of lived, historical experience is replaced by the quantitative demands of technical rationality, Gabel argues that reified thought imputes an ahistorical logic in the human subject:

As a prisoner of a universe where space takes the place of duration, man in the reified world cannot understand history as the expression of creativity and spontaneity ... Reified existence, where everything is measured in quantity, does not understand the event and substitutes the notion of catastrophe ... history appears as a function of a demiurgic action.164

Crushed beneath the weight of an economic universe in which the worker cannot identify with the products of his own activity, Gabel argues that the worker suffers a form of schizophrenia. Subjectivity becomes identified with frozen things, fixed in time, rather than dynamic, human Being: “the rationalization of labour under capitalism [transforms] the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to a dimension of space.”165

These permutations of Marxian humanism were part of the generative force that created the ‘New Left’ in France. And if Marcuse had been the father of the ‘New Left’166 in the world at large, then in France the paternity was uncertain, as these wide-ranging currents of thought no doubt suggest. Marcuse did contribute some of the genetic material, however, in his analysis of the “oppressive totalization that was contemporary society.”167 Advanced industrial society, as Marcuse called it, brought into existence

[technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and coordination ... [which] creates forms of life (and of power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system and to defeat or refute all protest.168

Marcuse identifies in this stage of development, a growing integration of social formations: society, state, and the political sphere.169 The consequence of a society in which the basic principle of organisation is “that of a machine process”,170 is the transformation of the population into “objects of total administration”,171 whose needs both real and falsified are satisfied by the apparatus. The result is an inverted totality of

164 Gabel, False Consciousness, 151.
167 Jay, Marxism and Totality, 220-1. See also: Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism, 3-4 on the absorption of Marcuse’s thought into 1960s political culture.
169 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, xlv.
170 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 3-4.
171 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 7.
social mimesis: an immediate identification between the individual and the society which has technocratically determined every facet of his outer and inner life. Marcuse considers this stage, in which ideology is absorbed into reality, to manifest an advanced form of alienation: "There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the ‘false consciousness’ of their rationality becomes the true consciousness." Advanced capitalism holds its sublation in abeyance, by means of the automation of labour, which "reinforces the negative position of the working class", the massive increase in productivity which permits "increased consumption," and finally by the self-alienation of the worker who is subject to these new ideological and material depredations.

Debord joined this chorus of voices whose incantations on alienation, even with their varying accents and philosophical counterpoints, continued to echo the liturgy devised by Marx in his earliest phase. La Société du Spectacle (1967) was a clear attempt to confront the many contradictions in the evolving Western Marxist conception of alienation, especially as it had emerged in France. Alienation was a central theme for Debord - the "essence and anchor of the existing society" - and his concept of the spectacle is a synthetic variation on this theme, in which he attempts to overcome those dissonant strains in Western Marxism that remained unreconciled. Debord does not merely "hew narrowly to the Lukácsian tradition" in his theorisation of the spectacle, but incorporates motifs from all of the thinkers discussed here; ultimately it is his engagement with the corpus of Marx that arranges his thinking. Debord’s assertion that, “understood in its totality,” the spectacle “is at once the result and the project of the existing mode of production”[§6], grounds the concept of spectacle firmly in the French soil of post-war, Hegelian, ‘heterodox’ Marxism. The spectacle is a totality, but therefore, no more

172 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 11.
173 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 31.
174 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 49.
175 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 51-2.
176 This is to disagree with Anselm Jappe’s formulation that Debord was “one of the last voices of an old kind of social criticism, Debord was at the same time one of the first voices of a new stage.” Debord participated in an ongoing social criticism which was in a constant state of renewal - without any clear ‘epistemic break’ between old and new - as it encountered new phases in the mode of production. See: Jappe, Guy Debord, 18.
177 See: Jappe, Guy Debord, 4.
178 Whether he was successful in this endeavour is another matter.
179 Jappe, Guy Debord, 5.
180 And more beyond.
181 See: Jappe, Guy Debord, 9; Jay, Marxism and Totality, 289-90.
than the “totality of its constituent elements”[SduS §63] - and is itself an integrated, constituent element of the existing mode of production. Moreover, it is a false totality which must be sublated by the project for a conscious history[SduS §80] in order to actualise the normative totality - the unity of man with his own conscious being - of man’s dynamic and self-creative species-life:

"History become actuality no longer has a conclusion.”[SduS §80]

Debord re-affirms the Marxian ontology - the relationship between man and the object world mediated by purposive activity - and philosophy of history, while at the same time criticising Sartre’s existentialist position, and thereby assimilating it into his own:

Man, “the negative being who is, uniquely, insofar as he negates Being,” is analogous with time. Man’s appropriation of his specific, natural character, is as much his grasp of the unfolding world. "History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of the natural into the human” (Marx). Inversely this "natural history" exists effectively only inasmuch as the process of human history, of the element identifiable with all that is historic; as in the range of the modern telescope which captures in time the passing of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in its historical form.[SduS §125] Natural history, or the unfolding of natural relationships in time, acquires its historical form through the cumulative activity of mankind:

Specific, historical motion ... begins with the slow and imperceptible formation of "the genuine character of man," this "nature emerging from human history - in the generative action of humanity." Although this human society had mastered language and specialised labour, even if it was already the product of its own history, it lacked the consciousness of anything beyond a perpetual present.[SduS §125]

The humanisation of nature is not only an objective fact, for Debord, but a temporal one: "The temporalisation of man, as much as it is accomplished by the mediation of a given society is, equally, a humanisation of time.”[SduS §125]

The humanisation of both the object world - nature - and of time, engenders in man a specific consciousness of his being. Debord cleaves to the teleological vision of man’s development, which treats history as the unfolding of human potential, culminating in the self-establishment of man as the self-mediating being of nature:

It is in being thrown into history, confronted with and sharing in labour and the struggles which shape it, that man is compelled to face his relations with sober senses [...] The subject of history can be

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nothing less than living man in the process of self-creation, becoming master and possessor of his world which is history, and being conscious of his activity.[SduS §74]

The expansion of human capacities to the point of becoming master and possessor of the world and its history, hinges on a progressive, historical specialisation, or social division of labour; a separation which, Debord states, is “the alpha and omega of the spectacle.”[SduS §25]

Debord implicitly accepts the outline of historical development - the unfolding division of labour - composed by Marx, and seeks to elaborate on it by exploring more deeply the category of time. Time - as a historical category - manifests coherently only when the bourgeoisie achieves the domination of society as a whole from within “the core sector of social life, the economy, over which this class already held sway.”[SduS §123] The victory of the bourgeoisie, Debord argues, heralded the victory of “profoundly historical time”[SduS §141], because it was a form of time inextricably bound with the “time of economic production which transformed society permanently, and from top to bottom.”[SduS §141] The irreversible time[SduS §143] which accompanied the bourgeois mode of production, extirpates all other instantiations of time and thus reveals the general movement of history as process of man’s universalisation. Bourgeois thought is insensible to this movement - unable to identify the real foundations of historical time in political economy - and so represents only a blind prehistory; this mystification of time is the only thing that the “commodity economy has truly democratised.”[SduS §141] The development of capitalism ushers in a global unity of irreversible time: for the first time, universal history - the lived experience of time through shared activity - becomes possible, yet remains only in potentia.[SduS §145] The capitalist mode of production represents a refusal of humanised time - history - because the time of production is a dehumanised, alienated form of time.[SduS §163]

The spectacle, for Debord, “is at once the result and the project of the existing mode of production ... It is the heart of the unreality of social reality ... the spectacle constitutes the present model of dominant social life.”[SduS §6] It as much the product of separation as it is a phenomenon of separation: “All the activity of those societies in which

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modern conditions of production reign, announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.” [SduS §1] Spectacular man is arguably separated from society (social relations), from history (time), from himself, and from his own consciousness of himself. While the concept, according to Debord, unifies and explains a diverse range of phenomena – alienations – it is, considered in its own terms, “the affirmation of appearances and the affirmation of all human life, which is to say social life, as mere appearance.” [SduS §10] Essentially protean, the spectacle denotes a more or less fluid coalescence of the economy, civil society, state, ideology, and epistemology: “The spectacle simultaneously presents itself as the whole of society, a section of society, and as an instrument of unification.” [SduS §3] It is not simply a “system of representation”, however, “but a social relation between men mediated by representation.” [SduS §5] In the spectacle, ideology is indistinguishable from epistemology: “the ideological pretense acquires a tedious positivistic definitude … no longer conceivable as anything other than a recognised “epistemic base” which claims to be divorced from all ideological phenomena.” [SduS §213] As such, the spectacle follows the logic of “total ideology” [§214], but it is ultimately rooted in, and inseparable from, material conditions of production and consumption.

These conditions, were the product of a “second industrial revolution,” [SduS §42] representing a new phase in capitalist development. Mandel characterises its results as such:

Far from representing a ‘post-industrial society’, late capitalism thus constitutes generalised universal industrialisation for the first time in history. Mechanisation, standardisation, over-specialisation and parcellisation of labour, which in the past determined only the real commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life. [188]

Debord would have agreed with Mandel’s argument that the description “in no way suggests that capitalism has changed in essence”. [189] Debord outlined the following core elements of the capitalist mode of production in this period: an ever more extensive market [SduS §25]; “automation … the most advanced sector of modern industry” [SduS §45]; “The tertiary sector, the services” [SduS §45]; an abundance of commodities, engendering a “surplus of

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185 By forswearing the concept of a “system of representations”.

186 See Marcuse above.


188 Mandel, Late Capitalism, 387.

189 Mandel, Late Capitalism, 10.

collaboration from the worker" [SduS §43]; a conflict both real and ideological between “developed” and “underdeveloped” economic spheres [SduS §57, 104, 113]; and a concentration of capital at the competing poles of “existing capitalist power” - the bourgeois West and bureaucratic Eastern Bloc [SduS §113]. These conclusions incorporate Debord’s extensive readings on society and economy, including works by Ante Ciliga,191 Sidney Hook,192 J.K. Galbraith,193 Vance Packard,194 David Riesman,195 and Bruno Rizzi.196

For Debord, the alienated nature and alienating conditions of labour, have scarcely been modified by the advent of automation:197

With automation, which is at once the most advanced sector of modern industry, and the model which perfectly enumerates its practice, it has become necessary for the world of commodities to overcome the following contradiction: the technical apparatus which objectively elides labour must at the same time preserve wage labour as a commodity, and as the crucible of the commodity. In order that automation, or any other less radical means of unleashing the productive capacities of labour, do not effectively diminish the quantity of social labour fundamental to the scale of such a society, it is necessary to create new sources of employment. The tertiary sector, the service industry, is the immense expansion of the rank and file of the army of distribution and vendition of current commodities. [SduS §45]

The total quantity of wage labour deployed in the service of capital has not been diminished by automation, but has increased. There is a further division of labour on a massive scale, between the producers of commodities and the vast numbers of workers required to distribute and exchange them. The alienation of the individual worker is intensified by a further division of labour within the work process, and labour as an activity is rendered passive, or contemplative: “with the enlargement of productive capacities by means of the unremitting refinement of work into a parcellisation of gestures, the worker is subordinated to the motion of the machines – serving a relentlessly sprawling market.” [SduS §25] Despite the refinement of the division of labour, the workers – Debord’s spectators – remain bound to one another by an essential social relation this is merely masked by the reification of this relation: “That which binds the

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191 Guy Debord on Ciliga, Lénine et la Révolution, Box A20, Folder 6, “Marxisme,” Fiches de lecture, Les Fonds Debord, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Debord’s notes on Ciliga concern the formation of the Soviet bureaucracy and its analogy to the bourgeoisie in the West.
192 Debord on Hook [pour SduS], Box A20, Folder 6, “Marxisme.”
193 Debord on Galbraith, Box A20, Folder 5, “Philosophie, sociologie, etc.” Debord is primarily interested in Galbraith’s analysis of commodity production and consumption, and the emergence of the (Keynesian) public services.
194 Debord on Packard, Box A20, Folder 5, “Philosophie, sociologie, etc.”
195 Debord on Riesman, La foule solitaire, Box A20, Folder 5, “Philosophie, sociologie, etc.”
196 Debord on Rizzi, La Bureaucratisation du Monde, Box A20, Folder 4, “Historique.”
197 On alienated production in Debord, see also: Jappe, Guy Debord, 29.
spectators together is their irreversible relationship to the centre [the commodity] from whence their isolation originates.” [SduS §29]

Debord enlarges the Marxian concept of the cycle of reproduction, to encompass consumption as a particular site of alienation: “Since the advent of the ‘second industrial revolution,’ alienated consumption has for the masses, become a duty supplementary to alienated production. This is the sum wage labour of a society wholly transformed into the totalising commodity, resolving itself in eternal recurrence.” [SduS §42] The technocratic rationalisation of labour not only separates the production of commodities from any rational human need, but has transformed and extended the conditions of survival - rendering fundamental needs nugatory in appearance - into a universal condition of abundance:

The domain of the commodity, within the sphere of natural economy, constitutes itself as a surplus of survival ... The relentless maneuvering of economic power which transmutes human labour into wage labour, into a wage system [salariat], cumulatively culminates in a superaffluence in which the essential question of survival is categorically resolved, but in a fashion after which it must be repeated ad perpetuum; and more fervently at each instance ... the abundance ... of commodity relations, is nothing more than augmented subsistence. [SduS §40]

The abundance of commodities does not presage the end of subsistence for Debord, but rather represents an abundance of of “commodity relations ... nothing more than augmented subsistence.” [SduS §40] Under such conditions, the commodity is at last unshackled from human need in the form of subsistence: “in its most rudimentary form (alimentation, habitation) [use value] exists only within the prisonhouse of chimerical abundance that is augmented survival, here lies the true source of naturalisation for the general mystification implicit in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer is transformed into a consumer of illusions.” [SduS §47]

These illusions are not phantasms of consciousness, but concrete, material things created in order to meet needs which are not born of man’s essential humanity:

It has unleashed forces which eliminate economic necessity, the heretofore immutable foundation of past societies. Having replaced economic necessity with the necessity of boundless economic expansion, even the most arbitrary recognition and satisfaction of primary human needs is duly displaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which serve only the preponderant pseudo-need: the sustentation and expansion of this economic system. Thus the autonomous economy has forever freed itself from the fetters of primordial human needs in the same fashion as it originated; as the socially unconscious means developed by, yet unknown to man, for the fulfillment of those needs. [SduS §51]

198 See again: Marcuse on “increased consumption.”
Man has power in neither his productive, nor consumptive activities. These are objects of external determination. In this manner the subject, Debord argues, is reduced to a passive, contemplative state: “the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the longer he identifies his needs with the prevailing images of need, the less he understands his own being and desires. The exteriority of the spectacle in relation to active man appears in those gestures, human gestures, which no longer belong to man, but rather to an otherworldly thing which represents them to him.”[SudS §30] Man is transformed into a spectator by his relationship to this spectacle of representation.

The meaning of the spectacle becomes more apparent in this light. Debord’s spectator cannot participate in history – the spectacle is anti-historical – because he does not truly participate in his own life. Merleau-Ponty had suggested that because of man’s active involvement in history, his relationship to history “is not only one of understanding [contemplation] - a relationship of the spectator to the spectacle”.199 The spectator lives less, understands less of his own historical being, because all is determined a priori within the technocratic rationality of the spectacular commodity economy: “the domination of society by ‘sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social,’ endlessly perpetuating themselves in the spectacle.”[SudS §36] The spectator is also a product of the passivity and boredom described by Lefebvre,200 incapable of interpreting the signals which regulate his existence. The signal – finding material expression in the very alien products of man – becomes a “sign of negation.”[SudS §115] The spectator “feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere,”[SudS §30] and moreover the spectacle is everywhere, because the spectator sees it reflected in everything, even himself.

Thus, Debord calls the spectacle “the moment in which the commodity-form has achieved the total occupation of social existence.”[SudS §42] In the spectacle, the commodity-form reproduces itself both at the level of the mode of production, as well as that of the ideal realm – forms of consciousness – as a whole. On the one hand, the reified, autonomous power of the commodity totally occupies all social activity, relations, and institutions: “In the essential motion of the spectacle which subsumes in itself all that which existed dynamically in human activity in order to

200 See again: Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 244-5.
freeze it in a static state, qua objects whose value derives exclusively from an inverse formulation of their human value, we recognise our old nemesis [...] the commodity form.” [SduS §35] On the other, all conceptual schema are assimilated into, and so function to reproduce, the spectacle: “It partitions itself into sociology, psycho-pathology, cybernetics, semiology, etc., ensuring the self-regulation of each level of the [conceptual] process.” [SduS §42]

In these historical conditions, the alienation of the proletarian – alternatively, spectator – remains the most extreme in its form. Moreover, Debord argues, the development of the mode of production which brings the spectacle into existence, results in a “proletarianisation of the world.” [SduS §26] The alienation of Debord’s proletarian is total, and it is universal:

In the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, ‘political economy saw in the proletarian no more than mere worker,’ obligated to earn only the bare minimum necessary for the conservation of his labour power, never having to take into consideration ‘his leisure or humanity.’ This worldview of the ruling class is immediately turned on its head the moment the degree of abundance attained in the production of commodities demands a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker, suddenly cleansed of the total contempt which is signified clearly by the modes of organisation and surveillance of production, finds himself each day outside of this sphere, seemingly treated as a grown-up ... in the guise of the consumer. Here the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the ‘leisure and humanity’ of the worker, quite simply because political economy can and must maintain its control of these spheres as political economy. Thus the totality of human existence has been subjugated by the ‘total abjuration of humanity’.” [SduS §43]

By accounting for the supposed humanity of the worker, the spectacle masks both his alienation, and its own operation “as a concrete inversion of life ... the autonomous motion of static things.” [SduS §2]

Even in the midst of this complex of alienations, Debord ultimately affirms that the “only two classes which effectively correspond to the theory of Marx, the two pure classes ... [are] the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.” [SduS §88] And it is the proletariat, whose universal alienation remains in conflict with its potentially universal humanity; they are the only strata of society for Debord who are capable of fulfilling the Marxian project of a conscious history[SduS §80]: “The

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201 See again: Gabel on reification and schizophrenia.
202 See also SduS §215.
203 See also SduS §25: “It is pseudo-sacred. It reveals what it really is: an alien power developing for itself.”
204 Jappe draws attention to this apparent contradiction: “when Debord deems it possible, under present-day conditions, for a subject to exist that is by definition ‘outside’ the spectacle, he seems to be forgetting what he had himself said regarding the unconscious character of the commodity economy; and he seems to forget it a second time when he identifies this subject with the proletariat.” Jappe, Guy Debord, 38. He also identifies this as one of the limits of Debord’s theory; Jappe, Guy Debord, 36.
subject of history can be nothing less than living man in the process of self-creation, becoming master and possessor of his world which is history, and being conscious of his activity.”[SduS §74]205 The fulfillment of this unity of being and consciousness – the instauration of a normative, humanist totality – “demands that workers become dialecticians and inscribe their thought as practice”;[SduS §123] only then, when “the proletariat demonstrates by its own existence that historical consciousness has not been obliterated, does the negation of the conclusion equate to a confirmation of the method.”[SduS §77]206 For Debord, the proletariat is the only class capable of sublating the spectacle, and he makes this clear in a direct invocation of Marx: “No quantitative amelioration of its misery, no illusions of hierarchic integration, can proffer a lasting remedy for its grievances, because the proletariat cannot be identified with any particular wrong that it suffers – neither can it be satisfied with the reparation of any particular wrong – nor with any great number of these wrongs, but only with the absolute wrong of having been cast to the fringes of existence.”[SduS §114]

205 On the proletariat as “reification-resisting subject”, see also: Jappe, Guy Debord, 27-9.  
206 See again: Merleau-Ponty on the “historical fact” of the existence of the proletariat.
III. The Spectacle of Class.

Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight.

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*.

At each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessors; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*.

It is never merely given that some are born to sweet delight and others into endless night. For Marxists, this represents a “historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another”: a relation of class. The concept of class was not only the “historical starting point of Marx’s ... theory,” but has become “something more than one of the fundamental concepts of Marxian doctrine. It has ... become the symbol of his whole doctrine and of the political programme that is derived from it.” Class is inextricable from alienation, and evinces an analysis of the economic, political, and ideological formations, as much as the social relations, in a society divided into classes. Nevertheless, any rigorously Marxian understanding of class is impeded by the profound ellipsis in Marx’s work: death truncated his answer to the question “What makes a class?” This necessitates an exploration of “Marxists’ use of the term.” Applying the concept to “the modern bourgeois society”, Marx revealed its distinctive feature to be the simplified class antagonisms of the “two great hostile

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camps ... Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.” Moreover, Marx identified, in the proletariat, the historical subject capable of acting “in such a way as to change reality ... in the class consciousness of the proletariat theory and practice coincide and so it can consciously throw the weight of its actions onto the scales of history.” Like Marx, Debord regarded his own epoch through the lenses of class division - “separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle”§25 - and of the class struggle between those “two great hostile camps”. In the last instance, Debord reiterated that the “only two classes” which effectively correspond to the theory of Marx, the two pure classes ... [are] the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.”§88 This chapter navigates the social topography of the société du spectacle, situating SchüS within the Marxian Atlas Novus.

The concept of class articulated by Debord in SchüS is a response to the sociology which developed in the intellectual milieu of postwar France. A number of thinkers in the Marxian camp embarked on the search for the “new working class.” Few at that time had “related the idea [alienation] ... to the concepts of worker self-management, the new working class, and advanced technological society,” which were gaining currency. The recovery of Marx’s early writings, and the translation of Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness re-introduced the concept of alienation and opened critical pathways in contemporary class theory, galvanising those Marxist intellectuals who saw the value in fusing the two concepts once again. Debord returned to Marx, and to the classical interpreters of Marx, in order to develop a critical sociology capable of grasping the

8 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 69.
9 See also: Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 59; “The bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society.”
operation of alienation in society, its relationship to the mode of production, and to recover the historical subjectivity capable of overcoming it. To fully grasp Debord’s notion of class, it is necessary to understand Marx’s use of class, and Debord’s reception of Marx’s sociological thought.

The position of class in Marx’s thought, in particular its relationship to the concept of alienation, demands a definition of class which accounts for its specificity, its dialectical elasticity, and its broader meaning in the philosophic system devised by Marx: 15

class occupies a position ... akin to labor and value. Whereas labor (earlier, the division of labor) is the preferred Relation for encompassing alienated productive activity and value (earlier, private property) the products of such activity, class is the preferred Relation for encompassing the interpersonal ties which are established in this activity and through its products. Class, labor and value stand directly beneath the capitalist mode of production itself in the hierarchy of Relations which Marx makes Marxist sense of his society. 16

According to Calvez, Marx’s notion of class was the hybrid of several branches of social theory:

Nous trouvons en effet chez Marx la trace d’une théorie « raciale » des classes ... nous trouvons également une « théorie psychologique », une théorie « culturelle » ... nous trouvons encore une théorie des classes fondée sur la division du travail ou sur la profession, souvent même un théorie fondée sur la disparité des revenus, sur les niveaux de fortune, enfin une théorie fondée sur une situation économique déterminée résultant du fonctionnement du capitalisme et de l’achat du travail humain sur un marché. Tantôt l’accent est mis sur une situation purement objective, entièrement déterminée par une position dans le système économique, celle de l’ouvrier qui vend sa force de travail ou celle du capitaliste qui touche des dividendes, tantôt au contraire l’accent est mis sur la conscience de classe, qui résulte d’une réflexion subjective sur la situation donnée. La dernière difficulté, et non la moindre, c’est que Marx ne distingue pas toujours avec rigueur la division de la société en classes, et la division organique de certaines sociétés en « états », en « ordres », ou en « corporations ». 17

The definitions of class as it relates to the historical division of labour in general, to the particular historical conditions of capitalism – the relationship between the worker who sells his labour, and the capitalist who profits from it – and finally to consciousness, are of crucial importance to the present study.

15 See: Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 197-204; Ollman, Alienation, 202-11.
17 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 197-9. Calvez levels the charge of economic determinism against Marx, a charge which a number of thinkers, especially the French Western Marxists, tried to acquit. See: Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 55.
Marx’s concept of class, in the broadest sense, is used to explain the characteristics, historical origins, development, and concurrent interests of social classes, and is underpinned by a political programme for the abolition of all classes. For Marx, the division of society into classes begins with the social division of labour, the foremost being the division of material and mental labour:

The greatest division of material and mental labour is the separation of town and country ... Here first became manifest the division of the population into two great classes, which is directly based on the division of labour and on the instruments of production. This division “reduces [man] to a one-sided being” identified with his occupation, and engenders an antagonism between different characteristic types of men, engaged in distinct forms of social labour. The division of labour and its instruments creates specific, historically contingent social conditions of production, which determine the boundaries of social classes “directly, through their effect on the individual’s powers and needs, and indirectly, through the creation of interests which he then strives to satisfy.” These historically evolving divisions generate classes with differing and competing interests:

In the course of historical evolution, and precisely through the inevitable fact that within the division of labour social relationships take on an independent existence, there appears a division within the life of each individual, insofar as it is personal and insofar as it is determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it ... their personality is conditioned and determined by quite definite class relationships, and the division appears only in their opposition to another class, and for themselves ... The division between the personal and the class individual, the accidental nature of the conditions of life for the individual, appears only with the emergence of the class, which is itself a product of the bourgeoisie.

The development of capitalism brings into existence social relationships between men which radically transform the nature of social activity, and the social character of that activity. It is only with capitalism that, for Marx, class as a social category emerges in all its starkness and that,
moreover, for the first time "economic class interest emerge[d] in all its starkness as the motor of history."\(^{23}\)

In capitalism, class is not merely a relation of value in general, but a relation of exchange value in particular, because activity "regardless of its individual manifestation, and the product of activity, regardless of its particular make-up, are always exchange value, and exchange value is a generality in which all individuality and peculiarity are negated and extinguished."\(^{24}\) Class, therefore, represents a form of alienation in which the social relations between men, conceived both in terms of practical activity and consciousness, are objectified and their being as individuals is invalidated:

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual - their mutual interconnection - here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth.\(^{25}\)

In practical, individual terms, there is only an abstract relationship between the activity of those who constitute a class; the activity of individuals themselves varies, yet they are united by a shared, common form of activity and method of relationship to one another through the conditions of activity in society as a whole. Class as an objective, external relationship between men, determined by their shared activity, is likewise inscribed in the consciousness of men as a social relationship.\(^{26}\)

The interests shared by members of this or that group are transformed into a common special interest if all members of a social group consciously recognise their shared conditions of labour and relationship to the mode of production of material life. When these interests become opposed to the interests of another group in society, the two constitute themselves as classes through the struggle to satisfy these interests.\(^{27}\) There are, moreover, divisions and struggles within classes as individual members of a class are subject to the social conditions of competition which set all men

\(^{23}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 58.


\(^{26}\) See: Gilman, *Alienation*, 204-6.

\(^{27}\) See: Fischer, *Marx in His Own Words*, 64-5.
against one another as they seek to fulfill their individual needs with the limited resources available to them. These class interests and struggles are partly generative of the various spheres of “the economy, civil society, the state (or political spheres), ideology and science (or knowledge),” and reproduce themselves in these spheres as class differences and the struggle for control over given spheres.

Marx identified the constitutive elements of a class as shared economic conditions, interests, and culture, yet he did not consider these sociological features alone to be sufficient to make a class – if “the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name.” Thus for a class to be truly considered as such, its members must possess a consciousness of their common conditions of life, interests and culture, as well as a capacity to act in accordance with that consciousness. Marx was interested in the “historically determining classes of modern society,” those born in the class struggle. This active and conscious identification with class distinguishes a class-for-itself (Klasse für sich), from the passive class-in-itself (Klasse an sich). Wage labourers and capitalists were viewed as classes by Marx precisely because their relations to the means of production – “the individuals forming them live respectively from wages, [and] profit … from the valourisation of their labour-power, [and] capital” – and their shared conditions, interests, culture, and the consciousness of their interests, brought them into sometimes open, sometimes clandestine conflict with one another: they formed themselves as historical classes through the struggle to satisfy their mutually exclusive interests.

Marx’s thought coincided with the rapid material and intellectual expansion of industrial capitalism which heralded the ‘first industrial revolution.’ Three intrinsic features characterised this new era: a general

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30 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 199. Erik Olin Wright suggests that “Class structure refers to the structure of social relations into which individuals (or, in some cases families) enter which determine their class interests … Class formation … refers to the formation of organised collectivities within that class structure on the basis of interests shaped by that class structure.” Classes, 9-10.
31 Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 106. See also Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, 14-17.
32 Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 72-73. For this reason, this thesis does not consider the full range of classes identified by Marx.
33 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 199. See also Ossowski, Class Structure in the Social Consciousness, 72-73.
34 Marx, Capital, vol. 3, 1026.
transformation of economic life – industrialisation and urbanisation – the sordid conditions of workers in the 'satanic mills,' and an extraordinary accumulation of capital at a few points of the globe.35 Culminating in Capital, the economic and social studies of Marx drew upon a vast range of work by his forerunners,36 the outcome of which was a “critical study of his predecessors ... [and] a critical presentation of the labour theory of value, as a part of his sociological analysis.”37 The result of this is made apparent in the second volume of Capital, in which Marx argues that the capitalist mode of production maintains and reproduces the social relations of “the capitalist class and the working class, and hence the capitalist character of the entire production process.”38 This analysis finally led Marx to identify “new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle,”39 typified by the fundamental opposition between the two great social classes: “wage labourers and capitalists”.40 The central cleavage in bourgeois society between capitalists and wage labourers, or the bourgeoisie and proletariat, stemmed from the economic and social relations of these groups to the capitalist mode of production.

The bourgeoisie – the owners of the means of production and employers of wage labour – ascended the throne of history through a “series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange,”41 the foundations of which had already been built up, and were subsequently dominated, by the bourgeoisie as a ruling class. The tyranny of feudal life succumbed to the imperatives of circulation and exchange,42 ushering in a new historical epoch. So ended the historically revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie.43 The long bourgeois revolution had entirely transformed economic and social relations – the mode of production, civil society, the State, and ideology – which became bourgeois in form, as well as in character. The capitalist mode of production, the “most developed and the most complex historic organization of production,”44 called into existence a new class, “the

35 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 244-251. See also: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 162-174.
36 See: Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 61.
40 Marx, Capital, vol. 3, 1026.
42 Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 8.
44 Marx, Grundrisse, 105.
modern workers – proletarians,“45 whose labour, sold on the capitalist market, would stoke the fires and feed the mills. Installed at the head of the means of production and exchange, the bourgeoisie oversee the establishment of a truly global market,46 driving society and economy toward the elimination of all existing limits as they seek to universalise the social relations of capitalism.47

Thus, Marx sees in the capitalist only the personification of capital, which is gripped by the determination to valourise itself, extract surplus-value, and ensure that the means of production – constant capital – absorbs the greatest possible amount of surplus labour, so as to extract the greatest amount of surplus value from the workers’ labour time – variable capital. The extraction of surplus value is inextricably tied to the private ownership by the capitalist class of the means of production.48 Capital is the accumulated result of dead labour – the labour stored in things which are the products of living men – which, Marx argues, sucks ever more labour – vampire-like – from the living; that which was dead lives the more, the more labour it sucks from men. The bourgeoisie lives and attains its rate of profit by the extraction of surplus value from labour, and the time of labour is, in that sense, the time in which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased from the worker.49 As such, Marx considers the basis of the bourgeoisie’s power as a ruling class, to be the most direct and “brutal exploitation” of labour, because the capitalists as a class expropriate the surplus value produced by the working class.50

The superstructural forms of bourgeois civil society, the state, and the conceptual schema of bourgeois thought are all erected on this basic relationship between private property and labour.51 Civil society, the sphere of private property,52 is established upon the unequal and exploitative relationship between capitalists and wage labourers, the possessors and the dispossessed. Wage labour creates no property for the labourer, rather it “creates capital, i.e. that kind of property which

46 Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 208.
47 See: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 162-74; Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 212-13.
49 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 342.
52 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 25. See also Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 187-188.
exploits labour."\(^{53}\) This exploitation is inscribed in the forms of social intercourse which characterise civil society: politics becomes a "rationalization of property relations,"\(^ {54}\) family becomes a site for the accumulation and transference of property and profit,\(^ {55}\) and property relations are enshrined in law. These relations taken as a whole are, for Marx, epitomised in the State: the organ through which "the individuals of the ruling class assert their common interests" and impose them on society.\(^ {56}\) The bourgeois state exists for, and expresses the interests of the class of owners of private property:

> And so we stand here | and write into the declaration of the rights of man | the holy right of property | And now we find where that leads | Every man’s equally free to fight | fraternal and with equal arms of course | Every man his own millionaire | Man against man group against group | in happy mutual robbery | And ahead of them is the great springtime of mankind | the budding of trade and the blossoming of industry | and one enormous financial upsurge | We stand here more oppressed than when we began.\(^ {57}\)

The development of the state as the independent form of common interest,\(^ {58}\) which necessitates an increasingly sophisticated and sprawling bureaucracy, creates a division within the bourgeoisie. With its base in the state, the bureaucracy forms the political counterpart to the corporation in civil society, serving the private interests of the state in opposition to other, competing private interests.\(^ {59}\) With its organised executive power, Marx describes the emerging bureaucracy of the nineteenth century as an "appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of ... society and chokes all its pores."\(^ {60}\) Finally, Marx argues that all bourgeois forms of consciousness - law, morality, religion, political economy - appear to the wage labourer as "so many bourgeois prejudices behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests."\(^ {61}\)

The proletariat, whose labour is the concrete foundation upon which the whole edifice of capital wrought by the bourgeoisie is raised, are

\(^{53}\) Marx, The Communist Manifesto, 18.

\(^{54}\) Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 25.


\(^{56}\) Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 78.


\(^{58}\) Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 48. See also: Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: "the division of labour in bourgeois society created new groups of interests, and hence new material for state administration. Every common interest was immediately detached from society and counterposed to it as a higher general interest, snatched away from the activity of the members of society themselves and made an objective of government activity", 237-8. See also: Lefebvre, The Sociology of Marx, 123-5 on the relationship between the theory of state and the theory of classes in Marx.


\(^{60}\) Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 104.

wholly marginal in bourgeois civil society, their interests are largely excluded from the so-called common interest which coheres in the state, and their culture and epistemological standpoint are devalourised. And yet, it is the proletariat that holds the spheres aloft:

From [his] determination of the political structure by class differences Marx arrived at the dilemma facing that social class which is marginal to civil society ... Marx clearly anticipates ... that the proletariat is 'a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society', when he says: 'The characteristic thing is only this: the lack of property, and the class which stands in immediate need of work, i.e. the class of concrete labour, is less a class of civil society than the basis on which the spheres of civil society rest and move.' The 'class of concrete labour' is not just a marginal phenomenon of modern society. Its existence is the condition for the functioning of civil society itself; hence an understanding of modern society presupposes an analysis of the conditions of the working class.

The activity of the worker, labour, appears to the worker as an activity of alienation not merely because it is appropriated by the capitalist, but because the products of that labour, both immediate and abstract, are denied to the worker, and to the proletariat as a class:

To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity - that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the from the standpoint of capital - to that extent, this twisting and inversion [Verdrehung und Verkehrung] is a real [phomenon], not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists.

Marx's grim vision of the proletariat describes the real social conditions of that class and reveals their alienation in its material forms.

The working class, for Marx, develops in proportion to the bourgeoisie and to capital, and their individual existence depends entirely upon the whims of capital. They are "a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all fluctuations of the market." The vagaries of competitive exchange and the fluctuations of the market - the falling rate of profit which plagues the capitalist, and the augmentation of the instruments of labour which reduces the quantity of necessary labour power and time - are not chimerical forces which haunt the worker, but manifest as tangible physical and mental depredations for him.

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63 Marx, Grundrisse, 831-2.
Marx identifies the workers variously as “appendages of the machine,” “privates of the industrial army … hourly enslaved by the machine,” and as “instruments of labour” whose toils lose “all individual character.” The demand for their labour and their immiseration intensifies “in proportion as the use of machinery and the division of labour increases … whether by prolongation of the working hours, [or] by increase of the work extracted in a given time.” This spiritual and physical impoverishment of the working class is inextricable from the transformation of their essential human being (menschliches Dasein), their purposive activity - labour - into an activity of alienation, and into a commodity: wage labour.

As the class of civil society whose existence remained entirely marginal to civil society - even while it is the labour of the working class, and the value produced by that labour, which buttresses civil society and the position of the bourgeoisie - the working class, for Marx, inhabits the ironically privileged dialectical station that Hegel had attributed to the slave. Should the slave become conscious of his master’s reliance on him, indeed, of his power, he might cast the master down, and thereby claim mastery over himself and his own powers. For Marx, this is the historical role of the working class, which emerges organically from the particular nexus of “being, consciousness, praxis and theory, activity and change,” characteristic of that class. The proximity of the proletarians to their essential humanity endows them with a universality which is a concrete inversion of the abstract universality of the bourgeoisie: a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society, an estate that is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it; a sphere that can claim no historical title but only a human title.

69 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 141-2.
70 The universality of the proletariat is, for Marx, a concrete universality both because of the universal nature of their suffering, but also because capital submerges nearly every class in the conditions of the proletariat: all “former lower strata of the middle estate - the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and rentiers, the handicraftsmen and peasants - all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern industry is carried on.” Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 11.
Thus, Marx locates in the proletariat the potential negation of all classes, and the total abolishment of class society: the sublation of alienation by the subject of history.\textsuperscript{72}

The theory of class retained its significance for Marxists as they attempted to negotiate the flood waters of change precipitated by seismic shifts in the bedrock of capitalist production and society at the end of the nineteenth, and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This represented both a crisis of progress, and a progressive crisis for Marxists who faced the challenges to Marx’s theory posed by the unfolding conditions of automation,\textsuperscript{73} the labour organisation methods of Ford and Taylor,\textsuperscript{74} the appearance and subsequent humiliation of the European workers’ movement – exemplified by the syndicates and social democratic parties of the West, the degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution in the East, and the rise of fascism in Europe – and finally the emergence of seemingly new classes: the bureaucracy, the service class and, by the mid-twentieth century, students. The transformation of class theory into a sociology – as the empirical study of social formations – divorced from concepts of alienation and revolution also posed particular challenges to Marx’s epigones. Among those acolytes who kept alight the Hegelian embers at the heart of Marx’s theory of class, it was Lukács for whom the questions of universality and the historical subjectivation of the proletariat illuminated the path forward. Others retreated into scholarly study of the workers’ conditions, either from the remote cloisters of the academy, or at first hand in the factories, while some – early critics of Soviet Marxism, especially – were branded heretics.

Lukács affirms the central concepts of Marx’s theory of class in History and Class Consciousness, while further probing the crucial, but underdeveloped notion of class consciousness:

\begin{quote}
[The] Bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society. They are the only classes whose existence and development are entirely dependent on the course taken by the modern evolution of production and only from the vantage point of these classes can a plan for the total organisation of society even be imagined. The outlook for the other classes (petty bourgeois or peasants) is ambiguous or sterile because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production but is indissolubly linked with the vestiges of feudal society.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} See: Rivin, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 59-64; Calvez, La Pensée de Karl Marx, 220-223; Ollman, Alienation, 210-1.
\textsuperscript{74} See: Georges Friedmann, La Crise du Progrès (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).
\textsuperscript{75} Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 59.
As far as Lukács is concerned with the sociological conditions, or definitions of these two classes, it is primarily with regard to the question of consciousness and its relationship to class struggle. Lukács argues that the immediate class interests of both the bourgeoisie and proletariat concentrate on symptoms of development – the social effects of material conditions of production – and on elements of society, rather than on the construction of society as a whole, and all that entails for the overcoming of alienation.\(^76\)

Lukács argues that the bourgeois does "everything in its power to eradicate the fact of class conflict from the consciousness of society, even though class conflict had only emerged in its purity and [was] established as a historical fact with the advent of capitalism."\(^77\) From this position, he infers the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie, which "understands the process" of history but, by necessity, ignores the "objective economic limitations of its own system."\(^78\) He identifies the belief in a "planned economy" as the most problematic form of bourgeois organisation to have been conceived by bourgeois political economy – already a form of mendacious consciousness.\(^79\) In the relationship between the consciousness of the bourgeoisie – "geared toward economic consciousness ... the crassest form of ‘false consciousness’"\(^80\) – and society, Lukács highlights the contradiction expressed in the "irreconcilable antagonism between ideology and the economic base."\(^81\)

Against this, Lukács counterposes the intellectual superiority of the proletariat which rests exclusively upon its "ability to see society from the centre."\(^82\) The standpoint of the proletariat in society grants them access to the truth of society as a whole, and Lukács believes this truth to be the weapon that will bring victory to the proletariat once they consciously recognise, as a class, the unity of theory and practice that structures their daily lives – their potentially free, self-creative humanity – and "throw the weight of [their] actions onto the scales of history."\(^83\) This utopianism is tempered by what Lukács considers to be the reified consciousness of the proletariat created by conditions of

\(^{76}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 59-60.  
^{77}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 61.  
^{78}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 63-5.  
^{79}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 65-7.  
^{80}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 64.  
^{81}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 64.  
^{82}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 69.  
^{83}\) Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 68-9.
increasingly contemplative labour and the tension between their immediate and universalist ambitions:

The reified consciousness [of the proletariat] must also remain hopelessly trapped in the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism ... consciousness becomes either a completely passive observer moving in obedience to laws which it can never control ... [or] it regards itself as a power which is able of its own - subjective - volition to master the essentially meaningless motion of objects.

Lukács was not able to sufficiently overcome this tension in his own analysis of the proletariat; the proletariat became, for him, at once a subjective transcendental force and, at the same time, was co-identified with the revolutionary organisation of the Party. These positions satisfied neither his critics in the orthodox camp of the Bolsheviks, or the Western Marxists who followed him.

While Lukács pursued philosophical solutions to the problems of consciousness in the twentieth century, many of his contemporaries concentrated on the changing face of class society and the conditions of labour. Friedmann pointed to the materialised ideological forces of Fordism and Taylorism which encouraged a form of individualism in the worker and thereby eroded the base for collective organisation: « La rationalisation doit permettre de prolonger contre les menaces du socialisme, l’hégémonie d’une classe ... Le destin de la bourgeoisie, où tant d’ombres se profilent déjà le début du siècle, en paraît transfiguré. » The rationalisation of labour, which Lukács identified with the phenomenon of reification had, in material terms, transformed the situation of the bourgeoisie from one of crisis to one of illusory solidity. The appearance of fascism in Europe, Friedmann argues, is effectively the reactionary product of this process:

Par sa révolte contre les effets sociaux et moraux de la technique dans ‘le système des prix’, par ses outrances, la technocratie représente bien une maladie, une sorte de convulsion de l’idée de progrès. Celle-ci, pour se défendre, s’abstrait de toutes les conditions sociales de la production dans le milieu historique du capitalisme et projette ses bienfaits dans un monde mathématico-physique où rien ne peut venir les contrarier.

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84 See: Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 71; 89.
85 See: Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 71; 73.
86 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 77.
88 Friedmann, La Crise du Progrès, 77.
89 Friedmann, La Crise du Progrès, 128.
90 Friedmann, La Crise du Progrès, 175.
The Bolshevik revolution had its own disastrous results for the class struggle, as several of its critics believed, bringing into existence for the first time the bureaucracy as a separate class.

The emergence of the bureaucracy in the Soviet bloc, whose apparent function mirrored that of the bourgeoisie in the West, was identified as a particular deformation of the class relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Bruno Rizzi identified the process of bureaucratisation with a new form of bureaucratic exploitation in which what had once been private property was now the “class property” of the bureaucratic class, who now acted en bloc as a new exploiting class in their extraction of surplus value. Rizzi saw in the bureaucracy a new historic unity of the state and its functionaries, who occupied the position of the bourgeoisie in its absence. Ante Ciliga reached similar conclusions about the analogous role played by the bureaucracy:

Sous la surface des monopoles bureaucratiques du parti (des représentants du prolétariat qui possèdent tout ce le prolétariat est causé posséder), il y a partage du pouvoir dominant avec les spécialistes (qui sont l’équivalent de la bureaucratie du capitalisme moderne à l’Ouest).

Ciliga situated the new forms of class struggle created by the conditions of bureaucratic exploitation in the struggle against the organisational forces which the bureaucracy had unleashed upon the economy.

At the same time in the West, some Marxists believed yet other new classes had appeared on the stage of history. One such was the so-called service class identified by Karl Renner. This class, he believed, constituted those workers who – like the bureaucrats and specialists in the East – were employed in public service, drawing a salary in service of law and order.

Employed in the tertiary spheres of the economy, these workers found themselves engaged in all manner of economic, social and public functions.
service, and like the bureaucracy, drew their living from the diversion of surplus value in the abstracted sphere of circulation of commodities.  

These various currents of thought flowed into the milieu of Marxian social theory in postwar France. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* developed an inconoclastic critique of the non-socialist character of the Soviet Bloc, influenced largely by Trotsky, and in part by the likes of Rizzi and Ciliga. They were also concerned with the class struggle against the form of bureaucratic domination, as well as the constitution and revolutionary role of the proletariat. Lefebvre undertook an analysis of monopoly capitalism and new developments in social structure and classes in light of Marx’s own sociology and the concept of alienation. Moreover, the sweeping changes which took place in France between 1945 and 1960 inundated the streams of Marxian social thought as sociologists tried to respond to the changing conditions of the working class:

The cherished balance of the French economy between agriculture and industry was erased … Could one still speak of a working class, or had it been altered beyond recognition? While liberals and technocrats foresaw the disappearance of working-class radicalism, and while the Communist Party, under Thorez and Rochet, simply repeated the formula of increasing pauperization with no sense of the changes in the proletariat’s nature, a diverse group of intellectuals and sociologists began to describe a very different working class. Working independently, Friedmann (*Le Travail en miettes*, 1956), Touraine (*L’Evolution du travail ouvrier aux usines Renault*, 1955), Mallet (*Les Paysans contre le passé*, 1959), Belleville (*Une Nouvelle classe ouvrière*, 1963) and Gorz (*Strategy for Labor*, 1964) dispelled the myth of a unified proletariat by studying the working class empirically and pointing up the differences in types of jobs, skills, and salaries. Thus a far more shaded picture of the working class under advanced capitalism began to emerge.

Whether the unified proletariat was a myth to be dispelled is questionable at least from a philosophic standpoint. Many of these works had benefited from, and made some attempt to engage with, Marx’s early writings and the concept of alienation, which was a unifying concept in the Marxist theory
of classes: "The interest in the early Marx because of what he offered to the proletariat, rather than for what he could do for philosophers, distinguished the marxist humanism of 1963 from the Hegelian Marx who so fascinated the previous generation."\textsuperscript{105}

The defining characteristics of this new sociology were its concerns with the relative material well-being, or affluence, of the contemporary working class; the diminution of manual labour which resulted from automation; the replacement of a mass of manual workers with a small number of highly-educated and skilled technicians; and the reforms won by the labour movement - culminating in the welfare state - which had greatly ameliorated the general conditions of labour, and of subsistence for the working class as a whole. The working class of the post-war economic boom seemed to be a new model army made up of highly skilled technicians, engaged in highly individuated work. With this notion in mind, several of the French sociologists seized upon autogestion as a principle of organisation native to the conditions of the new working class, seemingly far more conscious and capable of carrying on their struggle than their more primitive cousins in the old industries.\textsuperscript{106} Some, like Mallet, tried to assimilate the new sociology wholesale into the Marxian dialectic:

For Mallet there is no such monolithic entity as the "working class" ... to talk of it as a homogeneous body is at best metaphysical and at worst a hangover from the Stalinist subjectivism which identified the party with the class. The working class exists in a dialectical relation within the society as a whole; it is one structure, interweaving itself with others, and is itself composed of several structures. One can always discover a 'model' of the working class, found within forms of organization and struggle in a given period. But not every worker belongs to, or is represented by, the model—on the contrary, there are always remnants of past forms of work situations and of organizations, as well as forms indicative of the future, which co-exist with the current dominant mode. It is important for the militant as well as the theoretician to distinguish between models obviously held over from a past epoch (whose reason for existence was a specific form of production now archaic) from those models which are signs of the objective tendencies toward which capitalism is being pushed by its own internal dynamic.\textsuperscript{107}

The schematic of a differentiated, and increasingly internally divided, working class in advanced capitalism proposed by the French Marxian sociologists led them to search elsewhere for the classes who might fulfill the historical role ascribed by Marx: both the technicians who composed the

\textsuperscript{105} Judt, Marxism and the French Left, 218.
\textsuperscript{106} Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France, 363-5: on Gorz and the concept of autogestion.
\textsuperscript{107} Dick Howard, 'French New Working Class Theories,' Radical America vol. 3 no. 2 (Mar-Apr., 1969), 2.
aristocracy of labour, and the mass of students who now filled the universities demonstrated some potential.\textsuperscript{108}

Debord was neither satisfied with the method nor with the conclusions of the new sociology, which in its study of separation using the conceptual and material instruments of separation itself, represented to him “the spectacular critique of the spectacle”.\textsuperscript{[SduS §196]} Marx had not been a “descriptive sociologist ... What Marx was trying to do was to give an account of the reality which underlies the appearance of capitalism.”\textsuperscript{109} Debord, like Marx, wished to reveal the essence of the spectacular stage of capitalism, not through the empirical study of a given fraction of the working class or bourgeoisie, but through the dialectical study of society as a whole, in order to understand the historical forces, classes and points of rupture within it. By returning to the essential Marxian dialectic of the two historically significant classes – “the only two classes which effectively correspond to the theory of Marx, the two pure classes toward which the entire analysis of Capital is directed ... the bourgeoisie and the proletariat”\textsuperscript{[SduS §88]} – Debord radically broke with the sociology of the ‘New Left’ and grounded his own theory of society in the much earlier one devised by Marx and developed by Lukács.

The theory of society articulated by Debord is underpinned by his understanding of the conditions of capitalism following the ‘second industrial revolution.’\textsuperscript{110} These conditions are, broadly, the rationalisation of production and consumption\textsuperscript{[SduS §40]}; widespread automation of labour, and the creation of the tertiary sector\textsuperscript{[SduS §45]}; a further division of labour within production, and the refinement of labour within work processes into a “parcellisation of gestures”\textsuperscript{[SduS §25]}; the massive expansive of commodity consumption, engendering the collaboration of the individual worker with the system as a whole\textsuperscript{[SduS §40, 43 47, 51]}; the full emergence of leisure as a site of alienated activity and consumption\textsuperscript{[SduS §43]}; and a universalisation of the market which tends toward the proletarianisation – qua transformation into reified commodity relations – of all forms of work.\textsuperscript{[SduS §26]} It was in light of his understanding of these historical conditions, and the concept of spectacle defined as a dynamic coalescence of the structures – ideal and material – of contemporary society, that Debord set out to define the existence of the two pure classes of Marxian social theory.

\textsuperscript{108} Poster, \textit{Existential Marxism in Postwar France}, 369.
\textsuperscript{109} Howard, ‘French New Working Class Theories,’ 10.
\textsuperscript{110} These conditions are broadly outlined in Chapter II of this thesis.
Debord recognises the historical role played by the bourgeoisie: the “only revolutionary class which has yet succeeded; concurrently they are the only class for whom the development of the economy has been both the cause and consequence of their stranglehold on society.”[SduS §87][111] As the class whose domination of society as a whole is rooted in the universalisation of the economic conditions of capital, the bourgeoisie is the “first ruling class for whom labour is a value” and, moreover, the first ruling class who “recognise no value which does not stem from the exploitation of labour.”[SduS §140] The development of the bourgeoisie is thus inextricable from the development, and expansion, of the means of production and the instruments of labour which increase the extraction of surplus value from wage labour. They are the class for whom the continual accumulation of capital and commodities necessitates the continuous transformation of “nature by transforming the character of labour and by unleashing its full productive capabilities.”[SduS §140]

The material intercourse of spectacular society is wholly predicated on the appearance of lived reality as an “immense accumulation of spectacles,”[SduS §1] or rather, of spectacular social relations. Civil society, if it can be considered separately in the spectacle, is characterised by uneven and exploitative relations of class[SduS §25, 54, 72], by the reification of social relations[SduS §35, §40], and by the mediation of class relations by the technical apparatus and ideology.[SduS §10, 24, 219] As a social relationship, the spectacle in this sense is the unitary function of the class domination of the bourgeoisie. Debord conceives of the State firstly, and in classically Marxian terms, as an organ of class domination,[SduS §24] which is inseparable from the generalized cleavage in a society based on the division of labour. It is also the separate locus in which the development of the bureaucracy as a class began:

Marx could nevertheless trace in Bonapartism, the preliminary outline of the modern state bureaucracy—a fusion of capital and State, constituted by the national power of capital over labour, and the organisation of the forces of law and order in favour of social bondage.[SduS §87]

The extension of the state and its technocratic rationality into every facet of life, both in the East and West, renders the conditions of life in the two opposing poles of capitalist accumulation barely distinguishable from one another. In the spectacle, Debord argues, a banalised bourgeois positivism encompasses intellectual and spiritual life. The thought of the

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[111] See also: SduS §88.
spectacle represents for Debord, a general science of false consciousness. [SduS §194] Meanwhile the particular, dominant science – political economy [SduS §82; 84] – must by necessity fracture into a number of specialist domains: sociology, psychotechniques, cybernetics, and semiology in order to better regulate all levels of society. [SduS §42] The dominant science, thereby becomes a science of domination. [SduS §41]

Debord’s analysis of the totalitarian bureaucracy of the East owes a great deal to his association with Socialisme ou Barbarie and to his reading of Rizzi and Ciliga. The Soviet bureaucracy effectively constituted itself as a “new ruling class,” [SduS §103] with no need for a bourgeoisie. [SduS §104] This had been accomplished through the seizure of what would otherwise have been bourgeois, or private property. [SduS §110] The total domination of the bureaucracy over society demonstrated that capitalism remained essentially in existence at both poles of global power:

It is the proof of the autonomous economy, which dominates society to the point of recreating for its own ends the ruling class which necessitates it … the totalitarian bureaucracy is not ‘the last owning class of history’ after Bruno Rizzi, but merely a substitute ruling class for the commodity economy. [SduS §104]

Debord argues that the bureaucratic class has “no recognisable existence as [an] owning class,” [SduS §107] even though they possess complete power over the disposition of social labour as the ‘total commodity’:

Bureaucratic property is in effect concentrated in the sense that the individual bureaucrat has no relation with the ownership of the global economy, except through the intermediary of the bureaucratic community, despite his membership in this community. Additionally, the production of fewer sophisticated commodities also appears within this concentrated form: the commodity possessed by the bureaucracy is the totality of social labour; that which they resell to society is therefore wholesale survival. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot allow the exploited masses any margin of choice, as they must make every choice themselves. All extraneous choices, whether they concern diet or music are, therefore, the choice to utterly annihilate the bureaucracy. [SduS §64]

While the bureaucracy is not a property owning class in the traditional sense, the property relations of the bureaucratically dominated society are, for Debord, based on the expropriation of surplus value and the redirection of use values by the bureaucracy as a class, and as the sole organ of economic organisation. Moreover, the bureaucracy seeks to monopolise all so-called “ideological property,” [SduS §111] to extend its control of choices made in production and consumption into the mental life of those subject to it. It fails to achieve this, Debord believes, because the pseudo-freedoms permitted within the ideological structure of the bourgeois spectacle cannot be countenanced by a bureaucracy with totalitarian intentions. [SduS §110; 111]
There are, as far as Debord is concerned, no really new classes either in the bourgeois dominated West, or bureaucratic East; rather there are spectacular divisions which manifest as classes carrying out their own struggles in appearance only: a product of the “unequal and conflictual development of the system.”[SduS §56] More ideological formations than social classes, they are a product of the transformation of “dissatisfaction [into a] commodity,”[SduS §59] which resurrects everywhere “false, archaic oppositions; regionalisms and racisms tasked with imbuing in the vulgar, hierarchic ranks of consumption a lofty, imaginary ontology.”[SduS §62] For Debord, the students and technicians, the old and young, the peoples of the developing and developed economies are not classes and could not constitute themselves as such;

wherever abundant consumption has established itself, a major spectacular opposition comes to the fore, the deceptive division between youth and adults. Nowhere is the adult master of his life, and youth—the transformation of that which exists—is in no way the property of those who are currently young, but rather of the economic system as the dynamism of capital.[SduS §62]

The phantom classes which appear in the spectacle seemingly oppose one another as virulently as the proletariat and the bourgeoisie had done; however, Debord calls these only “spectacular oppositions” which disguise, in actual fact, an unparalleled global “unity of immiseration.”[SduS §63]

This unity of immiseration is expressed in the concrete situation of the working class. For Debord the proletariat has remained

implacably in existence under the intensified alienation of modern capitalism ... [constituting] the immense majority of workers who have lost all power over the use of their lives ... This proletariat is objectively reinforced by the encroaching extinction of the peasantry, as well as by the extension of economic rationalism to the greater part of the 'services' and intellectual professions.[SduS §114]

Debord does not see those engaged in the “tertiary sector,” - the services - as a separate class, but rather as a mobilised auxiliary labour force - “the army of distributors and spokesmen for the current crop of commodities”[SduS §45] - capable of meeting the needs of the “commodity economy ... [and as] an organised source of redundant labour.”[SduS §45] In contrast to the notions of a new, hierarchically layered working class, Debord argues that the universalisation of the modern systems of production, consumption, and communication have, in fact, extended the conditions of the proletariat to all classes which exist under the conditions of total rationalisation and total management: “The success of the economic system of separation is the proletariatisation of the world.”[SduS §26]
The conditions of the universalised proletariat are systematically determined by the technical rationality of the spectacle and the reification of social relations. Automation abolishes the immediate necessity of labour, while preserving "labour as a commodity [wage labour], and as the fountainhead of the commodity form." [SdUS §45] The exploitation of labour is intensified by the unceasing extraction of value, and "the growth of productivity by means of an unremitting refinement of the division of labour into a parcellisation of gestures subordinated to the motion of the machine; and labour for an ever-expanding market." [SdUS §25] The division of labour within the work process explodes all sense of community and all the critical faculties of the worker, [SdUS §25] whose labour is rendered wholly contemplative:

The worker does not produce himself, he produces an independent power. The success of this production, its abundance, returns to the producer as an abundance of dispossession. All the time and space of his world becomes estranged from him by his accumulation of his own alienated products. The spectacle is the map of this new world, one which exactly overlays its territory. [SdUS §31]

The abundance of commodities, whose use value has been utterly eroded by the primacy of exchange value, [SdUS §47] creates images of need - accompanied by the ideological phantasms of advertising which reinforce the need for things, or the lack of things - which return to haunt the salaried worker in the guise of the consumer; the "alienated consumption" [SdUS §22] of the spectacle creates only new breeds of privation, while leaving the worker to face his "ancient penury": the choice between submission and death. [SdUS §47] For the "consumer of illusions," [SdUS §47] social being is downgraded into having to the profit of the contemplated object. [SdUS §30]

Debord argues that the ever increasing pressure of capitalist alienation at all levels renders the working class powerless to name their own misery, [SdUS §115] which encompasses the total life of society: "The spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." [SdUS §30] And Debord extends his analysis to almost every facet of alienated existence. The irreducible biological element which remains inextricable from labour, "the natural cycle of wakefulness and sleep", [SdUS §160] and the irreversible processes of ageing become incidental to the demands of modern production and, as such, are neglected and ignored by the discourse which proclaims at the same time, a "capital of youth": the "social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life." [SdUS §160] The touristic adventures of the newly affluent workers appear to Debord as nothing more than a circulation of human commodities, rendering all leisure
The urban spaces in which life and work unfold, are rendered monotonous and banal by the technocratic imperatives of capital – the efficient movement of commodities and wage labour – they become, instead, the wide open spaces of the commodity form. The ideological schema of urbanism, and the material process of urbanisation, preserve everywhere the uninterrupted power of the ruling class; the atomisation of the workers is accomplished through the division of individuals into isolated collectives, constituted of monadic family units who become targets for the entire ideological weight of the proliferated images of spectacular consumption.

For Debord, the alienation of the proletariat is, in essence, total: “the totality of human existence has been subjugated by the ‘total abjuration of humanity’.”

In spite of all of the material and ideological forces of alienation arrayed against the proletariat, Debord locates in them – as both Marx and Lukács had – a radical subjectivity, and indeed, the only truly radical subjectivity capable of sublating the spectacle. Debord’s social theory is, in this sense, a total rejection of the conclusions of the Marxian sociologists who found in the “new working class,” a qualitatively different method of relationship between wage labour and capital, and moreover, it is a refutation of any theory that does not seek the total abolishment of the spectacle as an expression of that relationship. Debord, like his proletariat – the totally dominated, and totally alienated class – can accept no alternative to the spectacle but the refusal of the totality of misery or nothing.

The immanent potentiality of the proletariat remains, for Debord, in the proximity between its social being and consciousness to its essential, and historical, human being in society: “[When] the proletariat demonstrates through its own active being that historical consciousness has not been obliterated; the negation of the conclusion equates to a confirmation of the method.” The negation of the conclusion, is the self-abolishment of the proletariat as a class, which Debord ultimately believes will be achieved in the revolutionary praxis – the unity of being and consciousness – of the proletariat: “Proletarian revolution wholly relies on the necessity that, for the first time, revolutionary theory qua consciousness of human life activity needs must be known and lived by the masses. The revolution demands that workers become dialecticians and inscribe their thought as practice.”
IV. (Revolutionary) Praxis.

I swear to you that I, humiliated as I am,
Bound hand and foot in these strong straps,
Shall yet be needed by the lord of immortals
To disclose a new design, tell him who it is,
Shall rob him of his power and his glory.

S’émanciper des bases matérielles de la vérité inversée,
voilà en quoi consiste l’auto-émancipation de notre époque. Cette « mission historique d’instaurer la vérité dans le monde », ni l’individu isolé ni la foule atomisée soumise aux manipulations ne peuvent l’accomplir, mais encore et toujours la classe qui est capable d’être la dissolution de toutes les classes en remanant tout le pouvoir à la forme désaliénante de la démocratie réalisée, le Conseil dans lequel la théorie pratique se contrôle elle-même et voit son action. Là seulement où les individus sont « directement liés à l’histoire universelle »; là seulement où le dialogue s’est armé pour faire vaincre ses propres conditions.

Praxis is the millenarian culmination of Marx’s system as a whole: the unity of theory – man’s consciousness of his activity – and of practice – man’s conscious activity – directed towards the fulfillment of his essential being. Praxis is the “consequence and the concentrated expression of Marx’s view of historical development.” It is the accomplishment of the dynamic, open teleology of the Marxian project, in which the historical conditions of alienation and the conditions for future alienation are abolished – Aufheben – restoring unity at a higher level between alienated man and his species-being. It does not imply an end to history, but the end of prehistory, and the creation of the conditions for an open and dynamic unfolding of the historical conditions which are the product of man’s self-creative, and self-mediated, communal being – Gemeinwesen. For Marx, the historical conditions and social relations brought into existence by capitalism – “the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production” – typified by the antagonistic relationship between wage labour and capital, have equally created the conditions for the total overthrow of the economic and social relations of capitalism and, moreover, for the sublation of all historical

\[1\] See Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 210. “Class, labor and value stand directly beneath the capitalist mode of production itself in the hierarchy of Relations which Marx makes Marxist sense of his society.”


forms of alienation. In the material and mental life of the proletariat – the "class of concrete labour" – whose universal sufferings demand a universally transformative solution, Marx sees the only class capable of unifying theory and practice, and thereby blasting open the continuum of (pre-)history. The entire political programme of Marx hinges on the praxis of the proletariat, a programme for the abolition of all classes. Debord too sees, amidst the mass of spectators, a proletariat faced with a nightmarish landscape, scarred by the universalised conditions of total ideology, reification, and immiseration: "The spectacle is the map of this new world, perfectly overlaying its territory." 

[SduS §31] And, at the same time, the immanent potentiality which arises within the proletariat itself – "the historical mission to instaurate truth in the world" [SduS §221] – to discard all faulty ideological charts, and to navigate this new world by the unification of their consciousness with their practical activity. The workers must become dialecticians[SduS §123] and "use the country itself, as its own map." 

The notion of praxis developed by Debord in SduS – and indeed the work itself is praxical in intention – is fundamentally rooted in Marx's Hegelian conception of praxis as Aufhebung and intertwined with the political programme which became almost synonymous with Western Marxism: conseillisme. The internal structure of Debord's philosophy of praxis in SduS relies, firstly, on the development of his position on the basis of a specifically Hegelian interpretation of the goals of the Marxian project, and a consideration of Marx's own political programme. And secondly, Debord makes his conception of praxis concrete by developing a critique of failed or false examples of revolutionary praxis through his engagement with the early critics of Bolshevism – those who were opposed to the Party,

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the organisational form of the Worker’s Councils – and by articulating a revolutionary programme founded on his philosophic schema. In order to understand Debord’s concept of praxis and the councillist programme which he derives from it, an exploration of the idea in Marx’s writings is necessary.

The core of Marx’s philosophy of praxis is outlined in the well-worn line from the Theses on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it.” In Marx’s philosophic schema, praxis represents both the pre-condition for the fulfillment of man’s historical self-realisation and freedom and, at the same time, the ultimate fulfillment thereof: “The standpoint of the old materialism is bourgeois society, the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social humanity.” The fulfillment of social humanity, which unites man’s essential species-being – Gattungswesen – and his communal being – Gemeinwesen – presupposes that man’s “social tendencies concentrate into aims [and] the self-cognition of practice becomes one of the essential factors of practice.” Praxis is the material ‘negation of the negation’, or the negation of those alienating forces which effectively negate the essence of man, and consequently it is the self-establishment of man through his own self-mediating, self-creative activity. The achievement of this stage of man’s emancipated self-development is the goal of Marx’s philosophy.

In the first instance, praxis is the tendency of Marx’s thought – before the world can be changed, it must be correctly interpreted – as it seeks to overcome the mystifications of theory before anything else:

The theory of praxis ... sets its sights on demolishing the positivist dogma on every front. In practical terms, praxis theory rejects

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16 Karl Marx, ‘On Feuerbach (Brussels, March 1845),’ in O’Malley, ed., Early Political Writings, 118.


18 Marx, ‘On Feuerbach (Brussels, March 1845),’ in O’Malley, ed., Early Political Writings, 118.


20 “As human nature is the true communal nature, or communal being (Gemeinwesen) of man, men through the activation of their nature create and produce a human communal being (Gemeinwesen), a social being (gesellschaftliche Wesen) which is no abstractly universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the nature or being (Wesen) of every single individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth.” Karl Marx, Werke III, cited in: O’Malley, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, xlii.

21 Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 157.

positivism’s uncritical acceptance of the capitalist system and looks instead to a society in which people can control their own lives, unhampered in their freedom by exploitation or repression. On the theoretical level, praxis demolishes all antitheses, conceptual expressions of practical antagonisms, between subject and object, facts and values, which make critical activity impossible, and conceives man as a being who is creatively united with the world around him.23

While Marx’s philosophy of praxis is an attempt to demolish all positivist dogma in the ideal realm, he believes that the only way to truly supersede ideological mystification, is through the sublation of the socio-historical conditions which make them possible.

In the historical conditions of the proletariat, the class of wage labour brought into existence by capitalism, Marx identifies the class whose alienation is of the “most extreme form,”24 whose daily activity — labour — has been transformed into an activity of alienation.25 The nature of the proletariat, in essence, is preserved in society by the existence of private property, which is compelled to “maintain itself, and thereby its opposite, the proletariat, in existence.”26 Every proletarian to some degree shares the suffering of every other, the labour of the proletariat as a class is exploited, and they are everywhere robbed of the value that they produce. This historically created relationship renders them most painfully aware of the difference between being and thinking, between consciousness and life. They know that property, capital, money, wage-labour and the like are no ideal figments of the brain, but very practical, very objective products of their self-estrangement and that they must be abolished in a practical, objective way for man to become man not only in thinking, in consciousness, but in mass being, in life.27

In the consciousness of the proletariat — the class of concrete labour — the cognizance of the historical conditions of its spiritual alienation and physical impoverishment creates the potential for the total abolishment of the sources of its alienation: “the process of recognizing reality changes both the observed object and the observing subject.”28 As such their total marginalisation makes the proletariat a “class with radical chains ... that can claim no historical title but only a human title.”29

24 Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 46.
28 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 136.
In laying claim to their human title, their truly human being — mensliches Dasein — the proletariat, for Marx, can accept no amelioration of their conditions and no alternative but the transformation of society from bottom to top. The self-establishment of man can only begin with the self-abolishment of the proletariat as a separate class. For Marx, the question of praxis is historically contingent. The goals of the proletariat are, and must remain, universal, in spite of the vicissitudes of capital and its development:

The question is not what goal is envisaged for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is what is the proletariat and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature.\(^{30}\)

Thus the question of what course of action the proletariat will take re-asserts itself at every juncture in their powerlessness and self-estrangement. The proletariat is compelled to “abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property.”\(^{31}\) Marx did not believe this emancipation to be the work of philosophy, but of the socially-directed action of the workers as a class, and the political programme of Marx reflects this.

The goal of political action is to enable the development of revolutionary praxis — the unity of proletarian theory and practice — which is capable of changing the course of history and the situation of men in the external, objective world. The programme of the Manifesto is designed to direct philosophic praxis toward the fulfillment of the aims of the workers’ movement, while equally establishing the conditions for the proletariat to dissolve itself as a class.\(^{32}\) For Marx, the “essential content of the socialist revolution [lies] in the transfer of the means of production into public ownership, a process which takes place under the leadership of the working class as having a greater interest in it than any other class.”\(^{33}\) To achieve this aim, the proletariat must first be organised “into a class, and consequently into a political party,”\(^{34}\) then raised through their struggle against the bourgeoisie “to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy,”\(^{35}\) by supplanting the bourgeois state as “a particular organ divorced from the totality of economic life.”\(^{36}\)


\(^{32}\) See: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 142.

\(^{33}\) Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 131.

\(^{34}\) Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 12.


\(^{36}\) Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 204.
argues that this revolutionary “dictatorship of the proletariat” stands for the end of the political state and establishes new social conditions which “do not preserve the alienation between state and civil society.” Marx outlines the practical aims of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the terms of a programme for “action and legislation” to ameliorate the most immediate miseries of the working class, while setting in motion the process which will achieve the proletariat’s “truly universal ends; in this way the potential universality immanent in the Hegelian theory of the state would become an actuality and not merely [an] abstract postulate.”

The appearance and subsequent suppression of the Paris Commune left the field of history strewn with the bones on which Marx would sharpen the teeth of his political programme and his philosophy of praxis. Marx’s chief criticisms of the Commune, and of the Blanquist faction who supported it, related to their inability to effectively translate the seizure of power in the state into a political programme for the abolition of class society. The Blanquistes, according to Marx, were not content with the “task of organising the proletariat; not at all. Their business lies precisely in trying to pre-empt the developing revolutionary process, drive it artificially to crisis, to create a revolution ex nihilo, to make a revolution without the conditions for a revolution.” The result was, for Marx, an urban insurrection which was “in no sense socialist, nor could it be.” The failure of the Commune, from the Marxian standpoint, was its interest “in political power per se, not in society,” which rendered it unable to transcend the existence of the state as a separate institution and as the locus of power of the appropriating class: “the political rule of the producer cannot co-exist with the perpetuation of his social slavery.” The seizure of the state was not, for Marx, a political end in itself, but by necessity had to be rooted in the revolutionising “permanent action” of the proletariat pursuing its conscious historical aims as the

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37 See: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 204; Karl Marx, ‘Letter to J. Weydemeyer (March 5, 1852),’ cited in Fischer, Marx in His Own Words, 136; Karl Marx, The Critique of the Gotha Programme (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933), 45.
40 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 206.
41 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 206-7.
44 Karl Marx, ‘Letter to Domela Nieuwenhuis (February 22, 1881),’ in Dona Torr, ed. The Correspondence of Marx and Engels 1846-1895: A Selection with Commentary and Notes (London: Martin Lawrence, Ltd., 1934), 388.
45 Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 201.
46 Karl Marx, The Civil War in France (London: Lawrence Martin Ltd., 1933), 43.
47 Karl Marx, ‘Letter to Domela Nieuwenhuis (February 22, 1881),’ 386.
transcendence of the state.\textsuperscript{48} Nevertheless, Marx saw in the Commune—"essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipated of Labour\textsuperscript{49}—the foundations for a possible "future society,"\textsuperscript{50} had its organisational principles been proletarian in form and directed towards the radical, and democratic, achievement of proletarian aims.\textsuperscript{51}

The tensions which persisted in Marx's evolving political programme revolved around the questions of whether a revolutionary party of the proletariat would take the form of a Party designed to educate and organise the workers' struggle, or whether that Party meant the free association of the socially conscious workers themselves, directing their own struggle—councils of workers' delegates. Moreover, there lingered the questions of how to institute the worker's programme and whether the seizure of power in the state was a pathway to failure or to victory—the Commune demonstrated both possibilities. These tensions, which had remained largely unresolved for Marxists, re-asserted themselves prior to, and more urgently, following the Bolshevik intervention in the Russian Revolution. Debord, in 1962, set out to study the historical developments in, and deformations of, Marx's political theory which characterised this period:

The revolution of 1917—the world historical turning point for Marxism in this period—reminded many Marxists that "technical questions of organization [reveal] themselves to be social questions."\textsuperscript{52} The already fractious Marxian camp ruptured along the faultlines of Bolshevism and

\textsuperscript{48} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 203.
\textsuperscript{49} Karl Marx, The Civil War in France, 43.
\textsuperscript{50} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 241.
\textsuperscript{51} Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 241-9.
\textsuperscript{52} Shipway, 'Situationism,' in Crump and Rubel, eds, Non-Market Socialism, 152.
\textsuperscript{53} Ante Ciliga, Lénine et la Révolution, cited in Guy Debord, La Société du Spectacle, 5104.
councillism, and the councillorism of the ‘left opposition’ became a touchstone for the emerging, dissident Western Marxism.54

The theory and political programme of council communism was an inherent element of Marx’s own philosophical schema and political position, and it developed in opposition to the tendencies of the social democrats and syndicalists55 through the first two decades of the twentieth century. The outline for socialist democracy presented by Rosa Luxemburg points to some of the key features of the movement:

Mais la démocratie socialiste ne commence pas seulement dans la terre promise, quand aura été créée l’infrastructure de l’économie socialiste, à titre de cadeau de Noël pour le bon peuple qu’aura entre temps fidèlement soutenu la poignée de dictateurs socialistes. La démocratie socialiste commence avec la destruction de la domination de classe et la puisse de pouvoir par le parti socialiste. Elle n’est pas autre classe que la dictature du prolétariat. Parfaitement: dictature! Mais cette dictature consiste dans la manière d’appliquer la démocratie, non dans son abolition … Mais cette dictature doit être l’œuvre de la classe et non d’une petite minorité dirigeante au nom de la classe.56

The dictatorship of the proletariat is here considered by Luxemburg to be a radical application of democracy, by the class of labour as a whole, and not under the directorship of any single party. The councillorist thesis relied on this notion of radical democracy and of the revolution as a process of restoring democracy to society at all levels – economic and political: “The idea of revolution as a process is central to council communism, and it leads us directly to consideration of council communist ideas concerning class consciousness and organisation, which Pannekoek described in 1909 as ‘those two pillars of working class power’.57 Council communism, at its core, presented both a moving theoretical critique of the unfolding Bolshevik revolution and offered a way forward for those Marxists who rejected the ‘orthodox’ political and philosophic interpretations of Marx.58 “In the council communists’ view, revolution would involve the mass action of a vast majority of the working class. This was one of the


55 On the developments after Marx’s death, especially in the social democracy of Kautsky, Bernstein et al.: Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx, 250-8.

56 Rosa Luxemburg, Grève générale, parti et syndicats, marked [Pour S. du S.], cited in Guy Debord, Fiches de lectures: Rosa Luxemburg, Grève générale, parti et syndicats, Box 1, Folder 20: 6, “Marxisme”.


principal points of divergence between the council communists and the Bolsheviks."^{59}

The apparent success of the Bolshevik model in Russia, and the failures of the workers' movement in the West, precipitated a crisis in Marxism and demanded a radical interrogation of the councilist thesis. Karl Korsch re-examined the councilist thesis in light of these events:^{60}

Now after overcoming the world economic crisis of 1921 and the related defeat of the German, Polish and Italian workers—and the following chain of further proletarian defeats including the British general strike and miners' strike of 1926–European capitalism has commenced a new cycle of its dictatorship on the backs of the defeated working class ... we cannot any more hold subjectively onto our old belief, quite unchanged and unexamined, in the revolutionary significance of the council concept and the revolutionary character of council government as a direct development of that political form of the proletarian dictatorship 'discovered' half a century ago.^{61}

Korsch would not accept, unexamined, the political concept of the council, attributing its failure, in part, to the “bourgeois class character”^^{62} of its origins in the medieval commune and pointing to Marxists' failure, up to the point, in identifying the significance of the council in its political form, rather than its social content. While Korsch argues that the council does not represent the “destruction of prevailing bourgeois state power”^^{63} — rather a proletarian form of state power — he identifies the true secret of the councilist thesis in the “social content”^^{64} of the workers' councils:

There remains still an unbalanced contradiction between on one hand Marx’s characterization of the Paris Commune as the finally discovered ‘political form’ for accomplishing the economic and social self-liberation of the working class and, on the other hand, his emphasis is at the same time that the suitability of the commune for this purpose rests mainly on its formlessness; that is, on its indeterminateness and openness to multiple interpretations ... the experience of the Paris Commune provided [Marx] with the proof that the ‘working class cannot simply appropriate the ready-made state machinery and put it into motion for its own purposes, but it must smash the existing bourgeois state machinery in a revolutionary way.'^^{65}

The dynamic and indeterminate association of workers in power reiterates at every turn — in practice — the “essential final goal of proletarian class struggle ... the classless and stateless Communist society.”^^{66}

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^60 On Korsch, see: Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality, 130-49.
^62 Korsch, 'Revolutionary Commune I,' 203.
^64 Korsch, 'Revolutionary Commune I,' 211.
^65 Korsch, 'Revolutionary Commune I,' 206.
^66 Korsch, 'Revolutionary Commune I,' 211.
At the same time as he sought a new political form which might express the social content of the council concept, Korsch undertook a critique of Bolshevism in power, on the basis of his own councillist position, which highlighted a number of key failings:

(a) The overestimation of the state as the decisive instrument of social revolution;
(b) the mystical identification of the development of the capitalist economy with the social revolution of the working class;
(c) the later ambiguous development of this first form of Marxist revolutionary theory through artificially grafting a two-phase theory of the Communist revolution onto it.  

The problems of the Russian revolution raised here by Korsch echo Marx’s critique of the Paris Commune: the seizure of state power as an end in itself; the failure to abolish the economic conditions of capitalism; and the transformation of theory into dogma. For Korsch, Bolshevism represented “Marxian socialism ... changed from revolutionary theory to an ideology.”

Lukács likewise adopted a councillist position, both as it fulfilled certain specific elements within his philosophic schema, and as a means of criticising and rehabilitating the Bolshevik model. For Lukács, the historical conditions of reification can only be disrupted by the “constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence.” The disruption of these structures requires that they, and their contradictions, be made conscious, or awakened in the consciousness of the proletariat which, when it becomes fully cognizant of the process of historical development, becomes the identical subject-object of history — “the first subject in history that is (objectively) capable of an adequate social consciousness” — “whose praxis will change reality.” Lukács argues that the fate of the revolution depends on the class consciousness of the proletariat, which stems from its particular location in society, and the social relations of its members to one another through their labour: “only the proletariat can discern in the correct understanding of the nature of society a power-factor of the first, and perhaps decisive importance.”

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68 Korsch, ‘Ten Theses on Marxism Today,’ 282. See also: Karl Korsch, ‘Crisis of Marxism,’ in Douglas Kellner, ed. Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977, 174: “Of all the contemporary forms of Marxism, [orthodox Marxism] is the most damaging to the progressive development of the proletarian class. After having long since stagnated into ideology, ‘orthodox Marxism’ collapsed as such (Kautsky) in its final phase.”
69 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 197.
70 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 199.
71 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 197-8.
72 Otherwise put: The proletariat’s consciousness of itself as a class.
73 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 68. See also: Jay, Marxism and Totality, 115: “But it is true that, as Lukács himself later admitted, ‘the proletariat seen as the identical subject-object of the real history of mankind is no materialist consummation that overcomes the construction of idealism. It is rather an attempt to
goal of the proletariat is, therefore, the abolition of reification, which relies on the proletariat’s radical self-negation: “the proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle.”

The workers’ council is the form of organisation with which Lukács identifies the achievement of these aims:

Every proletarian revolution has created workers’ councils in an increasingly radical and conscious manner ... this is a sign that the class consciousness of the proletariat is on the verge of overcoming the bourgeois outlook of its leaders ... The revolutionary workers’ council is one of the forms which the consciousness of the proletariat has striven to create ever since its inception. The fact that it exists and is constantly developing shows that the proletariat already stands on the threshold of its own consciousness and hence on the threshold of victory. The workers’ council spells the political and economic defeat of reification.

Like Korsch, Lukács sees in the councils the radical potential to overcome the apparently bourgeois origins of the councillorist form and, moreover, he locates the councils within the consciousness of the proletariat as the expression of an inchoate radical and practical need.

Finally, Anton Pannekoek devised perhaps the most practical outline for the implementation and function of the workers’ councils, reliant partly on Marx’s analysis of the Paris Commune, and as a rejoinder to the Bolshevik model. Pannekoek’s vision of the workers’ councils is, according to Aronowitz, overly schematic and simplistic. He articulates a form of social and political organisation constructed around the same core of proletarian control conceived by Marx:

The organization of production by the workers is founded on free collaboration: no masters, no servants. The combination of all the enterprises into one social organization takes place after the same principle ... Given the impossibility to collect the workers of all the factories into one meeting, they can only express their will by means of delegates. For such bodies of delegates in later times the name of workers’ councils has come into use. ... Different persons will act as delegates according to the different questions raised and the forthcoming problems.
This model, as Aronowitz argues, does not take into account any possible changes in the modes of production, or the organisation of social relations, and therefore lacks the historical grounding upon which Marx founded his own model of organisation. Further, Pannekoek seems to suggest that social consciousness – knowledge of the rules of the new society – will emerge *sui generis* from the formation of councils, rather than through the process of class struggle itself: “For every worker these rules will immediately spring up in his consciousness as [its] natural basis.”

The councillorist question became crucial for the Western Marxists in postwar France following the Soviet intervention against the uprisings in Hungary and Poland in 1956. The Arguments group translated the works of Korsch, who assumed his place in the pantheon of Western Marxism alongside Lukács: “[Korsch’s] decision to favor the workers’ councils over the Party as the appropriate form of proletarian organization also endeared him to the critics of the bureaucratized party system of the Soviet Union. And his deep distrust of statist forms of Marxism attracted the New Left’s more anarchistic adherents.” Several thinkers associated with the Arguments journal raised the question of the workers’ councils as an alternative to the Soviet, bureaucratic form of the workers’ party: “On peut dire que des « Conseils ouvriers » existent presque toujours à l’état latent dans les entreprises de tous genres.”

For the French Western Marxists, the problem posed by the workers’ councils was that of the tension between the “spontanéiste” conception of the workers’ movement, and that of the direction of the workers by party theoreticians. Rubel, for example, argues that the “spontanéiste” conception of the workers’ movement presents an indispensable critique of the “fétichisme du partie”, founded on the essential Marxian thesis that no state politics is capable of resolving the problems of pauperisation. Rubel interprets the legacy of Marx as fundamentally ambiguous, but ultimately sees the Marxian position as supportive of the will of the proletariat as the class to spontaneously intervene in historical events in

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81 Pannekoek, Workers’ Councils, 25.
83 Jay, Marxism and Totality, 130-1.
86 Rubel, ‘De Marx au bolchévisme,’ 11-12.
order to radically change their conditions. Moreover, he declares that Marx and Engels were opposed to indoctrination, preferring by contrast the direct experience of the working class as a guide for their own theory. The reception of the councillorist tradition in France, coupled to the immanent critique of Bolshevist practice which had so often accompanied it, would prove a rich source for Debord who pursued, in the councils, the political form capable of abolishing both capital and itself.

Debord presents in La Société du Spectacle a work with practical intentions, which contains both a theory of praxis and, at the same time, sketches a programme for the establishment of workers’ councils. Debord reaffirms the inseparability of the Hegelian element from Marx and erects his political programme on a concrete philosophy of praxis, which views man as the potentially self-mediating and free subject of history:

It is in being thrown into history, confronted with and sharing in labour and the struggles which shape it, that man is compelled to face his relations with sober senses [...] The subject of history can be nothing less than living man in the process of self-creation, becoming master and possessor of his world which is history, and being conscious of his activity.[SdS §74]

In order to for man to establish himself by his conscious, self-creative activity, he must overcome his historically located alienation. In other words, he must negate his own negation. For Debord, the spectacle represents the most extreme historical expression of this negation: “the totality of human existence has been subjugated by the ‘total abjuration of humanity’.”[SdS §43]

The alienations of the spectacle bear down most severely on the proletariat, whose humanity is affirmed only inasmuch as it becomes the property of commodity relations. They are the sole class for whom the question of their self-fulfillment is posed as the choice between the total refusal of their alienated and impoverished conditions of life, or nothing.[SdS §122] This total alienation renders them the only class capable of recognising in their social relations, the gulf between their self-realisation and self-alienation: “[when] the proletariat demonstrates through its own active being that historical consciousness has not been obliterated; the negation of the conclusion equates to a confirmation of

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87 Rubel, ‘De Marx au bolchévisme,’ 16-17.
88 Rubel, ‘De Marx au bolchévisme,’ 17.
89 See: Tom McDonough, The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France 1945-1968 (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2007), 25-6: “Décourement was the Situationist recognition of the need to struggle for control of the sign’s use, its range of reference, and the meaning it would assume in specific conjunctural instances. That intervention took the form of a struggle over meaning, an attempt to uncouple or disarticulate words from their significations in the dominant ideology and to impel them to pronounce instead a subversive social accenting.”
The negation of the negation is both the immanent potential of, and a historical compulsion for, the proletariat confronted by the necessity not only to abolish the spectacle, but to abolish itself as a separate, alienated class of society. [SduS §221]

Debord’s theory of praxis identifies the necessity for a critical theory to establish the foundations for a unity of theory and practice by first demolishing its speculative oppositions:

In order to effectively abolish the society of the spectacle, humanity must by necessity engage actively in struggle. A critical theory of the spectacle becomes actual only by uniting itself with the living movement antithetical to spectacular society, and this antithesis, expressed through the struggle of the revolutionary class, will become self-conscious by developing a critique of the spectacle which theorises the real historical conditions of life and of its suffocation; inversely revealing the secret totality of what life might be. Such theory expects no miracles from the working class. It envisages a modern formulation and realisation of the radical needs of the proletariat as a daunting task. To artificially distinguish theoretical from practical struggle – as fundamentally shown here, the very constitution and communication of such a theory cannot be conceived as anything other than rigorous practice –, it is certain that the arcane and demanding development of critical theory must also be the objective of this living movement in its struggle to abolish class society. [SduS §203]

Critical theory, as a theory of the real conditions of historical life faced by the proletariat, represents the antithesis of the anti-historical ideology of the spectacle in all its forms – bourgeois political economy, philosophical idealism, and scientism. This critical theory is for Debord as the new materialism was for Marx, a consciousness “wholly indistinct from a conscious practice to be embraced” [SduS §95] by the proletariat.

The revolutionary praxis of the proletariat both relies on, and is inextricably tied to, historical consciousness: “Historical consciousness cannot be safeguarded unless it becomes conscious practice; so too the action of the proletariat as a revolutionary class can be nothing less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of the world.” [SduS §78] The radical potentiality of proletarian consciousness lies in its relationship to labour which, for Debord, makes it the historical class par excellence. Labour, as purposive activity, creates the conditions for history and imbues time with its historical character, thus historical consciousness of the proletariat is the goal and the realisation of Debord’s revolutionary project: “[The] worker’s unmitigated ownership of every aspect of his life.” [SduS §53] For Debord, this goal can only be accomplished through the historically transformative unity of proletarian theory and practice: “Proletarian revolution wholly relies on the necessity that, for the first time, revolutionary theory qua consciousness of human
life activity needs must be known and lived by the masses. The revolution demands that workers become dialecticians and inscribe their thought as practice." [SduS §123]

Debord rejects the Bolshevik model of organisation as the means to achieve the aims of the proletarian revolution, seeing in the Communist Party a “representative party of the working class radically opposed to that class.” [SduS §100] The outcome of the organisation of the proletariat based on this model, [SduS §102] Debord argues, is the “extraneous administration of the working class, effected by means of an organised and clandestine party subjected to a cadre of intellectuals in the garb of ‘professional revolutionaries’.” [SduS §98] As a consequence, the Russian Revolution was not a triumph for the proletariat, but rather a triumph of the party for itself. [SduS §98] Debord’s analysis of the Russian situation – largely indebted to his forerunners⁹⁰ – views the conservation of the state and the continued development of capitalism by the Bolsheviks as the project of a new, “substitute ruling class” [SduS §104]:

The Bolsheviks justified their continued existence by arrogating in themselves state monopoly over the representation and assurance of proletarian rule, therefore becoming what they had always been: the proprietors of the proletariat. As such they eliminated all hitherto existing forms of property. [SduS §102]

In place of capitalist private property, the new bureaucratic class formed by former party cadres held all property in common as a class, transforming social labour into the ‘total commodity.’ [SduS §64; 107] Debord locates the failings of the Bolshevik model in the bourgeois form of the party itself: “It is the worker’s party, when organised according to the bourgeois model of differentiation, which appoints its cadre as the supernumerary ruling class of a new state hierarchy.” [SduS §104] The alternative to this organisational framework advanced by Debord, is the form of the workers’ councils.

The councillist thesis proposed by Debord as an outline for organisation binds his conception of political organisation to both the early Western Marxists and to Marx:

“The discovery of a political form under which the economic emancipation of labour might, at last, be achieved” has, in this century, assumed the distinct figure of the revolutionary workers’ councils; concentrating in themselves all decisive and executive functions, and assembling by means of delegates responsible to the base and dismissible at any moment. [SduS §116]

⁹⁰ Among them Castoriadis and Lefort, Ciliga, Korsch, and Rizzi.
This evokes both the model for the Commune proposed by Marx\textsuperscript{91} and the later, more advanced articulation of councillist organisation developed by Pannekoek.\textsuperscript{92} In spite of this, Debord paints past councillor irrigation as a revolutionary dumbshow: “Their actual existence has been as yet, no more than desultory prelude, immediately assailed and vanquished by the various forced committed to the defense of class society, among which we must count the workers’ own false consciousness.”[\textit{SduS} §116] Debord identifies the “specter of the councils”[\textit{SduS} §118] as both the apex, and nadir, of the proletarian movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century, which demonstrated its potential actualisation only to be defeated or suppressed.

Nevertheless, Debord presents the councils as the only viable political form for the achievement of proletarian praxis: “the power [of the councils] is precisely the context wherein the problems of proletarian revolution can be elucidated. This context aggregates the objective conditions for historical consciousness.”[\textit{SduS} §116] The form of the council creates the conditions for the proletariat to become conscious of their revolution as a historical process and as the process of history. As a theory it must be hostile “to all revolutionary ideology, and consciously so”[\textit{SduS} §124] the councillor position cannot therefore accept any “revolutionary organisation preceding the function of the councils – which must forge their particular form through struggle.”[\textit{SduS} §119]

The notion that the councils must be formed through the struggle of the working class differentiates Debord’s theory of councillorism from some of the more mechanistic interpretations of the earlier councillors\textsuperscript{93} and aligns his concept with the fulfillment of a dynamic, open process of revolutionary transformation. For Debord, the councils represent the historical consciousness of transformation and act so as to transform every facet of society:

> It is the decision to remodel everything from top to bottom according to the requisite power of the workers’ councils – the \textit{anti-statist dictatorship} – executive dialogue. The councils, whose power cannot be actualised by any means save the transformation of all that exists, could assign themselves no lesser task should they seek to convey and comprehend their own rôle in the human world.[\textit{SduS} §179]

By acting consciously in order to transform and to humanise its world, the proletariat establishes the conditions for the “coherent expression of the theory of praxis engaging in non-unilateral dialogue with practical struggles, which themselves tend toward practical theory.”[\textit{SduS} §120] In

\textsuperscript{91} See: Avineri, \textit{The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx}, 241.

\textsuperscript{92} See: Pannekoek, \textit{Workers’ Councils}, 24.

\textsuperscript{93} For example, Pannekoek.
the councils, the theory of praxis is to some degree actualised as they enable for the first time, workers to become dialecticians and inscribe their theory as practice. Debord suggests that the councils pose historical problems to be resolved, and above all, that problem is the proletariat’s abolition of itself as a separate class, and the instauration of truth – as the freedom and self-realisation of mankind – in a humanised world.

The philosophy of praxis functions in the Hegelian system of Marx to reunify that which was separated, and connects the historically located analysis of class relations to the concept of alienation which pursues man through history. Praxis represents both the conditions for man’s self-realisation and freedom, and his active pursuit of those aims:

The profound philosophical meaning of praxis is to place us in an order which is not that of knowledge, but rather that of communication, exchange, and association. Praxis, in its historically located sense, as the struggle of one class against another, and specifically as the struggle of the proletariat against the conditions of its immiseration, prepares the proletariat for the unification of its theory – conscious understanding of the conditions of the alienated social relations capitalism, and of the more profound alienation of man’s active historical being – with its practice: the political struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. Praxis unites Debord’s analysis of the spectacle as a historically located form of alienation, expressed in the class relations of spectacular society. It is also the foundation upon which Debord builds his political programme. Only the praxis of the proletariat, and its expression as a material, armed dialogue in the form of the Conseils, can overturn the entire historical process of man’s alienation, beginning with the historical conditions of spectacular society.

94 Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, 50.
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