

THE DECLINE AND THE FALL OF THE “ SPECTACULAR ” COMMODITY - ECONOMY

From the 13th to the 16th of August, 1965, the blacks of Los Angeles revolted. An incident involving traffic police and pedestrians developed into two days of spontaneous riots. The forces of order, despite repeated reinforcement, were unable to gain control of the streets. By the third day, the negroes had armed themselves by pillaging such arms shops as were accessible, and were so enabled to open fire on police helicopters. Thousands of soldiers — the whole military weight of an infantry division, supported by tanks — had to be thrown into the struggle before the Watts area could be surrounded, after which it took several days and much streetfighting for it to be brought under control. The rioters didn't hesitate to plunder and to burn the shops of the area. The official figures testify to 32 dead, including 27 negroes, plus 800 wounded and 3,000 arrested.

Reactions on all sides were invested with clarity : the revolutionary act always discloses the reality of existing problems, lending an unaccustomed and unconscious truth to the various postures of its opponents. Police Chief William Parker, for example, refused all mediation proposed by the main Negro organizations, asserting correctly that the rioters had no leader. Evidently, as the blacks were without a leader, this was the moment of truth for both parties. What did Roy Wilkins, general secretary of the NAACP, want at that moment ? He declared that the riots should be put down « with all the force necessary ». And the Cardinal of Los Angeles, McIntyre, who protested loudly, had not protested against the violence of the repression, which one would have supposed the subtle thing to do, at the moment of the *aggiornamento* of the Roman church ; instead, he protested in the most urgent tones about « a premeditated revolt against the rights of one's neighbour ; respect for the law and the maintenance of order », calling upon catholics to oppose the plundering and the apparently unjustified violence. All the theorists and « spokesmen » of the international Left (or, rather, of its nothingness) deplored the irresponsibility and disorder, the pillaging and

above all the fact that *arms and alcohol* were the first targets for plunder ; finally, that 2,000 fires had been started by the Watts petrol throwers to light up their battle and their ball. But who was there to defend the rioters of Los Angeles in the terms they deserve ? Well, we shall. Let us leave the economists to grieve over the 27 million dollars lost, and the town planners over one of their most beautiful supermarkets gone up in smoke, and McIntyre over his slayed Deputy Sheriff ; let the sociologists weep over the absurdity and the intoxication of this rebellion. The job of a revolutionary journal is not only to justify the Los Angeles insurgents, but to help uncover their just reasons : to explain theoretically the truth for which such practical action expresses the search.

In Algiers in July, 1965, following Boumedienne's *coup d'etat*, the situationists published an *Address* to the Algerians and to revolutionaries all over the world, which interpreted conditions in Algeria and in the rest of the world *as a whole* ; among their examples, they evoked the American negroes, who if they could « affirm themselves significantly » would unmask the contradictions of the most advanced of capitalist systems. Five weeks later, this significance found an expression on the street. Theoretical criticism of modern society, in its advanced forms, and criticism in *actions* of the same society, co-exist at this moment : still separated but both advancing towards the same reality, both talking of the same thing. These two critiques are mutually explanatory, each being incomprehensible without the other. Our theory of « survival » and the « spectacle » is illuminated and verified by these actions so unintelligible to the American false consciousness. One day these actions will in turn be illuminated by this theory.

Up to this time the Negro « Civil Rights » demonstrations had been kept by their leaders within the limits of a legal system which overlooked the most appalling violence on the part of the police and the racialists : in Alabama the previous March for instance, at the time of the Montgomery March, and as if this scandal was not sufficient, a discreet agreement between the Federal government, Governor Wallace and Pastor King had led the Selma Marchers of the 10th of March to stand back at the first request, in dignity and prayer. Thus the confrontation expected by the crowd had been reduced to the charade of a merely potential confrontation. In that moment, Non-Violence reached the pitiful limit of its courage : first you expose yourself to the enemies' blows, then force your moral grandeur to the point of sparing him the trouble of using more force. But the basic fact is that the civil rights movement, by remaining within the law, only posed legal problems. It is logical to make an appeal to the law legally. What is not logical is to appeal legally against a patent illegality as is this contradiction would disappear if pointed out. For it is clear that the superficial and outrageously, visible illegality — from which the blacks still suffer in many American states — has its roots in a socio-economic contradiction which existing laws simply cannot touch, and which no future juridical law will be able to get rid of in face of more basic cultural laws of the society : and it is against these that the negroes are at last daring to raise their voices against and asking the right to live. In reality, the American negro wants the total subversion of that Society — or nothing.

The problem of this necessity for subversion arises of its own accord the moment the blacks start using subversive means : the changeover to such methods happens on the level of their daily life, appearing at one and the same time as the most accidental and the most objectively justified development. This issue is no longer the status of the American negro, but the status of America, even if this happens to find its first expression among the negroes. This was not a *racial* conflict : the rioters left certain whites that were in their path alone, attacking only the white policemen : similarly, black solidarity did not extend to black shopkeepers, not even to black cardrivers. Even Luther King, in Paris last October, had to admit that the limits of his competence had been overshot : « They were not race riots », he said, « but one class ».

The Los Angeles rebellion was a rebellion against commodities and of worker consumers *hierarchically* subordinated to commodity values. The negroes of Los Angeles — like the young delinquents of all advanced countries, but more radically because at the level of a class globally deprived of a future, a sector of the proletariat unable to believe in significant chance of integration and promotion — take modern capitalist propaganda *literally*, with its display of affluence. They want to possess *immediately* all the objects shown and made abstractly accessible: they want to *make use* of them. That is why they reject the values of exchange, the *commodity-reality* which is its mould, its purpose and its final goal, which has *preselected* everything. Through theft and gift they retrieve a use which at once gives the lie to the oppressive rationality of commodities, disclosing their relations and invention to be arbitrary and unnecessary. The plunder of the Watts sector was the most simple possible realization of the hybrid principle: « To each according to his (false) needs » — needs determined and produced by the economic system, which the act of pillaging rejects.

But the fact that the vaunting of abundance is taken at its face value and discovered *in the immediate* instead of being eternally pursued in the course of alienated labour and in the face of increasing but unmet social needs — this fact means that real needs are expressed in carnival, playful affirmation and the *potlatch* of destruction. The man who destroys commodities shows his human superiority over commodities. He frees himself from the arbitrary forms which cloak his real needs. The flames of Watts consumed the system of consumption! The theft of large fridges by people with no electricity, or with their electricity cut off, gives the best possible metaphor for the lie of affluence transformed into a truth *in play*. Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and modification, and this under whichever of its forms it may appear. Only so long as it is paid for with money, as a status symbol of survival, can it be worshipped fetishistically. Pillage is the *natural* response to the affluent society: the affluence, however, is by no means natural or human — it is simply abundance of goods. Pillage, moreover, which instantly destroys commodities as such, discloses the *ultima ratio* of commodities, namely, the army, the police and the other specialised detachments which have the monopoly of armed force within the State. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of commodities, the man in complete submission to commodities, whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labour remains a commodity with the magical property of having to be paid for instead of becoming a mere fridge or rifle — a mute, passive insensible thing, itself in submission to the first comer to make use of it. Over and above the indignity of depending on a policeman, the blacks reject the indignity of depending on commodities. The Watts youth, having no future in market terms, grasped another *quality* of the present, and the truth of that present was so irresistible that it drew on the whole population, women, children, and even sociologists who happened to find themselves on the scene. A young negro sociologist of the district, Bobbi Hollon, had this to say to the *Herald Tribune* in October: « Before, people were ashamed to say they came from Watts. They'd mumble it. Now, they say it with pride. Boys who always went around with their shirts open to the waist, and who'd have cut you into strips in half a second, used to apply here every morning. They organised the distribution of food. Of course it's no good pretending the food wasn't plundered... All that Christian blah has been used too long against the negroes. These people could plunder for ten years and they wouldn't get back half the money that has been stolen from them all these years... Myself, I'm just a little black girl.» Bobbi Hollon, who has sworn never to wash from her sandals the blood that splashed them during the rioting, adds: « All the world looks to Watts now. »

How do men make history, starting from the conditions preestablished to persuade them not to take a hand in it? The Los Angeles negroes are better paid than any others in the US, but it is also here that they are

furthest behind that high point of affluence which is California. Hollywood, the pole of the worldwide spectacle, is in their immediate vicinity. They are promised that, with patience, they will join in America's prosperity, but they realise that this prosperity is not a static sphere but rather a ladder without end. The higher they climb, the further they get from the top, because they don't have a fair start, because they are less qualified and thus more numerous among the unemployed, and finally because the hierarchy which crushes them is not one based simply on buying power as a pure economic fact: an essential inferiority is imposed on them in every area of daily life by the customs and prejudices of a society in which all human power is based on buying power. So long as the human riches of the American negro are despised and treated as criminal, monetary riches will never make him acceptable to the alienated society of America: individual wealth may make a rich negro but the negroes as a whole *must represent poverty* in a society of hierarchised wealth. Every witness noted this cry which proclaims the fundamental meaning of the rising: « This is the Black Revolution, and we want the world to know it! » *Freedom now!* is the password of all historical revolutions, but here for the first time it is not poverty but material abundance which must be controlled according to new laws. The control of abundance is not just changing the way it is shared out, but *redefining its every orientation*, superficial and profound alike. This is the first skirmish of an enormous struggle, infinite in its implications.

The blacks are not isolated in their struggle because a *new proletarian consciousness* — the consciousness of not being the master of one's activity, of one's life, in the slightest degree — is taking form in America among strata whose refusal of modern capitalism resembles that of the negroes. Indeed, the first phase of the negro struggle has been the signal to a movement of opposition which is spreading. In December 1964 the students of Berkeley, frustrated in their participation in the civil rights movement, ended up by calling a strike to oppose the system of California's « multiversity », and by extension the social system of the US, in which they are allotted such a passive role. Immediately, drinking and drug orgies were uncovered among the students — the same supposed activities for which the negroes have long been castigated. This generation of students has since invented a new form of struggle against the dominant spectacle, the teach-in, a form taken up by the Edinburgh students on October 20th apropos of the Rhodesian crisis. This clearly imperfect and primitive type of opposition represents the stage of discussion which refuses to be limited in time (academically), and in this its logical outcome is a progression to practical activity. Also in October, thousands of demonstrators appeared in the streets of Berkeley and New York, their cries echoing those of the Watts rioters: « Get out of our district and out of Vietnam! » The whites, becoming more radical, have stepped outside the law: « courses » are given on how to defraud the recruiting boards, draft cards are burnt and the act televised. In the affluent society, disgust for affluence and *for its price* is finding expression. The spectacle is being spat on by an advanced sector whose autonomous activity denies its values. The classical proletariat, to the extent to which it had been provisionally integrated into the capitalist system, had itself failed to *integrate* the negroes (several Los Angeles unions refused negroes until 1959); now, the negroes are the rallying point for all those who refuse the logic of integration into that system — integration into capitalism being of course the *nec plus ultra* of all integration promised. And comfort will never be comfortable enough for those who seek what is not on the market — or rather, that which the market eliminates. The level reached by the technology of the most privileged becomes an insult — and one more easily expressed than that most basic insult, which is reification. The Los Angeles rebellion is the first in history able to justify itself by the argument that there was no air conditioning during a heatwave.

The American negro has his own particular spectacle, his press, magazines, coloured film stars, and if the blacks realise this, if they spew out

this spectacle for its phoneyess, as an expression of their unworthiness, it is because they see it to be a *minority* spectacle — nothing but the appendage of a general spectacle. They recognise that this parade of their consumption-to-be-desired is a colony of the white one, and thus they see through the lie of this total economic-cultural spectacle more quickly. By wanting to participate really and immediately in affluence — and this is an official value of every American — they demand the equalitarian *realization* of the American spectacle of everyday life : they demand that the half-heavenly, half-terrestrial values of this spectacle be put to the test. But it is of the essence of the spectacle that it cannot be made real either immediately or equally ; and this, *not even for the whites*. (In fact, the function of the negro in terms of the spectacle is to serve as the perfect prod : in the race for riches, such underprivilege is an incitement to ambition). In taking the capitalist spectacle at its face value the negroes are already rejecting the spectacle itself. The spectacle is a drug for slaves. It is not supposed to be taken literally, but followed at just a few paces' distance ; if it were not for this albeit tiny distance, it would become total mystification. The fact is that in the US today the whites are enslaved to commodities while the negroes negate them. The blacks ask for *more than the whites* — that is the core of an insoluble problem, or rather one only soluble through the dissolution of the white social system. This is why those whites who want to escape their own servitude must needs rally to the negro cause, not in a solidarity based on colour, obviously, but in a global rejection of commodities and, in the last analysis, of the State. The economic and social backwardness of the negroes allows them to see what the white consumer is, and their justified contempt for the white is nothing but contempt for any passive consumer. Whites who cast off their role have no chance unless they link their struggle more and more to the negro's struggle, uncovering his real and coherent reasons and supporting them till the end. If such an accord were to be ruptured at a radical point in the battle, the result would be the formation of a black nationalism and a confrontation between the two splinters exactly after the fashion of the prevailing system. A phase of mutual extermination is the other possible outcome of the present situation, once resignation is overcome.

The attempts to build a black nationalism, separatist and pro-African as they are, are dreams giving no answer to the reality of oppression. The American negro has no fatherland. He is in *his own country* and he is *alienated* : so is the rest of the population, but the blacks differ insofar as they are aware of it. In this sense, they are not the most backward sector of their society, but the most advanced. They are the negation at work, « the bad aspect producing the movement which makes history by setting the struggle in motion ». (Marx : *The Poverty of Philosophy*). Africa has nothing to do with it.

The American negroes are the product of modern industry, just as are electronics, advertising or the cyclotron. And they carry within them its contradictions. These are the men whom the spectacle-paradise must integrate and repulse simultaneously, so that the antagonism between the spectacle and the real activity of men surrenders completely to their enunciations. The spectacle is *universal* in the same way as the commodities. But as the world of commodities is based in class conflict, commodities are themselves hierarchic. The necessity of commodities — and hence of the spectacle whose job it is to *inform* about commodities — to be at once universal and hierarchic leads to a universal hierarchisation. But as this hierarchisation must remain *unavowed*, it is expressed in the form of unacknowledgeable hierarchic value judgements, in a world of *reasonless rationalization*. It is this process which creates *racialisms* everywhere : the English Labour government has just restrained coloured immigration, while the industrially advanced countries of Europe are once again becoming racist as they import their sub-proletariat from the Mediterranean area, so exerting a colonial exploitation within their borders. And if Russia conti-

nues to be antisemitic, it is because she is still a society of hierarchy and commodities, in which labor must be bought and sold as a commodity. Together, commodities and hierarchies are constantly renewing their alliance, which extends its influence by modifying its form: it is seen just as easily in the relations between trade-unionist and worker as between two car-owners with artificially distinguished models. This the original sin of commodity rationality, the sickness of bourgeois reason, whose legacy is bureaucracy. But the repulsive absurdity of certain hierarchies and the fact that the whole world strength of commodities is directed blindly and automatically towards their protection, leads us to see — the moment we engage on a negating praxis — that every hierarchy is absurd.

The rational world produced by the industrial revolution has rationally liberated individuals from their local and national limitations, and related them on a world scale; but denies reason by separating them once more, according to a hidden logic which finds its expression in mad ideas and grotesque value-systems. Man, estranged from his world, is everywhere surrounded by strangers. The barbarian is no longer at the ends of the earth, he is on the spot, made into a *barbarian* by this very same forced participation in hierarchised consumption. The humanism cloaking all this is opposed to man, and the negation of his activity and his desires; it is the humanism of commodities, expressing the benevolence of the parasite, merchandise, towards the men off whom it feeds. For those who reduce men to objects, objects seem to acquire human qualities, and manifestations of real human activity appear as unconscious *animal behaviour*. Thus the chief humanist of Los Angeles, William Parker, can say: « They started behaving like a bunch of monkeys in a zoo. »

When the state of emergency was declared by the California authorities, the insurance companies recalled that they do not cover risks at that level: they guarantee nothing beyond survival. Overall, the American negroes can rest assured that, if they keep quiet, at least, their *survival* is guaranteed; and capitalism has become sufficiently centralised and entrenched in the State to distribute « welfare » to the poorest. But simply because they are *behind* in the process of intensification of socially organised survival, the blacks present problems of *life* and what they demand is not to survive but to live. The blacks have nothing to insure of their own; they have to destroy all the forms of security and private insurance known up to now. They appear as what they really are: the irreconcilable enemies — not of the vast majority of Americans — but of the alienated way of life of all modern society; the most advanced country industrially only shows us the road that will be everywhere followed unless the system is overthrown.

Certain black nationalist extremists, in showing why they could never accept less than a separate State, have advanced the argument that American society, even if it someday concedes total civic and economic equality, will never get around to accepting mixed marriages. *It is therefore this American society which must disappear*, not only in America but everywhere in the world. The end of all racial prejudice (like the end of so many others prejudices such as sexual ones related to inhibitions) can only lie beyond « marriage » itself: that is, beyond *the bourgeois family* (which is questioned by the American negroes). This is the rule as much in Russia as in the United States, as a model of hierarchic relations and of the stability of an *inherited power* (be it money or socio-bureaucratic status). It is now often said that American youth, after thirty years of silence, is rising again as a force of opposition, and that the black revolt is their Spanish Civil War. This time, its « Lincoln Battalions » must understand the full significance of the struggle in which they engage, supporting it up to the end in its universal implications. The « excesses » of Los Angeles are no more a political error in the Black Revolt than the armed resistance of the P.O.U.M. in Barcelona, May 1937, was a betrayal of the anti-Franquist war. A rebellion against the spectacle is situated on the level of the *totality*, because — even

were it only to appear in a single district, Watts — it is a protest by men against the inhuman life; because it begins at the level of the *real single individual*, and because community, from which the individual in revolt is separated, is the *true social nature* of man, human nature: the positive

transcendence of the spectacle.

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