



**MYTHS  
OF  
DISPERSED  
FORDISM**

**A Controversy About the Transformation  
of the Working Class**

**Advocom/  
Echanges et Mouvement**

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# INTRODUCTION

The nature of class struggle and the way the working class/the capitalist class are transformed in the process have always been highly controversial subjects. The more the course of world history is dominated and accelerated by class antagonism, the more certain people who would want to see themselves as social critics develop a tendency to proclaim the end of classes, class antagonism and class history.

Such proclamations have taken on very different forms: A lot of ink has been wasted in the 50s and 60s, in particular in the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany, on theories of the 'affluent worker' and the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class. In many instances this has been accompanied by triumphant claims about how Marx was completely wrong with all this nonsense he wrote about the immiseration of the working class. Nowadays it is easy to see, e.g. in the United States, why theorists are much more reluctant to spread all that rubbish about affluence.

In a slightly different perspective others have argued in the 60s and 70s that the majority of the working class was no longer interested in radical social change or was unable to initiate it because of internal differentiations brought about by capitalist development. Again Marx was criticised for having been wrong in assuming the existence of a united and strong proletariat. Thus theorists began to ponder about the 'new working class' or, in a different context, about the 'mass worker' and the positive role they could play in attacking the bastions of the capitalist system. In the meantime we know only too well what has become of these supposed vanguards of class struggle.

Others were prepared to declare the entire working class to be too conservative for change since their only interest resided in defending the status quo of their conditions of employment. Consequently any theory of revolution ascribing a central role to the proletariat like that of Marx was to be regarded as completely outdated. If the main aim was less work for everybody in the future, then the non-class of non-workers would inevitably replace the working class as the agent of social change.

Some of the latest variants of such wild phantasies about a mythical proletariat (of which I could not even give a complete account here) go as far as diagnosing the gradual disappearance of the working class and the complete atomisation of what is left of it. The subjectivity of the traditional working class, or of some of its sections, is seen as being destroyed through a double strategy of capitalist management: the introduction of the decentralised factory/of dispersed Fordism,

and the use of modern electronic equipment/the introduction of a new system of industrial communication. As a result it is assumed that there is no longer a fundamental contradiction between working class and capitalist class, there is only a kind of dispersed conflictuality. It is only logical in this perspective that Marx' theory has to be thrown on the scrapheap.

That is the position defended by Carlos in the first article of this small collection, and again in a subsequent letter to Henri Simon. Both pieces led to a renewed discussion inside Echanges et Mouvement about transformations of the working class in recent decades. Fundamentally it was accepted by those involved in the discussion that major transformations had in fact taken place in the antagonistic relationship between capitalists and working class (and not just inside the working class) although the nature of these transformations still needs to be clarified. However, we were convinced that the description as given by Carlos entirely missed the point, not only disregarding current changes in class relations but also rewriting the history of past struggles along lines of a most superficial interpretation, in contradiction with any kind of elementary experience.

Opposing the idea of an atomised working class and of dispersed conflictuality, it was thus necessary to emphasize the elements of continuity in (working-)class struggle and working-class structure. This is the major aim of a letter Henri Simon wrote to Carlos and which is reprinted as the third text in this brochure. It insists on analysing capitalism as a world system, on the increasing homogeneity of living conditions of workers, on an increasing centralisation of factory command with the decentralisation of production, etc. He concludes that a new society could arise out of the dynamic of present-day society, almost without the knowledge of the participants, as a result of a myriad of minor conflicts which taken individually might seem harmless but then add up to a major contradiction: the traditional contradiction between capitalists and workers.

But there were also some basic theoretical problems involved in Carlos' discussion of the tendency towards a new type of struggle under the heading of 'dispersed Fordism'. These problems were discussed in a letter by myself to Henri Simon (text no. 4). It was argued that Carlos completely ignored tendencies of the production of surplus value and the inherent self-destructive mechanisms, instead reproducing modern management-produced lyrics about the valorisation of capital. It was further claimed that his analysis of Fordism, the elimination of living labour from the production process and the development of class relations was based on a point of view regarding automation as a technical, organisational and management problem, not as part of a struggle between two antagonistic classes. It was finally maintained that his concept of the totalitarian tendencies of capital and the 'repressive unification of a world being subordinated to capital' was nothing but the unavoidable result of his failure to offer any kind of realistic ana-

lysis of class struggle, or perhaps of his offering no analysis of class struggle at all.

Both pieces of critical commentary were sent to Carlos in order to have his reactions. In his response he once again explains his attitudes concerning what he calls the 'methodological limitations in Marxian analysis', 'economic reductionism' and 'teleological assertions' (text no. 5). These arguments are of course not very new nor very well founded but form part of the standard weaponry of many decades of sociological critique of Marx in the vein of people like Theodor Geiger, Ralf Dahrendorf, Cornelius Castoriadis, André Gorz, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, John Goldthorpe, Anthony Giddens, etc.

# **DISPERSED FORDISM AND THE NEW ORGANIZATION OF LABOUR**

## **Towards a new type of struggle?**

For eleven days in October, 1990 (10th-20th), the road transport sector in Spain, carrying around 75% of all goods according to sources of the CEOE, witnessed one of the most violent labour conflicts in recent memory in a strike conducted by the joint associations of "owner-operators" in the trucking industry.

Given the nature of the demands raised by the strikers, this strike could be dismissed as simply another conflict between big and small capital; that is, between the large employers' organizations controlling the major part of the longhaul transport market and the little guys who own and operate from one to five trucks. As a conflict of interests between two fractions of transport capital the demands of the organizations calling the strike - they represent around 15% of the sector according to the press - centered around a series of demands aiming at the defense of traditional ways of regulating the transport market (government intervention against "illegal" truckers, as well as intervention with regard to the fixing of tariffs, inspection of vehicles, etc.). As such, considering the forces at play, this struggle would necessarily be of little interest to the readers of this paper.

### **The collapse**

Like so many other conflicts in Spain in recent times, this strike remained strictly within the limits of corporatist demands, although it brought with it wide-ranging disruption and tensions (confrontations with police, persecution of scabs, burning of trucks, blockades of entrances and exits of roads and national highways). But its real significance lies elsewhere. As has been underlined by the press, trying eagerly to minimize its importance, the strike was only followed by a minority of the truckers, and it did not affect all the provinces of Spain. Nonetheless we have to acknowledge the extraordinary impact it had.

Within a few days of the strike's beginning, once truckers had blockaded the roads and picketing had begun, its impact on the big cities could be seen in the empty shelves of the major supermarkets in Bilbao and Catalonia, and in the scarcity of goods (among others fish) in the central markets of Madrid and Barcelona. Disruption in the industrial centers was even much greater. Although claims



made by the CEOE and the major employers' associations tend to exaggerate the losses (with reported losses ranging from 50,000 to 200,000 million pesetas), it is a fact that a total blockade was effective in the industrial belts of the main Spanish provinces. Just to give a few examples: General Motors had to close; Firestone, Nissan and Seat shut down their assembly lines, as did Citroen. Many other enterprises suffered similar interruptions in the production process. Fasa-Renault, Michelin, Ford (which had to hire 25 airplanes to fly in supplies from its plants in Great Briatrain and Germany), the chemical industry of Tarragona and many lesser industries were hit by the strike. In addition, the border at Irun was blockaded by the strikers.

### **Optimization of work and vulnerability of the production process in dispersed Fordism**

Apart from the spectacular character of some of the conflicts, put into relief by the so-called mass media in a campaign of slandering the strikers and by signs of alarmism in the population (people began to hoard products as if it was question of an imminent war), the truckers' strike takes on a significance which exceeds the limits of its formal characteristics.

That specific significance - leaving aside the economic and social repercussions of what was no more than the action of a minority - has very much to do with how this battle highlighted the profound structural weaknesses in the production process growing out of the capitalist restructuring of the 1980's, as well as the objective limits of modern techniques for organizing and managing the workforce.

The cycle of capitalist restructuring of the past two decades has been marked by the deployment of a double strategy: A first result has been what has come to be called "the decentralized factory" or dispersed Fordism. The aim of such managerial strategies was in the first place to defeat the resistance of workers and their power to put pressure on capitalists within production itself, by dispersing the masses of workers which had concentrated around the poles of production centers having developed after the Second World War (especially with the growth of the auto industry and other mass consumption industries).

This massive concentration of the labour force around the assembly lines of the giant manufacturing complexes was at the base of a cycle of capital accumulation extending till the beginnings of the 1970s and presupposing the culmination of the scientific organization of work put into practice by Ford half a century before; an

organization which, apart from the massive concentration of workers, found expression in the segmentation and decomposition of physical movements of workers on the assembly line which then became the origin of numerous acts of resistance, strikes and sabotage. But the industrial agglomeration equally resulted in workers constituting a power which was able to exert economic and social pressure. In successive cycles of (trade union and autonomous) struggles workers succeeded in eroding the base of the rate of accumulation in the industrialized countries. At the end of the 1970s the profit crisis had reached a point where it became inevitable to completely reorganize the management of the labour force and to seek to intensify the exploitation of labour power in order to bring about a renewed rise of the rate of capital accumulation. This is the epoch of social pacts, of politics of austerity, of the neo-liberal models that have shaken the foundations of the welfare state.

As a consequence, the second part of the strategic orientation of capital in attempting to restructure the labour process in the past decade has consisted in a recomposition of the production process which, in order to defeat the resistance of the mass worker, was meant to facilitate a renewed dynamic development of the cycle of accumulation. The means for achieving this end was to be the implantation of modern electronic equipment and a new system of industrial communications. Putting into practice this double strategy, then, has resulted in a territorial decentralization of production processes and increased flexibility in response to the requirements of a type of flexible demand which has made necessary the production of small series of products (with the enterprises intending to gain a higher quota of the market by putting emphasis on varying design, changing fashions, etc.).

In past years we have witnessed the displacement of much of the assembly and finishing process towards the capitalist periphery, composed of countries which offer advantages in the availability of cheap labour (Turkey, South Korea, Philippines, Brazil, Mexico). This dispersion on a world scale has its counterpart on the regional level within the industrialized countries themselves. Thus we witness the decentralization of the big manufacturing centers transformed into smaller production units, and the extension of subcontracting, through which big corporations shift certain phases of production (and their costs) to smaller firms which charge themselves with the task of providing the parts and components for the final product. In this respect the automobile industry, motor of the economic development of capitalist countries up to the 1970s, is an exemplary case.

## **JIT and zero stock: The logistic chain of surplus value production**

It is easy to understand that such a new industrial landscape manifestly puts new demands on the techniques of organizing work and of managing production. Hence the proliferation of all kinds of conceptions and guidelines of a new management philosophy (just-in-time, zero stock which intends to save costs and to avoid the immobilization of capital, total quality, human resource management, etc.). In fact, the so-called new management philosophy corresponds to a new phase in the division of labour between different enterprises along the lines of what has come to be called the logistic chain of surplus value production; a model of establishing a hierarchy of different enterprises participating in the production of a specific product (e.g. a car which requires the cooperation of a large number of enterprises fabricating components or performing intermediate phases of assembly and operating under conditions dictated by the big corporation selling the final product).

In order for this new production process to function in practice, it becomes increasingly necessary that each link in the production process chain, every movement between the service firms and the corporations with which they maintain links of subcontract, be perfectly coordinated. In other words, if everything is to function according to the principle of JIT, it is absolutely indispensable that each necessary component - to say it in the words of the president of Nissan, the first enterprise putting it into practice in order to connect its factories in Japan and Great Britain - be at its destination "at the proper time, in the correct quantity and in the right place".

In reality we are confronted with what is only another expression of the subordination of small capital (the subsidiary enterprise) to big capital (the enterprise fixing the scale of demand). This is therefore a strategy of transferring the benefits of small production units to the big industrial corporations, ridding themselves in this way of the costs for keeping stock (zero stock) and for the immobilization of capital as a result of keeping stocks; at the same time this permits them to shift those phases of the production process which produce less surplus value to the subcontracting firms.

As far as the workers are concerned, this new industrial order represents another turn of the screw in the process of intensifying the exploitation of the labour force. The dissolution of the large concentrations of masses of workers translates itself into a relative loss of the ability to put pressure on the capitalists, an ability

which was so characteristic of the "old workers' movement". One of the first consequences has been the devalorization of labour power and the worsening of workplace conditions. This is the phenomenon which we know as temporal work, a reality expressing itself in a multitude of contract models (for temporary work) in the subsidiary firms which are for the rest the only ones keeping the labour market in flux, as well as expressing itself in a net reduction of wages and the limiting of other resources and rights at the workplace (flexibility).

All this has resulted in the emergence of a massive hierarchy of wages, the demolition of the class tradition associated with the struggles of the mass worker, and the neo-corporatist or sectional elements in working-class behaviour, pitting employed against unemployed, temporary workers against permanent workers, the workers of the advanced service sectors (computer specialists) against the workers of the backward service industries (state employees, cleaners), skilled against unskilled, etc.

But the new formula for the organization and management of socialized commodity production, by attempting to get rid of the kind of resistance which has consolidated itself around the figure of the mass worker, has opened a new dimension for the development of contradictions inherent to the social relations between capital and labour. The decentralization of production substantially increases the vulnerability of the entire process. The logistic network of the dispersed unities of production inevitably leads to a proliferation of elements to be linked with each other, and these links are the soft spots of the system. In fact, if these new technologies of organization are to function properly, not just as theoretical models, but in the daily practice of production, it becomes necessary to eliminate the possibility of any irregularity, setback or unforeseen event which might lead to a breakdown in the continuous flux of goods and components within the limits set by the JIT system (not only in the production of capital, but also in its realization).

In fact, if everything is to function perfectly, it becomes necessary that "all" the elements of the process to be linked, including the workers, operate in total harmony with the aims established by the centers of decision making. A minimal error in any part of the logistic network, whether intended (sabotage) or not, has a multiplier effect on the entire system and inevitably leads to the collapse of the process of production or distribution or of both of them at the same time. This is what happened in the Ford strike in Britain, or more recently in the Spanish truckers' strike which we discussed at the beginning of this article.

In this way, the formally subjective vulnerability associated with the conglomerations of mass workers in the factory whose intervention could well obstruct the production process, has been eliminated in dispersed Fordism through the transformation into a functional, formally objective vulnerability of the new production organization. Our individual tragedy consists in being labour power, precisely because we recognize ourselves as a constituting element of capital - i.e. of the system of social relations requiring the realization of the exchange value of our labour power; the tragedy of the forms of social domination which are at the base of capitalist production is rooted in the fact that they have to negate ( by suppression of living labour) the real source of value production, i.e. living labour which is capable of valorizing technology.

Capital, as a system of social relations, is not something which is exterior to ourselves. Only formally is it an exterior element, i.e. only in the forms of social domination which it entails. This is the origin of an unsurmountable contradiction between the forms of formal domination (the centers of financial and technological decision making) which require the physical suppression of the disruptive potential embodied in the labour force, and the necessity to incorporate the labour force as well as to intensify its exploitation as the only means of guaranteeing the continuity of the capitalist accumulation process.

Whether in the classical Fordist organization or in the actual variants of dispersed Fordism, it is a fact that the contradiction between capital and labour continues to appear as something with ever more fundamental connotations. The real (objective) limits to the further development of capitalist accumulation are rooted in the labour force or, to put it in another way, in the human existence being subordinated to its role as mere labour power. The automation of the industrial plant puts ever more into relief its dependency on living labour. And this is not only true with regard to the knowledge incorporated into the technical apparatus, but also with regard to the functions of control, of supervision, of maintenance and of complementary services (stretching from the advanced service sector to the most devalorized labour of cleaning) without whose coordinated contributions automation is impossible.

### **Human resource management and corporate ideology**

Though this kind of reasoning might seem to be quite abstract, its correctness is indeed confirmed by the most concrete plans of daily corporate practice. From

Japan to the United States and Europe, one of the principal preoccupations of the transnational corporations is the "management of human resources". Management of the electronic technology demands a complementary strategy based on the necessity of generating a consensus among the different levels of the functional hierarchy at work, strictly avoiding the resurgence of a new class identity like the one that has been expressed by the ideologies developing with the rise of the mass worker. This is to make possible a certain "corporate culture" in which each worker assumes as his/her own the objectives determined by the technical-financial center. It is clear that this refers to the hegemonic industrial corporations, because in the specific constellation brought about by the dispersed production process taylorist and authoritarian models coexist with models of this new culture which tries to imply workers in the implementation of objectives which are laid down by management (the proposal of Solchaga with the "Pact of Competitivity" goes in this direction in that it intends to link wage increases to an index of productivity).

But the nature of the dispersed production process, which makes the situation of increasingly larger sections of the workforce ever more precarious (characterized by the growth of part-time and temporary workers), sets narrow limits to achieving such a consensus. For this reason, corporate strategy orients itself towards a differential treatment of each worker, according to his/her relative importance in the logistic chain, establishing a rigidly stratified hierarchy of wages and functions within the enterprise. In fact, the new techniques of organizing the labour process have to be seen in the context of the necessity to achieve a consensus which is explicitly accepted by every single element in the chain of production and distribution. If it is true that the search for a consensus has been essential for the capitalist system ever since its beginnings (and has been incorporated into all forms of the prevailing power structure) and up to the present day, the ever more hectic ups and downs of the trade cycle and the level of the technical and historical development of exploitation of labour power which have led to the dispersed organisation of the production process have made the goal of obtaining a consensus the corner stone of the underlying forms of social life.

Just-in-time, total quality, and other watchwords put forth by the most aggressive Japanese transnationals are in the technological, as well as ideological, vanguard of this process. Up to now we have been accustomed to identify capitalist development with the protestant ethic. But protestantism, the cult of Reason as developed in the Enlightenment, as well as the invention of individuality in the western democratic system, maintain a balance between individual freedom and the func-

tional subordination to the new order forced upon us by the organizational process of labour. The mediation of the new techniques of organization and management of labour activity spreads more and more into sectors which have so far been looked upon as sacrosanct spheres of the individual. The totalitarian domination of capital extends in two directions at the same time, with a qualitative dimension (concerning the individuality and its psychic functions) and a quantitative dimension (concerning the entire arc of expressions of social life), and in doing so it exhibits signs which are more and more visibly totalitarian.

In the present phase of capitalist domination the ideological sphere has been totally subordinated to the material force of the process of accumulation. This is what the ideological highpriests of the system have called "the end of ideologies". The production of ideology has ceased to be formally independent from the process of material production. Ideology originates in the same process of valorization, and it takes concrete form in the cult of money (as a generalized social manifestation) and of the private accumulation of wealth as the beginning and the end of existence. Indeed, individual imagination is heavily imbued with the monetary principle: the cult of value finds expression in the possession of things. In this way the process of generating and realizing values - or, the dynamics of commodity production - reconstitutes itself in the generation and realization of ideological forms corresponding to the new phase of capitalist development. The ideology of a "corporate culture", then, represents the basic element of a consensus which makes it possible to attain the goals set forth by management.

But the forms of obtaining this consensus differ from place to place. In Europe the welfare state, to the extent that it still exists, serves this role. But as the recession points towards the abolition of the welfare state, capital increasingly is turning towards the Japanese capitalist block which has demonstrated a lot of dynamism in generating formulas of consensus. The major parts of the modern technologies of managing and organizing work have come to us from Japan, in accordance with its aggressive policy of technological and financial penetration in Europe and in the United States.

The technologies of surveillance and control that are integrated in the automation process in order to enforce the physical control of the productive sequence demand corresponding techniques of interiorized control on the part of living labour intervening in the process along the production chain. This implies, therefore, to extend the technology of control of the material processes to techniques of con-

trolling the subjective factor. The goal is to create the absolute "ideal" in automation, a self-regulating process in which humans and machines are fully integrated.

### **The new cycle of struggles under dispersed Fordism**

This desperate search for a consensus nonetheless has its limits in the way the imperatives of optimizing and maximizing profits are respected. Although this sounds like a voice of the past, it has to be recognized that the capitalist mode of production, with all its electronic paraphernalia, is an intrinsically contradictory reality. While the increasing complexity of production processes requires the consensual submission of all the elements of the logistic chain of surplus value production to a centralized command, the lowering of costs and the absorption of an ever larger part of surplus value by the centre leads to a hierarchy of subcontractors encompassing a multiplicity of differing interests. The transport strike is paradigmatic in this sense. The big corporations (e.g. in the automobile industry) have managed to rid themselves of all those phases of the production process which for technical and organizational or strictly economic reasons could well be taken over by other subcontracting firms. Centering in this way their activity on the segments of the logistic chain which promise higher surplus value, the monopolistic firms also dictate the rates (for transport, e.g.). Simultaneously, the same big corporations are strictly dependent on the subcontractors from the point of view of logistics (truckers and suppliers of parts, e.g.). With this they are confronted with an element of potential conflictuality between the various interests at play which has given rise to the October strike.

But what has undoubtedly been a conflict of interests between two forms of capital, also made manifest the weaknesses and the potentiality of conflicts existing in the dominant mode of dispersed Fordism. In the last years we have witnessed a multitude of conflicts often erupting in specific segments of the production chain and related services which would have to be classified as merely "sectional" forms (the machinists of Renfe, the air traffic controllers, the cleaners, buses, health sector, etc. - to refer only to the Spanish case). At first sight they all appear to be strongly sectional and corporatist in character, with demands being specifically tied to the respective professional category of the workers within a new industrial hierarchy. ATC

In their formal appearance (rank and file committees) these struggles tend to question the traditional trade unions, but nevertheless they remain firmly implanted within the horizon of traditional trade union demands, with their forms of



solidarity corresponding to the phase of dispersed Fordism, in the same way as mass actions were the expression of the mass worker issued from the classical Fordist strategy which was characterized by big industrial concentrations of the labour force. To criticize its sectoral or focal character is simply useless. Or it is another consequence of our being entangled in forms of ideological thinking which gave rise to the "grand projects" of proletarian emancipation, more appropriate for communist reminiscences than for a radically critical view of the new realities.

The real solidarity, the kind of social life which is possible today, is the one being practiced in the process of struggle and resistance to the process of reproducing capitalist relations. There is a correspondence between an atomized organization of the labour process and atomized forms of solidarity and resistance. The capacity of global control of the process is rooted precisely in the technical and scientific management of each of the elements of the social production chain; they favour in particular the integral components at the expense of those excluded from the process (old workers, young people, women, etc.); and thus they establish a hierarchy of privileges within specific industrial categories, based on their relative importance for the functioning of the process, i.e. on their contribution to the logistic chain of surplus value production.

The dissolution of the old forms of solidarity and resistance of the mass worker supposes in fact a process of adaptation of the forms of proletarian resistance to the new conditions under which labour power is exploited. This is the end of the teleological concept which maintained the objective necessity of communism and the corresponding vision (based on the recuperation of forms of community belonging to the past) which has been the traditional source of inspiration of the movement of opposition to wage labour. In fact, the implantation of Fordism already marks the beginning of a process in which the perspective of "going beyond" capital is abandoned in favour of a concept of "living with capital".

Insofar the absence of a social project and the falling-back into the immediacy characterizing the new cycle of proletarian struggles ultimately demonstrate simply the absence of a project on the part of capital itself in its phase of total domination in which the process of accumulation is completely transformed by the reduction of capital's circulation time to zero, negating in the concrete practice of accumulation its capacity of cyclical generation of administered time. Thus the ideal of progress which constituted the (bourgeois) project of rising capitalism, tied to a trade cycle which implied some promise - and a risk - with regard to the

future, has transformed itself in the present phase into a trade cycle pursuing its aim (namely, augmenting the mass of capital) in instantaneous form, without considering any perspective of projection into the future. In fact, in the context of dominant ideology the future only appears as a residual, spectacular category (futurism) so characteristic of a model of civilization sinking back into itself.

### **The destabilizing fragmentation**

The destruction of the formal expressions of resistance represents in fact the possible dissolution of the dominant forms of organizing the production process. There is a correspondence between the phenomenological reality of capital as the totalitarian control of the world - presenting itself under the aspects of extensive domination (world market) and intensive domination (aimed at the potentialities of subjectivity) - and the structural reality of its dispersed organization.

As in any form of totalitarian civilization, in which the trend towards total domination coincides with the emergence of centrifugal forces, menacing its stability from inside, the model of civilization based on the accumulation of capital is characterized by a similar contradiction, even if under new conditions for the concrete, historical realization of its domination. This is to say, the total realization of capital - or of the world subjected to capital - is at the same time the realization of the limits of totalitarian control. If the globalization of the cultural forms finds its counterpart in the forms of social fragmentation (along lines of nationality or of identities generated within the horizon of the capitalist model), then the totalitarian realization of the capitalist production process finds its counterpart in the expressions of fragmentation which appear in the concrete forms of the exploitation of labour power.

The total domination of capital presents itself as merely an abstract unification of the world on the basis of the commodity and of money. But the unification on the basis of these abstract categories (commodities are values, have a certain value) implies in fact a dissolution of underlying forms of social life, precisely because the access to the commodity (and to buying power) depends ever more markedly on the position a person occupies inside the logistic chain of the production of surplus value; it is this criterion which also assigns to employed persons a more or less advantageous position at the time of entering negotiations within the context of transactional relations (being the essence of those social relations which are usually called capital). Precisely because the present model of social life is characterized by the prevalence of immediacy (private consumption of things),

there is no social project "inside" the coordinates of the commodified forms of social life so typical of capitalist relations.

This crisis of social life becomes most evident at the very center of the capitalist system. The emergence of the fourth world in the "rich" countries, the thatcherite theory of the two-thirds society, the deterioration of living conditions in the metropolitan agglomerations and the spreading of pathological forms induced by the accumulation of capital itself, from contamination to drug abuse, the pockets of marginality, etc., - all this feeds precisely on those elements which have been expelled from work on the logistic chain.

### **The repressive unification of the world as subjected to capital**

The instable equilibrium in which the reproduction process is maintained in the capitalist countries and its implicit recognition on the part of the dominant technocracy has favoured the generalized implantation of a system of industrial blackmail represented by the destabilization of work conditions (at the same time traceable to other reasons for intensifying the exploitation of labour power) and direct repression whenever a conflict becomes manifest.

But the increasing importance of non-guaranteed labour accompanying dispersed Fordism sets a potential limit to achieving consensus. The instability of labour generates disaffection and makes it difficult to develop a "corporate spirit" (incessantly preached by the theoreticians of new industrial relations). The strategy of differential management offering privileges and recompense in a planned form to each of the various categories of the industrial hierarchy tends to destabilize precisely those strata whose contribution to the chain of surplus value production is less important, quite in line with today's dominant conception of political economy.

This is the only possible escape route when applying modern techniques of management, and not the resolution of the existing contradiction between capital and labour. But even using this escape route has its limits in the growing necessity of valorizing all the phases of the production chain, according to the criteria of maximizing the results (surplus value), criteria which are to be applied to every single element of the production chain. This is to say, the strategies of differential management of human resources has so far succeeded in preventing the intercategory consolidation of a politically active subject, but they have not succeeded in finally achieving the configuration of the capitalist reproduction process as a

totality, extending over the entire territory and over all of the faculties of individuals in which each of the integral parts functions as a determinant of the final result. Thus, for example, the strike of the airport cleaners of Madrid brought chaos and the threat of flights being cancelled to the airport.

Precisely because the increasingly precarious position of the labour force denotes the precarious state of a production system in a kind of instable equilibrium, the management of consensus has to be complemented by the implantation of openly repressive mechanisms. The growing tendency of policing everyday life, the restriction of the so-called democratic rights (right to strike, rights of expression), the criminalization of insurgent minorities or minorities who are exponents of whatever form of dissent, the purely propagandistic and fetishized affirmation of democracy at a time when the gap between official policy and the reality of everyday social practice keeps widening - all this has contributed to making the democratic rights appear as a simply propagandistic category in a context of technocratic management of public life as subordinated to capital which in practice more and more takes on the character of totalitarianism.

The democratic legitimation does not correspond anymore with the reality of a world whose dissolution of social functions and of the production chain has made it possible that the activity of a social group in a strategic position within the logistic chain of surplus value production (be this the power of finance capital or of any other social segment) could well cause the process of social reproduction to collapse through its influence on a segment or just a single element of the process.

The formal polarization apparently resulting from the relations between capital and labour has had two effects: On one side it has led to a higher level of the concentration of capital so that decision making has now gained the status of total autonomy with respect to any democratic instance or mediation whatsoever; on the other side the real dissolution of the production process, subjected to the laws of accumulation, has turned any references to democratic rules into a mere banality. The "majority" is nothing but an empty formula to legitimize the unilateral decision of capitalist managers as to the fate of society as a whole. In fact, the material conditions on which the present forms of social life are based have made irrelevant the democratic postulates of all kind, which are nothing but a fetter, a political prejudice of the past. Hence the various expressions of democratic action, remaining firmly within the universe of a fictitious role of the majority (in the style of the campaign led with the strike of 14 December, 1988, or the campaign

against the NATO or the campaign against the Gulf war), at the same time being located on the periphery of the reproduction chain (in the case of the 14 December strike campaign carefully organizing their activities in such a way as to avoid the interruption of the chain), and deliberately imitating forms of action developed by the mass worker, have degenerated into a mere ritual of testimony bound to end in frustration and failure (just in case that they actually have any objective at all).

An organization which restricts itself to affirming the principle of immediacy (i.e. the traditional demands) cannot be seen as questioning the totality that is represented by the logistic chain and the process of social reproduction (in this case as well as in the conflicts taking place in the nerve centers of capitalism - as in the transport strike in Paris - the propaganda machine of the State and of the communication media orients itself on mobilizing the rest of the urban masses against the "anti-social" minority).

Experience has taught us that such conflicts have no cumulative effect, nor do they insert themselves in a perspective of emancipation; they turn into isolated acts of resistance, adding up to a kind of social guerilla warfare. But they are fundamentally radical acts because each time it becomes more evident that our existence is defined as being a source of valorization of a world in which capital constitutes itself as a system of intrinsically conflict-ridden social relations. There are no real options outside the limits set by the social relations of capital - social relations which leave us no other choice except conflictuality. Maybe to accept this burden of conflictuality and to consciously renounce to vague hopes will be the last existential option remaining for us who - in a situation of being reduced to the status of labour power - have nothing to lose except our illusions.

Etcetera

(Translated from: Fordismo disperso y nueva organización del trabajo: ¿Hacia un nuevo tipo de luchas? in: Etcétera n. 18, junio 1991, p. 55-69)

# ON THE AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENT IN SPAIN AND IN GENERAL

Letter from Carlos to Henri Simon

12/7/1991

Dear Henri,

I intend to give some more detailed information on the autonomous movement in Spain which in my opinion could help to better understand its radical characteristics as resulting from the process of adaptation of the workforce leaving the countryside: During the last 15 years of the Franco regime many workers were in such a situation, migrating to the industrial towns in Catalonia, Madrid, the Basque Country, Asturias, Valladolid, etc. I think that the workers' attitude is intimately linked to their personal and historical experience in the milieu where they have grown up. In short, most of the workers involved in the most characteristic, autonomous struggles were young people (the first generation born in urban districts or having emigrated from other parts of Spain, all of them having a very recent experience of factory life and of its contradictions, with no political tradition (most of them coming from small villages in Andalusia, Extremadura, Galicia, Aragon, Castilia), i.e. they were not used to the capitalist ways of mediation to solve the labour problems. They only knew the previous current practice of 'caciquism', and social relations still tied to some kind of feudal remains.

In this respect, there is a significant difference between the Asturian miners (where workers' organisations have always existed - it is not by chance that the Comisiones Obreras had their origin right here) and the workers on the line at the Valladolid Renault factory rejecting all discipline, showing a very radical behaviour and being completely hostile to the unions. I am familiar with both experiences, and I always refer to formal differences, i.e. differences in the formal expression of autonomous struggles. On one hand, the Renault unions had to wait for the autonomous movement to exhaust itself before they could impose themselves as mediators, though remaining rather weak; on the other hand the same unions, while still being powerful in the Asturias, have had to defend many of the workers' tricks, of the transgressions of working rules (refusal of work, Monday absenteeism, faked sick-leaves obtained from the doctors through pressure or bribery, etc.) in order to retain their influence amongst the miners.

With this I turn to what you said on the need of avoiding the easy 'recipes for the success of struggles'. Of course, we have to be aware of 'the dialectical relationships' or, in other words, of the existing conflicts in the formal expression of the organisations and of the struggle as the real battleground of proletarian action. I have asked myself for a long time up to which point we refer to prejudices, to inherited out-of-date concepts no longer related to the modern world, when we investigate the present conflicts in developed capitalist countries. I am talking here about the bankruptcy of 'finalism', i.e. the fading of the meaning of quite a lot of concepts linked to the theory of class struggle, a theory which certainly corresponded to the moment when working-class subjectivity formed as a formal social expression in front of capital represented by the bourgeoisie. In my view the disappearance of finalism and of the messianic concepts of emancipation is directly linked to the disintegration or the disappearance of the historical subject which supported them. We witness the unfolding of a more and more developed process of decomposition of the social form of the classical proletariat (the factory worker who worked in large units of production and whose life and working conditions were characterized by a certain homogeneity). The rise of the service sector with a new fragmented and precarious proletariat and the dispersion of the large productive industrial units inaugurate, in my opinion, a new phase of relationships in the exploitation of the labour force.

On the workers' side, this implies a break with the so-called workerist tradition, and on the capitalists' side new necessities and expressions of a social consensus. But all that happens in a process of endless contradictions developing everywhere and being completely reshaped in a kaleidoscopic universe of paradoxical tensions and conflicts. Contradictions arising at a certain level of social relations are simply absent at another level. To consider human beings as nothing but labour force (synonymous with the growing proletarianisation of the population) was not in line with a sociologically homogenous class composition as the one we could observe after the Second world war, when working class struggle was linked to the dominance of Fordism. We might say today that work undergoes a process of transformation which is understandable only if we consider the crumbling of the old forms of capitalist domination (from classical Fordism to the decentralised production which implies the decomposition of the old forms of class structure at the level of the factory worker).

Accordingly, we might say that the classical model of class confrontation has been deeply transformed. The extension of capital has entailed the disappearance of the formal subjectivity, of a social subject developing around the traditional

working class, visible to everyone as a practical reality in the mass movement of workers. On the other hand, the new production and management techniques helped to shape an extremely hierarchical structure of segments of the labour force. Whatever has been formerly described in terms of the struggle of two classes cannot be seen so anymore because all kinds of contradictions have exploded. There is no longer a *fundamental contradiction*, there is only a conflictuality which spreads all over the developed capitalist countries through a lot of small unfair 'cheatings', crimes, insubordinations in the production sphere and in the social life in general.

This dispersion of the conflicts concerning more or less large segments of the working class and the proletarianised population is not linked at all to a specific vision of the future (like 'communism' or 'socialism'), contrary to what used to be the prevalent ideology amongst workers organised in parties and unions. Rather we can observe a tendency towards the decomposition of capitalist society instead of a tendency towards the recomposition of a historical subject representing a kind of alternative form of sociality. This does not mean the end of class struggle as the theory of post-modernism tries to explain, but its radical transformation corresponding to the present stage in the development of the exploitation of the labour force. At the same time it means new ways of expressing the resistance, the organisation on the workers' side, even new values and concepts of struggles sometimes in contradiction with what we knew from the past.

In fact, I tried to discuss this problem in an article published in the last Etcetera issue concerning the transport strikes and the new dispersed fordist organisation of work (see preceding article). I think you are right when you say that this discussion about the forms of the struggles can easily end up in a heap of prejudices (anarcho-sindicalist e.g.) about the working class, and perhaps it would help enormously if we just stopped looking at these more general questions which are behind this discussion on the forms of the class struggle and its meaning.

Actually, I believe it is impossible to develop any kind of serious analysis concerning the theory of communism, i.e. neither an inductive theory (trying to discover in the present struggles elements which could be seen as prefiguring communism), nor a deductive theory (proceeding from ethical, ecological, teleological ... principles or premisses). In my opinion, the transformation of society no longer follows laws like the ones which were formulated at the origins of modern social science according to a mechanistic picture of the world; on the contrary, it is an open process in which it is possible to detect contradictions through con-



flicts and tensions but we are dealing with contradictions which do not permit us to think of specific historic outcomes. The fact that there is still a lot of conflicts even if they are not seen by the actors involved as aiming at the substitution of one social order by another could be regarded as a kind of negation of the social status quo. Questions about the nature of communism and how to bring it to life were considered as being pertinent to the actual reality of a dominant capitalism from a point of view corresponding to the previous period. Presently, everything looks as if communism would be nothing but the virtuality of a fundamental social change springing from the multiplicity of conflicts.

### **On Spain and the current political debate**

In Spain, the present political debate concerns the 'competitivity pact'. As I have already mentioned in previous letters, the government tries to push for a new social pact (1) and the unions are against it. Of course we have to understand one thing: The conditions formulated by the government in its project were unacceptable; nonetheless the unions insisted on playing the same old comedy as usual - clamouring loudly their refusal with the threat to initiate a new general strike like in December 1988 (2) though agreeing 'to discuss' the matter. The government proposals include a tighter wage control. i.e. a bigger reduction of an already seriously lowered living standard, a reduction of the employers' contribution to the health system (with as a counterpart an increase of the employees' contribution), a diminution of enterprise taxes, more flexibility in the working contracts and the possibilities of redundancies becoming less expensive for employers, etc.

The central aim of all these measures is to increase productivity and competitiveness in Spain which is the lowest among the European countries (only a little better than in Turkey) according to some OECD or other international reports. The reduction of the labour price is the last possibility to try to improve the Spanish competitiveness on the European market and the counterpart offered by the government to the already invested transnational capital (or which could be invested in a near future). There are indeed no other measures to be taken. The modernisation of the productive apparatus is practically finished, mainly in the industrial branches which might have some future in the EC, while other branches with a less promising future have been left to themselves or have decayed which is more or less the same. Most of the modern factories already are in the hands of transnational capital (more than 90% of agrobusiness, the entire business of electronics, computers, and automation components, etc.). The only thing the gov-

ernment could still do now is to be tighter with wages and public expenses for welfare.

The unions have maintained their usual position during the previous period i.e. a verbal opposition to the government proposals, only to come back more recently to a position of dialogue expressing the will to conclude a trilateral agreement (government, employers, unions). The strategy employed by the government is a very classical one in 'democracy': The government unveils its plans and proposals for an 'industrial pact' and deliberately presents it in a way and in such terms that they are completely unacceptable for the unions. Then it drops some formulations in its proposals (the less important but the most provocative) and then the unions agree first to meet for discussion and in the end to sign the agreement.

For instance, the unions at first refused to discuss the wage controls; but then, at the beginning of July, they declared openly they were ready to meet the government on this question (of course to discuss the rate of the next wage rise). As a counterpart the unions demanded quite a lot in the way of general measures concerning wage taxation, the management of employment, professional training, all measures being characterised of course by their ambiguity. What is even more, the same union document (a common ritual on the side of the CC.OO. and UGT) contained other proposals presented as a 're-inforcement of negotiation' which actually means a re-inforcement of the union role in the whole of industrial relations and a guarantee to be present in the management of the unemployment benefits organisations.

One of the proposals from the employers' side needs to be closely examined: the proposal linking the wage rises to the productivity increases. This measure would be considered individually for each worker in such a way that the wage fixed for a worker would be directly related to his personal productivity level. A general agreement would fix a minimum wage for each sector, category, etc. (Seat-Volkswagen already has tried to impose this system in its Barcelona factory). This is in fact another step forward in the process of destruction of the working class communities built around the Fordist organisation of work after the Second world war. Presently the uniformity of wages and the negotiating procedure for wages rises are the last point of practical convergence of the workers' interests when expressing claims at the factory level; these facts were the main element of aggregation for the workers.

I have no idea up to which point this disaggregation of the forms of resistance linked to Fordism will bring about new forms of resistance from the new proletariat. We will have to look for new forms of solidarity outside the traditional sphere of production, for instance in the sphere of commodity consumption where new identities are rising like styles of rock music, mass sport events, new fashions, etc. These new forms of solidarity would include some more or less marginal facts concerning the balance of the commodity sale like crime but essentially they would encompass forms of resistance in several specific conflicts in developed capitalist society (squatters, desertion, etc.) We have perhaps to consider these new forms of solidarity as the problematic (contradictory) expression of the present phase of the capitalist system, as the expression of a decomposition of social life (parallel to the process of decomposition of the forms of the Fordist aggregation), and as the expression of a certain rise of the resistance of the exploited in the form of new schemes.

Finally I have to add that the discussion on the 'competitiveness pact' develops in a context of a more and more repressive policy from the side of the government. The minister of labour has just published a project to limit the right to strike. If the unions agree, the project will become law without a parliamentary debate by means of a simple government order. The Spanish Home Office has just published the proposal of a law on the 'citizens' security' which on one hand is written in a bizarre and obscure language not even correct in juridical terms and on the other hand pushes aside some fundamental rights included in the 1978 constitution. The pretext is to be able to fight the drug traffic (new scapegoat) because the value of terrorism is somewhat reduced in the social imaginary. The police break into private homes everywhere as it wants without any court order. It is in fact the extension of a previous law against terrorism. We can observe that the franquist law offered a better guarantee for the safeguarding of individual rights than this new proposal. As I told about the 'competitiveness pact', after this polemic on the security law, the government will change some formulations, only to retain the essential and more fundamental questions like the limitation of the freedom of speech, of demonstrations and of assembling freely.

C.

#### Notes:

1) On Spain, see the previous *Echanges* issues ( n° 64, p. 21 on the 'competitiveness pact ') and for the post-franquism period and the assembly movement the book

(in French by C. Brendel and H. Simon, 'From anti-franquism to post-franquism. Political illusions and class struggle' (Paris: Echanges et Mouvement, 1980). The first social pact called 'Moncloa Pact ' was the result of a general consensus involving all parties and unions in order to modernise capitalism in a 'democratic' Spain.

2 ) On this strike see Echanges n° 61, p 8.

# ON THE SITUATION OF THE MODERN WORKING CLASS

Letter from Henri Simon to Carlos

12/2/92

Dear Carlos,

The debate on the Coordinadora is interesting because this union offers a perfect example - an exemplary case so to say - of the unavoidable transformation of a struggle organisation practising direct rank and file democracy into a traditional union in which the bureaucratic development is the consequence of the very function of regulation on the labour market (even though its existence was the result of the rank and file resistance against the application of such methods of regulation).

This discussion has to be welcomed because the struggle movements for the last years mainly in France and in Italy have seriously shaken the syndicalist milieu and brought about the building of organisations which try to become permanent after the period of struggle which had seen their creation, some with the label of 'alternative unions'. It would be interesting to write a pamphlet telling the whole story of the Coordinadora because in some countries (especially in the UK) and in the libertarian papers a lot of illusions have been spread on the possibilities to build 'democratic' unions in following the Coordinadora example.

We could examine this attempt with the arguments of your letter when you asked yourselves to which extent we analyse the present conflicts in the developed capitalist countries in prejudiced forms and with concepts inherited from the past and being no longer relevant to the present world. I think it is always like that, in the struggles themselves and in our mind. To escape these constant references to the past, we must analyse closely all the struggles going on all over the world in trying to detect in them what is referring to the past and what is new. Such an analysis must concern as well the struggles in the old, traditional industries (like the Asturian miners' strike for instance) as the struggles in the new modern industries (like the strike of the maintenance workers in the air control centers in France for instance). Inside a struggle in a traditional sector, we can find new forms of action (see for instance the British miners' strike in 1984-85); inversely, some apparently new forms of struggle organisations (like the COBAS in Italy or

the coordinating committees in France) have simply borrowed a lot from the old union forms of organisation. An Echanges comrade has developed such a criticism about the coordinating committees, explaining the anachronism of some finalist view and of organisational models like the workers' councils. A similar view was developed in a more theoretical manner by the French group 'Theorie Communiste'.

This last point could be linked to what is called 'the crisis of Eastern Countries' which is often erroneously identified with the 'end of communism'. We have to compare these developments with what happens in the western branch of capitalism: the end of the social-democratic ideas of a possible management of the economical system with elected organisations more or less identified with the State, after its conquest either via the parliament or via a 'revolution'. This fading of the idea that an economical regulation of the present system could be performed by some kind of delegated organisations not only concerns the crisis of confidence in such organisations (which involves what is called the 'crisis of politics') but the very idea that such a regulation could be possible at all.

If I could agree with what you said on the weakness, even the disappearance of the traditional structures of struggle, and beyond that the 'disappearance of finalism' (though I have doubts about their previous importance and the role they have had in the class struggle), I disagree with what you write about 'the more and more advanced process of decomposition of the social form of the classical proletariat'.

You identify this 'classical proletariat' as the factory worker who worked in big industrial concentrations and whose work and living conditions were characterized by a certain homogeneity. Do you really think that this kind of proletariat as you define it has disappeared? It could be true if you consider that in the industrialised countries whole sectors of the industry like coal mines, steel industry, textile industry, have, if not disappeared, then certainly declined enormously. This decline or disappearance has of course been effectively followed by the disbanding of the workers communities which, to answer the need of capital, have been built around the productive centers, the mines, the factories.

But such a statement, although it may be true in limited national or local circumstances, will have to be considered if not as untrue then at least as of very relative value if we consider the capitalist world in its totality:

■ Homogenous industrial concentrations have been rebuilt in the newly industrialised countries according to the tendencies of the new international division of labour.

■ Inside the old industrialized countries new industrial concentrations have replaced the old ones. If I take the figures for France, the staff of the top 1.000 industrial enterprises has increased from 3.342.000 in 1981 to 4.016.000 in 1991, and the average for each enterprise has increased from 3.000 to 4.000. If we take the top 100 enterprises the same figures are respectively 2.200.000 and 2.980.000 and the average has risen from 22.000 and 30.000. The last Renault strike at Cléon has revealed the importance of the transfer of workers in a number of huge factories where the staff is between 5.000 and 10.000 workers.

■ When we look at the figures concerning the different categories in the working population (still the figures for France), we can see that this active population is growing after having been constant for a long time: 19 millions from 1900 to 1954, 21 millions in 1970, more than 25 millions in 1990. The part of this active population working in industry and in public enterprises has increased from 6 millions to 8,5 millions in 1980 but began to decline to around 7,5 millions in 1990. In other words, if the population working in industry has somewhat diminished, its relative importance is about the same as before. But we have to keep in mind that this relative importance was to be seen against a background of a numerous population of peasants, a lower middle class of shop keepers and artisans fifty years ago, and that now it is to be seen against the background of a majority of wage earners in the services sector (in which are included the transport industry and other industrial services separated from industry through new divisions of labour but formerly included in the industrial sector).

The extension and the concentration of this services sector has meant not only the proletarianisation of these specific workers but the development of large working units similar to what already existed in the banking or the insurance sectors (transports, telecommunications, supermarkets, health sector, ...). You underline that in the industrial sector certain forms of homogenisation have disappeared (I don't agree with this assertion); if we consider this services world we can see the development of a homogenisation where there was formerly a certain degree of dispersion: The lorry drivers strike in the UK in 1978-79 (we can add in France in 1992) or the nurses strikes in several European countries during recent years offer examples of such a homogenisation of struggles inspite of the dispersion of the places of work.

■ It is true that some large concentrations have disappeared when the industry looked for better profitability in using selectively small subcontractors, a policy which broke with the former organisation of production with the typically vertical form of concentration, especially in the car industry. But this new policy included on one hand the development of subsidiary companies and on the other hand in more recent times the constitution of industrial poles around a central factory surrounded by a multitude of small or medium factories, all of them linked by mutual interdependence and totally depending on the central factory. For instance, the Renault factory at Douai (Northern France) with 6.300 workers is surrounded by a local industrial network employing 25.000 workers. We could cite a lot of other examples; and we can add that the difficulties of transport (not to speak of the recent lorry drivers' strike) push to this restructuring to make the 'just in time' method of production work effectively.

■ We can assume that there is a rebuilding of a proletarian social form different from the old one but no longer hierarchical or differentiated (you tend to think the opposite is true), more uniform and thus more homogeneous (in the UK, the Japanese car factories have only one category of workers, and the other British factories are on the way to follow this example). Even more than that, the wage level, the obligation to live in specific accommodations in specific locations, the limitations to a similar standard of living (with the use of the supermarket) and to the same kind of leisure (mainly TV) are evident factors for the reconstitution of a 'homogenous social formation' different from the previous one which some even considered as being 'a better way of life' when it is very fashionable to insist on the 'degradation of the present proletarian life'.

■ Fordism has been defined as mass production for mass consumption: These two elements are still here. The factory with the Taylorist division of labour and the production line still works even if automation has introduced some deep going changes. When you speak of decentralised production, it is true for the production of parts (not all of them, even the Japanese factories produce 40/50% of their parts) but all that converges on the line which is not decentralised but only often transferred in other locations to be able to use cheap manpower and to reconstitute in these locations the homogenous proletariat you think is disappearing.

I don't see exactly what you mean when writing about the disappearance of an older fundamental contradiction which will be replaced by a 'conflictuality' which is believed to testify to a tendency towards the decomposition of capitalist soci-



ety. In my opinion, this 'conflictuality' has always existed but was always considered as very minor, even as something despicable, a kind of technique of individual survival very far from a 'revolutionary consciousness' and 'revolutionary activity'. In my opinion, this 'subjectivity' was and remains essential and is the expression, at the lowest level of the rank and file, of this fundamental contradiction you think of as vanishing, or is, in simpler words, a pure expression of the class struggle. We have to consider how this important aspect of the class struggle has been completely hidden in the past behind the idea of finality; according to this ideology, the class-conscious proletarian had to detach himself from the simple problems of daily life, the so-to-say banalities of his daily struggle, and this perspective was often linked to a very specific work ethic.

All this would in itself necessitate a separate discussion. We would certainly have to analyse what the union militant or the political militant represents for the workers and for the work organisation in the different periods of capitalist development, and we would also have to analyse the corresponding workers' movement, in particular the problem in which way the 'revolutionary' ideology really was an expression of the real workers' behaviour inside and outside the place of work (for instance, why a proletariat apparently deeply influenced by the socialist and somewhat anarchist ideas accepted so easily the bloody war of 1914-18).

When writing that the transformation of society is no longer following laws, you seem to think that in former times it did. I believe there were and still are a lot of illusions about the role of the proletariat as representing or possibly representing some historical finality, or about ways of deducing from the present forms or character of the class struggle some basic elements of a future social order. I must say that I rather agree with what you said at the end of this passage in your letter. I think that society evolves in a dynamic movement and that nobody can foresee either its path of evolution or its finality (any finality will be in contradiction with the evolution of life itself on the earth). The fundamental contradiction labour-capital works in complex dialectical relations in which any movement of one side is followed by a movement of the other, all this being linked to immediate interests: profit on one side, survival on the other side (i.e. the resistance to reification). Beyond these immediate interests, everybody is pragmatic and never considers any finality. This pragmatism introduces what we could call tendencies which do not allow us to draw a picture of the future. All we can do, and what we constantly try to do, is drawing comparisons, always with the previous periods, to see what is changing and eventually to discern some tendencies but never forgetting to consider them as relative in space and in time.

You draw a parallel between:

- triumphant capitalism which thought to conquer the world in an endless progressive movement, seen as the endless development of science and technology,
- and the revolutionary theories which in another way proposed to follow the same kind of basic ideologies.

And for the present times you link the tendency towards the decomposition of capitalist society to the parallel decomposition of all revolutionary ideologies and to their support by unions and parties. I could agree with these ideas but they will have to be developed more concretely.

This will oblige us to examine another important point: A new society could arise only out of the development of the old one, not at all through some catastrophic events, and this might happen almost without the knowledge of the participants. It could arise only through the dynamic of present society, driven by the conflicts of interests, by the internal transformations of the relations of production and of the corresponding social relations. Most of the time when we discuss these questions we consider the events (which are only the consequence of the already accomplished internal transformations, often hidden to everybody) thinking that they are the true cause of these transformations. In other words, to come back to this question of finality, what we tend to regard as a finality could be nothing but the formalisation of what already exists.

Very friendly,  
Henri

# A CRITIQUE OF MODERN MANAGEMENT LYRICS

Letter from Theo Sander to Henri Simon

10/9/1992

Dear Henri,

In general I agree with the arguments you bring forward against Carlos' idea of a proletariat whose battalions are growing weaker and weaker, which is more and more stratified, more and more dispersed along the "logistic chain of surplus value production", more and more tightly controlled by modern computerized equipment, more and more restricted to leading isolated, local, sectional and corporatist struggles, and which could therefore no longer be regarded as the subjective factor overthrowing capitalist society as described in the classical theories of the 19th century.

However, while not disagreeing with anything you say (with one important exception concerning the laws of capitalist development), I am convinced that Carlos' ideas deserve to be even more sharply criticized, not only for what he says in his letter to you, but also for the much more elaborate and cautious things he says in the Etcetera article on dispersed Fordism.

Before heading off into the controversy with Carlos' ideas, I will have to make a very general remark about levels of analysis and method - and in reading on you will easily see why I am doing so: In the morning we see the sun rising in the East, and then wandering across the sky until it goes down somewhere in the West. At least this is how things appear to us. Now, even if it is a very cloudy day and we don't see the sun, we are not inclined to think that the sun is taking a different course or that it has disappeared forever. We know that the sun is there and that its taking the usual course could just be obscured by bad weather. And that is not yet all. We are in fact used to not trusting simply our eyes, but to put our observations into a coherent theoretical framework based on reflection. This framework, as developed ever since Kepler, Galilei, Huygens and Newton tells us that the earth is a globe moving around the sun although things appear to be different to us, that the course of the earth is an elliptic one and not a circle, and that the earth is also moving around its own axis thus producing effects of day and

night, of particular parts of the earth experiencing alternating periods of sunlight and absence of sunlight quite independent of specific weather conditions. This is what is usually called a scientific attitude in understanding natural phenomena. It rests on distinguishing essence and appearance, to be exact.

I cannot see any reason why we should be satisfied with a less scientific attitude when analyzing and understanding social phenomena, in particular since we know exactly that social processes have a very similar quality of making things appear different from what they essentially are, of hiding a lot of elements from our eyes, and of creating a whole range of false impressions, of impressions which are definitely deceptive. In short: If things would appear in capitalist society as they essentially are (to use the words of Marx), then there would simply be no need for any scientific research. In fact it is one of the basic truths about capitalism that hardly ever do essence and appearance coincide.

My problem here will be to clarify on which level of thinking Carlos situates his own analysis, how he deals with his sources of information, and what kind of conclusions have to be drawn for the validity of his analysis. I will only discuss three major problems, and in each case I will argue that the exact opposite is true of what Carlos wishes us to accept as plain truth, and that this has clearly to do with his failing to distinguish not only essence and appearance, but also in some instances fiction and reality. I regard as major problems

- the way he deals with the ideology of dispersed Fordism, of computerization and of human resource management (as well as the ideology of scientific management or Taylorism and Fordism);
- his views on the dispersal and decomposition of the workforce and the new cycle of struggles under dispersed Fordism (as well as the cycles of struggle of the so-called mass worker in the past);
- his concept of the totalitarian tendencies of capital and the repressive unification of a world being subordinated to capital.

1) It should be stressed right away that not even in the classical theories the specific role ascribed to the proletariat in the revolutionary process was made dependent on *numbers* (while evidently numbers play a different role in trade union or party organizations), or *local concentration of numbers* (again playing a well-known role in trade union struggles), or *homogeneity*, but on the development of

the accumulation process as influencing (and being influenced by) the struggle between workers and capitalists. I would expect that Carlos knows this, since he seems to be somehow familiar with Marxism, and nonetheless he builds his argument on the completely superficial and unfounded assumption that large numbers, a high degree of local concentration and professional homogeneity have been of utmost importance in the struggles of the mass worker in the past. Once these elements have vanished into the air - this is what he mistakenly believes to be the result of dispersed Fordism - the traditional antagonism of workers and capitalists is replaced by a system of repressive, totalitarian domination. This, then, is the end of the revolutionary process which has so far characterized the development of capitalism. The ideologues of capital have decided to get rid of class antagonism, because they are fed up with it, because they feel they don't want it and don't need it anymore, and why not just throw it on the scrapheap of history? That is really an easy job, isn't it, if you dispose of such formidable weapons as dispersed Fordism. Fiat tua voluntas! Thy will be done, o almighty center of financial and technological decision making!

But let us be serious: In fact, if you talk about numbers, you should keep in mind that Marx discusses the numerical growth of the proletariat as a process of capital attracting an ever larger part of the population in its early phase of development (thus increasing the production of absolute surplus value), while the numerical decline of the proletariat is described as a necessary process of capital repelling an ever larger part of living labour and replacing it by dead labour (thus effecting changes of the so-called organic composition of capital and at the same time guaranteeing the falling tendency of the profit rate) once the production of relative surplus value has become the dominant form in the age of big industry. Growing numbers of workers on a world scale would therefore indicate a continuing capacity of capital to transform humans into exploitable proletarians, and vice versa. Equally a shrinking active working class in the highly industrialized countries (and a growing reserve army of workers) would have to be interpreted not as a sign of working class retreat, but definitely as a sign of advance. So if anybody would tell me in ten years that figures for the industrial proletariat have fallen to half of what they are now, this would neither be a surprise nor a disappointment.

Indeed, looking at the world of capital as it is today, we can only be surprised about capital's inability to submit the majority of the world's population to its command by integrating it into the capitalist production process (cf. in particular the cases of China and India where capitalism has practically made no progress at all since the days of colonial rule). I have the impression that Carlos wishes to

reverse this fundamental relationship by saying - it is the numbers of soldiers and the concentration of fire power that count in this battle, with decreasing numbers implying weakness and increasing numbers implying strength of the proletariat.

2) I also have the impression that Carlos intends to reverse the relationship between the well-known changes in the organic composition of capital, the falling tendency of the profit rate, and the limits of capitalist development by saying - the life of capital and capitalism could be prolonged endlessly by rigorously eliminating living labour from the production process. There is some beautifully lyrical literature (notably from Japan) on "the factory without workers" - much more lyrical than the lyricism of "dispersed Fordism". And if you ask me, we should all be deeply grateful for the recklessness of capitalist managers translating such self-destructive ideas (never mind the lyrics!) into practice. Would you agree that Carlos, in taking management lyrics all too seriously, entirely forgets about the self-destructiveness of capitalist relations?

But how else does he wish to interpret the history of Fordism, if not in terms of the self-destruction of capital (notwithstanding the fact that we do have some really great lyrics from the beginning of this century praising in turn the wonders of Fordism - e.g. the autobiography of Henry Ford the old bastard himself - although I would say I haven't seen too many pieces of Fordist lyrics from more recent times. Certainly there must be some reason for this???)? I will have to say a few words about Fordism here although Carlos mainly deals with the more recent phenomena of dispersed Fordism. For any understanding of the functions and meaning of "dispersed Fordism", it is absolutely essential to have some precise idea of the functioning of Fordism.

a) Reading what Carlos says about Fordism and even more so about dispersed Fordism, you wouldn't believe that this has anything to do with the production of surplus value (and that is, with the antagonism of classes). Apart from a few misleading headings in his article without any reference to the text itself, apart from some very superficial use of Marxist language (in complete contradiction with the content of his article), Carlos discusses Fordism as well as dispersed Fordism exclusively in terms of managerial, organizational, and technical problems. If we were prepared to trust his allegations, the only real problem remaining for capitalists would be the purely organizational one of properly linking the various elements in the logistic chain of surplus value production, not surplus value production in itself. Provided that could be done - and Carlos seems to have no doubts about it - the world would have to bow to the totalitarian domination of "the cen-

ters of capitalist decision making". But such conclusions can only be drawn by someone who firmly believes that capitalism has absolutely nothing to do with value and surplus value production or that the present social system is not capitalism at all. All the elements in Carlos' article and in his letter are pointing exactly in this direction. Instead the image (not to say nightmare) of a totalitarian domination which he presents has a striking similarity with such science fiction films like "Star Wars", "The Empire Strikes Back", "The Return of the Yeti", etc., spreading the idea of some strange and always very abstract "masters of the universe" who are out to subjugate everything to their tyrannical command.

b) Back to something more concrete: No other industry has contributed more to increasing the rate of exploitation, i.e. the production of absolute and relative surplus value, than the automobile industry since its Fordist organization early in this century. This is not big news. But I am sure it is big news for a lot of people that problems of valorization are bound to result not just in the case of a malfunctioning of exploitation, but even in the case of its proper functioning, in the case of continuous increases in the rate of exploitation. The very central problem of capitalism is not that it does not produce enough surplus value, but that it produces too much surplus value (pushed to do so, of course, by the fundamental contradictions of capitalist society). Therefore the entire analysis of Marx' "Capital", including the falling tendency of the profit rate, is based on various assumptions of a smooth and even perfect functioning of capitalist production and circulation, of regular increases in the rate of exploitation, of surplus value not being wasted on luxury consumption. Therefore we will search in vain for any detailed analysis of the importance of strikes (trade union or autonomous), go-slows, sabotage, blue Mondays, etc. in the pages of "Capital". The simple reason is that the accumulation of capital is limited by its inherent principles (replacement of living labour by dead labour), even under the assumption of a complete absence of strikes, go-slows, etc. And therefore it is totally beside the point to ascribe the problems of capital with the Fordist organization of the production process to something so vague as "large concentrations" of workers and the "pressure" they could possibly exert.

c) So why should we be impressed (or even frightened to death) by the perspective of capital perfecting this or that aspect of the production and circulation process by the introduction of "dispersed Fordism"? Not even a more perfect organization of exploitation, not even a drastically higher rate of exploitation could prevent the self-destruction of capital. In fact the process of the dispersal of factory production on which Carlos puts so much emphasis has begun much

earlier than he indicates and is anything but a new phenomenon. As far back as the 1950's and 1960's American automobile capital had started moving out of the inner city locations (e.g. in Detroit) to the suburbs, to the South and also to Third World countries, in the end having left the Detroit inner city altogether, except for the administration. The same process of spatial relocation has also been very marked in France (Renault moving out of Paris), but not so much in Great Britain and even less so in Germany.

The latest phase of dispersal, however, has a slightly different meaning (although causes are the same as in the earlier phases). Big capital is not just relocating its production, but instituting a new division of labour, above all trying to rid itself from a number of processes which are labour intensive. The kind of subcontracting resulting from this management strategy has three important aspects: It is clearly a preparatory or concomitant phase for drastically increasing the organic composition of capital on the assembly lines; it puts enormous pressure on transport capital for increasing its organic composition and confronts it with extremely rigid demands of the central assembly plants; equally it puts pressure on the subcontractors producing parts to strictly rationalize production and to heavily attack their workforce. The result can only be increasing exploitation - and there is nothing to be said against it. Dispersed Fordism is nothing but capital's tendency of self-destruction pushed to its extreme.

d) So far I have only temporarily assumed that production and circulation of capital are functioning smoothly. If production and circulation do not function smoothly (in reality they are far from doing so), then of course things are even worse for the valorization of capital and for "the centers of financial and technological decision making". This is the place to discuss the subjectivity of capitalists, i.e. management incompetence, with which entire books could be filled. This is also the place to discuss the subjectivity of the mass worker and the way he has turned the Fordist production line into an effective instrument of struggle against the capitalist class. If anything has been of no importance at all in these struggles, then this has been "large concentrations of workers" somehow exerting "pressure". Apart from a few major struggles of national dimensions, the struggles of the mass worker, in fact 95% of all struggles of all workers in the entire post-war period in major industrialized countries (if the American and British example can be generalized) have been characterized by the following elements:

- limited participation, mostly involving less than 20 workers;
- short duration, from a few hours to a few days;
- very specific and restricted demands, mistakenly called "sectional";



- very specific forms of struggle;
- no intention of being officially recognized by the unions.

Could it be true that Carlos has not heard of this? Am I to assume that he is unaware of the kind of disruption which could be (and in many instances has been) caused by two or three workers or even a single worker placed in a strategic position on the production line? Does he really want to simply regard as irrelevant the fundamental problem of the Fordist production line - its being so easily immobilized by very small groups of workers?

e) So if it is correct to say that no other industry has contributed more to increasing the rate of exploitation than the automobile industry under Fordism, then this is coterminous with saying that no other industry has contributed more to its own self-destruction and to the self-destruction of capitalism in general. I am at a complete loss to see why different conclusions should have to be drawn for dispersed Fordism. The majority of struggles continue to be local struggles with very low numbers of workers involved and with very restricted, "sectional" demands. The formula of mass actions led by the mass worker and isolated, local actions led by the dispersed proletariat is in no way corresponding to reality.

I wish to emphasize, however, that this continuity of "sectional" struggles completely dominating the antagonism of classes up to this day (probably since the very beginnings of capitalism) is not at all the entire truth; it is just how things appear to us. If automobile workers all over the world, probably in most cases not even knowing from each other even if they belong to the same firm, are leading the same local, sectional, isolated struggles in more or less the same forms and with more or less the same kinds of "sectional" demands, then it becomes utterly ridiculous to describe these struggles as "isolated", "sectional" or "corporatist". Indeed a comparative in-depth analysis easily demonstrates that the so-called "sectional", "corporatist", "atomized" struggles are in fact the most generalized, unified, coordinated struggles integrating automobile workers all over the world into a **single antagonistic force with a single opponent**. There is nothing in dispersed Fordism which could possibly change this.

f) We cannot even stop here. The concept of capital as developed by Marx includes the notion of a world market, world capital and world history as the essence of capitalist development. All these elements have long since become reality. Many people would not even deny this at all. But then the concept of world capital directly implies the existence of a **united (!!)** world proletariat and a **united (!!)** world capitalist class and an average profit rate on a world scale as

the real basis of unity. This is where very many people clinging to their self-fabricated illusions start to protest. Their thinking is so much dominated by ideas of party and union organization that they could never imagine class organization to be totally different: no membership cards, no rule books, no written programme, no flags, no hierarchies, no presidents, no delegation of responsibilities, etc. They are unable to understand that unity does not exclude differentiation (e.g. with regard to the rate of exploitation, to working conditions, to wages, etc.), and that on the other hand differentiation does not stand in the way of unity. In fact differentiation, unity and renewed differentiation are necessary elements of capitalist development and the motor of capitalist competition.

3) As I said before, Carlos never mentions that Fordism has been the object of class struggle right from the beginning, and that there is no technical problem of Fordism, only a social problem. In doing so he is indeed following a general trend. A fairly representative piece is Harry Braverman's "Labor and Monopoly Capital" which naively accepts writings on management theory as evidence for actual developments on the shop or office floor, which overestimates scientific management's impact (most big corporations failed even to give it a try), and which failed to take account of labour responses to the new forms of work that employers developed after the turn of the-century. For him there is simply no class struggle, only scientific management as an organizational problem and as an instrument of repression.

The fundamental problem with Carlos' analysis is exactly the same - he has no precise idea of class struggle. Or should I rather say, he has too many different ideas about class struggle which mutually exclude each other? On one page capital is a contradictory reality of social relations between classes, on the next page he writes about the fundamental contradiction between capital and labour, further on in the text the fundamental contradiction is between the totalitarian civilization of capitalism and some wholly mysterious centrifugal forces, and at the end of this hotch-potch of definitions he finally decides that there is no contradiction at all, neither inside nor outside capital, just the repressive unification of the world under the totalitarian domination of capital. I am unable to see any coherence in this.

And things are not better for many other fundamental concepts of analysis. His usage of the terms "capital" and "labour" (defined as describing an antagonistic relationship, as has become commonplace in so-called radical circles) betrays a regrettable ignorance of the simple fact that "capital" is nothing but "labour", dead

labour and living labour, and that the antagonism is not between "capital" and something somewhere outside capital, but inside capital. Even if Carlos does not want to accept this (it is clear he doesn't), a presumed antagonism between "capital" and "labour" does not make any sense at all.

This leads me to another question concerning the very complicated problem of objectivity and subjectivity in the development of capital. Class relations are always described in Marx as objective (reified) and subjective at the same time. But that presupposes distinguishing capital and capitalists (also labour power and working class). Does Carlos want to imply that the fundamental distinction of capital, capitalists and capitalism without which there is absolutely no understanding of capitalist development is no longer valid and should be given up? Indeed I can find no trace in his article and in his letter indicating he is aware of the overriding importance of such a distinction. Whereas I find many traces of a usage ascribing total freedom of will (total subjectivity) to the "centers of financial and technological decision-making" and of this subjectivity translating itself magically into a total domination of the world (total objectivity) just because capitalists have subjectively decided that they want it to be like that.

The conceptual framework distinguishing capital and capitalists implies, however, the increasing (!) dependence of capitalists on the necessities and problems of valorization - and the increasing (!) independence of workers from the constraints of capital as an anonymous, objective power. If anything has contributed massively to this independence, then it was Fordism and Taylorism - and we may well expect "dispersed Fordism" to continue along these lines. As for the dependence of capitalists on the problems of valorization, I am reminded of the many attempts to instill some basic knowledge of Marxism into capitalist managers. The question is indeed: Couldn't this solve the problems of capitalism if managers knew about the destructiveness of accumulation? Why should capitalists continue to replace living labour by dead labour if they know that this destroys the profit rate? And the answer will tell you why it makes a lot of sense to distinguish capital and capitalists.

4) To return to the methodological questions formulated at the beginning: Carlos disregards all the available information and all possible observations concerning Fordism and dispersed Fordism except one particular source: management lyrics - and he takes this to be identical with reality. The way he deals with this privileged source is completely uncritical. I am afraid his results are some of the wildest phantasies regarding the unlimited power of the capitalist class I have ever

read. They culminate in some kind of prophesy of doom for the working class and mankind in general. Whatever the specific situation may be in Spain at this moment - about this I know very little - and whatever this might help us in understanding Carlos' point of view I entirely disagree with the results and the method.

Yours friendly,  
Theo

# OLD AND RUSTED RHETORICAL FORMULA

Letter from Carlos to Theo Sander

12/7/1993

Dear friend,

I have just read your criticism of my text on dispersed Fordism and, considering your judgment about it, I must say at first, that I am surprised about your decision to publish it. Actually, I don't see what sense such a publication could make because, according to you, I have understood nothing, neither capitalism, nor Fordism, nor Marx, etc... not to mention the serious errors and mystifications of the class struggle you have discovered in it. If I had such an opinion on any kind of text, I would, of course, prefer not to publish it, since this would only be a loss of time and money, except if you wanted to demonstrate how your readers should not understand Fordism. This would then be the only possible justification.

Furthermore, I have to say that I am even more surprised about the unduly aggressive tone which turns your text into a pompous diatribe against some heretical deviation .... Anyway, what has amazed me is that, after having read both texts (yours and mine), I still keep asking myself what exactly you are up against. Are you really certain to criticise what I explained in my text? I have some serious doubts about this. Thus, I am somehow unable to respond to your arguments because I don't know what they are about. Your criticisms certainly do not aim at the problems which I tried to shed some light on. I have the impression that you tried to write some critical remarks on Fordism in general and that my text was just a welcome pretext to do it. Anyway, your criticisms do not succeed either to remove some possible errors concerning the nature of Fordism, or to enable us to better understand the changing realities of the labour force in present-day capitalist society.

When I wrote this text, I only tried to make a bit clearer what kind of changes I believe to be taking place in the world I live in and which is the daily reality of workers. Of course, I can be wrong in my interpretations, considering that I have not at all tried to stick to a "scientific" approach and that I do not participate in the cult of the law of the falling profit rate, as a kind of basic principle explaining everything.

I don't want to again defend my text word by word because this will be too long a text. In fact, I would have to come back to every paragraph of your criticism and contrast it with the corresponding paragraph of my text. But that is something not worth doing for reasons you will understand once you have read the other parts of my letter. Yet you will find some references here and there to your critical remarks.

At first I want to underline the fact that the fall of the rate of profit is the general framework (or the background) in the context of which all my explanations have to be seen. Reading my text this will be sufficiently clear. I don't know if you understood from my text what I explained to be my general orientations. For instance you wrote (p. 39) that dispersed Fordism is nothing but a reinforcement of the tendency pushing capital to its limits, i.e. to self-destruction. My article tried precisely to explain this tendency (the limits of Fordism), though presenting it as a problem, which according to me consists in the parallel self-destruction of the forms of proletarian aggregation inherited from the past; I believe this to be so because we cannot separate capital (stolen labour) in any way from living labour. In fact, they are the two different sides of the same social relation.

Further down in your text (p. 42) you wrote : "Am I to assume ... by very small groups of workers? " Have you noticed at all what I wrote on the fragility of surplus value production or what I have said about the "destabilising fragmentation"? I think that behind your criticism we always find the old methodological problem I have tried to outline in my letter to Henri.

Yet I am surprised that somebody could try today to call on principles of Science for validating his arguments, in a kind of profession of faith in a scientific principle of universal truth. In my opinion, considering Heisenberg's work on the relativity of scientific objective "truths", and mainly Th. Kuhn's investigations and even more so research on the "process of the formation of scientific knowledge" (their historico-social nature), formulating a position based on Science as you do somewhat looks like a poor and simplistic argument.

Indeed, I don't know what could be the meaning of asking questions about objectivism and subjectivism in the same manner as in the 20's. If I consider your describing the falling tendency of the profit rate as an overarching principle explaining everything that happens in the capitalist world and at the same time the different levels of social reality, I have to denounce this as a form of reductionism

which does not leave any space either for questioning or for criticising. Questioning is not your business because there is no problem for you: Everything can be explained by a general law, all the facts are there to confirm that the law is correct. It does not matter if the phenomena contradict the law or express a counter-tendency because in the end we just have to refer to the general law. So confronting any specific proposition with any general principle asserting an eternal truth does not open up any possibility of discussion, quite the contrary: Either the facts serve to verify and confirm the basic assumption or they are banned from consideration.

In fact, I think that you have transformed the falling profit rate into the Spirit which pervades the Hegelian universal history. Are you actually persuaded that we can explain all that is happening in the fragmented and contradictory reality of the world, all our individual and social experiences? If so, what is the function of thinking? To ponder about the reflection of the Hypostasis in our petty daily or historical anecdotes? Would there be any scope for raising problems, for questioning everything - which are the basic elements of critical thinking? To go beyond the appearance of things, of course, this is our task; but in doing so we have to create a space for our individual and social affirmation of existence, not to chase after something like the essence of reality. We have to remember that reality, exactly like objectivity - its concept, its image - is nothing but a mental and practical construction, not something existing outside of us, something to be simply discovered. I can't share the reductionist and teleological vision of the world you have. And I am not at all adhering to ideas about the Spirit of History.

We have to assume that there are some important methodological limitations in the Marxian analysis which are not relevant or valid considering all the levels of reality, even the economic, or the reality of class struggle. The scope for criticism, the possibility to progress with regard to our understanding of the world, of the capitalist process and of conflicts is widened in the process of these analytical shiftings. What we need is a dynamical understanding answering to a changing problematics in which the elements change constantly in accordance with changing social relations.

What is the use of considering the fall of the rate of profit as a basic assumption? To remind us of the fact that the capitalist system has historical limits? But this is like saying that the earth will some day cease to exist as a result of the ongoing transformations in the planetary balance. In the light of the very long-range historical vision represented by theories of the falling profit rate, human

individual and collective intervention seems to be of rather limited importance. Yet the stake of conflicts and struggles is there, at the level of the concrete daily actions. It is at this level where we can observe the fragmentary and contradictory, even paradoxical, realities; in short, where we find all the contradictions we have to confront here and now. In my opinion, class struggle and theories about it are to be precisely based on the existence of this enormous gap between the general tendency and the limits of daily individual and collective actions. The space for controversy, for criticism and for any practical thinking about the world is precisely created by this very gap. What I understand from your criticism is a kind of optimistic fatalism (we have not to care about anything because the tendency is on our side) and of a cynical state of paralysis (no matter what strategies we have and what we do, the real essence of the Spirit or the falling profit rate is there).

You blame me for my having different ideas on class struggle than you. In fact, I tried to express them as paradoxical and contradictory signs, considering for instance the falling rate of profit or the objective unification of the proletariat because of the growing proletarianisation. Of course the growing proletarianisation unifies the proletariat but only at a certain level of conceptualisation. What I see is the atomisation and the decomposition of the previous elements of aggregation and the gradual disappearance of the links which guaranteed the practical unity of the proletarian movements, e.g. during the 70's in Spain. I can see that the abstract proletarian unification does not have corresponding effects in the sense of a practical, concrete unification of workers on the factory floor.

I am not very experienced in using quotations from the works of the Masters but I have heard somewhere that Marx said: The proletariat is revolutionary in its struggle or it is nothing. What we are presently confronted with is precariousness, atomisation of the workers' interests, defiance, discontinuity between in the struggles and the resistances ... Perhaps that does not mean anything considering the labours of the Spirit of History, perhaps we have not succeeded to establish a good communication contact with Him. This is more or less the same thing like being confronted with racism or xenophobia and staying indifferent to these more or less spectacular manifestations by using the basic argument that they express a false consciousness and that all of us belong to the human species. I don't think this will help the women burnt to death in Germany, or the Africans being constantly humiliated in any European town. I want to say that I don't live as an example of some kind of fundamental essence but that I



have to cope practically with apparent and deforming facts in daily life. I don't speak of the true and real consciousness which is in conflict with the apparent forms of consciousness concerning me and my life. It is in the latter that I find the reasons for struggle, the real basis of my criticism.

All these ideas are drawn from my experiences (and reading Marx is one of them but not the most important, perhaps that is why I have understood nothing from what you wrote; in fact, I don't care much about that). The theoretical approach to be chosen will result primarily from the living experience, from my contacts with other people, from my conflicts with other social structures as a wage earner, as a militant, etc ... It will be an approach which is part of my life, closely tied to the manner in which I tend to organise my relationships with others and my personal and professional life. So the theoretical reflection on social conflict is something more than just a hobby. I don't do it in the same way I would study for instance the life of butterflies. It is not a matter separated from my whole life, it is an expression of my contradictory relationship with the world .

Doing so I find that everything is much more complex than in the formulations of yesterday's or today's thinkers, mainly when considering the necessary methodological shifts I just mentioned. I don't deny that the fall of the rate of profit is still valid as a general explanation for the capitalist system, but I only wish to emphasize the counter-tendencies, the unforeseen events, the deviations which, in my opinion, raise questions about certain teleological assertions indicating nothing but leanings for economical reductionism. It is in the way I see various dimensions of a complex, paradoxical reality that I can think of the problems and start my theoretical explorations, without any basic assumptions to verify, rather with a self-critical consciousness. My starting point is the fact there is not an objective approach to reality which could be the basis for a general principle of truth. Thinking this way, I am bound to be prejudiced in a way which will determine my conclusions because the way I would ask the questions would already have predetermined the answer. It is for this reason that I don't believe in an objective approach separated from a subjective approach and that I can't accept the fall of the rate of profit as a universal principle explaining reality. The falling profit rate is a theoretical formulation, a concept - a scientific one if you want to - like any other. Its validity is guaranteed only at a certain level of abstraction, and beyond that this concept leads straight into idealistic or mechanistic absurdities as proved by your criticism.

Considering the authoritarian tone of your criticism, I have to say that in my relationship with friends all along my life I looked for - and on many occasions found - an opportunity to enrich myself intellectually and personally, but not at all because I would agree by chance or by coincidence with any kind of principle or concept in the world. I simply don't want to be a member of a school, a church, a sect or community of thought. There is just this interest in sorting out things together with friends.

Concerning the theoretical production about which I hear and read through different contacts I have already reached a point of saturation, in particular when they refer to abstract analysis. I have the same feeling about my own production. In fact we are still stirring the same old subjects and arguments. Perhaps because of that in our criticisms we tend to mainly attack the positions of others, and we are looking for polemics for the sake of polemics, blowing up some kind of basic assumption as a dramatic assertion against the opponent, accused of being an heretic. This is certainly an expression of the intellectual poverty of all those who follow ideas going beyond the vicissitudes of History. For them theory (cast in iron laws) has turned into a matter of faith. I have this feeling of the "désà vue" when I find so many articles and pamphlets repeating again and again the same arguments for ages. This is just boring. And it is indeed an isolated and sterile approach.

I have tried to go beyond the usual frame of analysis, of concepts and the much too rigid language of those trapped in the narrow world of those traditional concepts which, according to me, can't express the complex dimensions of the changes in which I feel involved. I am suspected to be caught by the fascination of the dominant ideology and the lyrical language of managers. We may find this regrettable but anyway the rusted rhetorical formula you have used will not contribute to my moving ahead on the path of criticising the present work relations.

Carlos.

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