

## The Misadventures of Critical Thought

I am certainly not the first to challenge the tradition of social and cultural critique my generation grew up in. Many authors have declared that its days are gone. Once we could have fun denouncing the dark, solid reality concealed behind the brilliance of appearances. But today there is allegedly no longer any solid reality to counter-pose to the reign of appearances, nor any dark reverse side to be opposed to the triumph of consumer society. Let me say at the outset: I do not intend to add my voice to this discourse. On the contrary, I would like to show that the concepts and procedures of the critical tradition are by no means obsolete. They still function very well, precisely in the discourse of those who proclaim their extinction. But their current usage witnesses a complete reversal of their orientation and supposed ends. We must therefore take account of the persistence of a model of interpretation and the inversion of its sense, if we wish to engage in a genuine critique of critique.

To this end, I shall examine some contemporary expressions that illustrate the inversion of the modes of description and demonstration peculiar to the critical tradition in the domains of art, politics and theory. For this I shall start from the domain where that tradition is still most persistent – art, in particular those major international exhibitions where the

presentation of artworks is willingly inscribed in the framework of a general reflection on the state of the world. Thus it was that in 2006 the curator of the Seville Biennial, Okwui Enwezor, devoted the event to unmasking, at the hour of globalization, 'those machineries that decimate and erode social, economic, and political networks'.<sup>1</sup> Foremost among these devastating machineries was obviously the American war machine, and visitors entered the exhibition through rooms devoted to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Alongside images of the civil war in Iraq, visitors could see photographs of anti-war demonstrations taken by a German artist based in New York, Josephine Meckseper. One of these captured the attention: in it, in the background we see a group of demonstrators carrying placards, while the foreground is taken up with a dustbin whose contents are overflowing onto the ground. The photo was called simply *Untitled*, which, in this context, seemed to mean: no need for a title – the image itself is sufficiently eloquent on the subject.

We can understand what the image said by relating the tension between the political placards and the dustbin to an artistic form that is particularly representative of the critical tradition in art – collage. The photograph of the demonstration is not a collage in the technical sense of the term, but its effect exploits the elements that account for the artistic and political success of collage and photomontage: the clash on the same surface of heterogeneous, if not conflicting, elements. In the days of surrealism, the procedure served to express the reality of desire and dreams repressed under the prosaic character of bourgeois quotidian reality. Marxism then seized on it to

<sup>1</sup> The precise title of the event was 'The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society'.

render palpable, through the incongruous encounter of heterogeneous elements, the violence of the class domination concealed beneath the appearances of quotidian ordinariness and democratic peace. This was the principle of Brecht's alienation effect. In the 1970s, it was still that of the photomontages created by a committed American artist, Martha Rosler, in her series entitled 'Bringing the War Home', which affixed to images of happy American domestic interiors images of the Vietnam War. Thus, against the background of a spacious detached house with inflated balloons in a corner, a montage entitled *Balloons* showed us a Vietnamese man carrying in his arms a dead child, killed by American army bullets. The connection between the two images was supposed to produce a dual effect: awareness of the system of domination that connected American domestic happiness to the violence of imperialist war, but also a feeling of guilty complicity in this system. On the one hand, the image said: here is the hidden reality that you do not know how to see; you must become acquainted with it and act in accordance with that knowledge. But it is not obviously the case that knowledge of a situation entails a desire to change it. That is why the image said something else. It said: here is the obvious reality that you do not want to see, because you know that you are responsible for it. The critical procedure thus aimed to have a dual effect: an awareness of the hidden reality and a feeling of guilt about the denied reality.

The photo of the demonstrators and the dustbin brings into play the same elements as those photomontages: distant war and domestic consumption. Josephine Meckseper is not less opposed to the war of George Bush than Martha Rosler was to the war of Richard Nixon. But the interplay of opposites works quite differently. It does not link American over-consumption

to the distant war in order to bolster activist energies hostile to the war. Indeed, it hurls this over-consumption at the feet of the demonstrators who are again claiming to be bringing the war home. Martha Rosler's photomontages accentuated the heterogeneity of the elements: the image of the dead child could not be integrated into the beautiful interior without exploding it. By contrast, the photograph of the demonstrators and the dustbin underscores their basic homogeneity. The cans spilling out of the dustbin have probably been thrown into it by the demonstrators. The photograph thus suggests to us that their march is itself a march of image consumers and spectacular indignations. This way of reading the image is in tune with the installations that have made Josephine Meckseper famous. On view today in many exhibitions, these installations are small showcases, similar to commercial or advertising display cases, in which, as in the photomontages of the past, she assembles elements that are supposed to belong to heterogeneous universes. For example, in an installation entitled *For Sale* we see a book on the history of a group of English urban guerrillas, who precisely wanted to carry the war into the imperialist metropolises, amid male fashion items; in another, a lingerie mannequin alongside a poster of communist propaganda, or the May '68 slogan 'Never Work' on some perfume bottles. These things are seemingly contradictory, but what is involved is showing that they belong to the same reality; that political radicalism is likewise a phenomenon of youth fashion. This is what the photograph of the demonstrators attests to in its way. They are protesting against the war prosecuted by the empire of consumption that releases bombs on Middle Eastern cities. But these bombs are a response to the destruction of the Twin Towers, which had itself been staged as the spectacle of the collapse of the empire of commodities

and the spectacle. Thus, the image seems to say to us: these demonstrators are there because they have consumed images of the collapse of the towers and the bombing in Iraq. And it is yet another spectacle that they are offering us in the streets. In the last instance, terrorism and consumption, protest and spectacle, are reduced to one and the same process governed by the commodity law of equivalence.

But were this visual demonstration to be taken to its logical conclusion, it would lead to the abolition of the critical procedure: if everything is nothing but spectacular exhibition, the contrast between appearance and reality that grounded the effectiveness of the critical discourse disappears, and with it, any guilt about the beings situated on the side of the dark or denied reality. In that case, the critical system would simply reveal its own extinction. Yet that is not how it is. The small display cases that mix revolutionary propaganda and youth fashion follow the dual logic of the activist intervention of the past. They still tell us: here is the reality you do not know how to see – the boundless reign of commodity exhibition and the nihilist horror of today's petty-bourgeois lifestyle. But also: here is the reality you do not want to see – the participation of your supposed gestures of revolt in this process of exhibiting signs of distinction governed by commodity exhibition. Artistic critique therefore always proposes to generate the short-circuit and clash that reveal the secret concealed by the exhibition of images. In Martha Rosler, the clash was intended to reveal the imperialist violence behind the happy display of goods and images. In Josephine Meckseper, the display of images proves to be identical to the structure of a reality where everything is exhibited in the manner of a commodity display. But it is always a question of showing the spectator what she does not know how to see, and making her feel ashamed of what she

does not want to see, even if it means that the critical system presents itself as a luxury commodity pertaining to the very logic it denounces.

There is thus clearly a dialectic inherent in the denunciation of the critical paradigm: it proclaims the obsolescence of the latter only to reproduce its mechanism; to transform the ignorance of reality or the denial of misery into ignorance of the fact that reality and misery have disappeared; to transform the desire to ignore what makes us guilty into the desire to ignore the fact that there is nothing we need feel guilty about. Such, in substance, is the argument defended not by an artist but by a philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, in his book *Sphären III*. As he describes it, the process of modernity is a process of anti-gravitation. In the first instance, the term obviously refers to the technical inventions that have enabled human beings to conquer space and those which have replaced the solid industrial world by technologies of communication and virtual reality. But it also expresses the idea that life has lost much of its erstwhile gravity, intending by that its load of suffering, harshness and misery, and with it its weight of reality. As a result, the traditional procedures of critical thinking based on 'definitions of reality formulated by the ontology of poverty' no longer have any rationale. If they survive, according to Sloterdijk, it is because belief in the solidity of reality and feelings of guilt about misery survive the loss of their object. They survive it in the mode of necessary illusion. Marx saw human beings as projecting the inverted image of their real misery into the heaven of religion and ideology. According to Sloterdijk, our contemporaries do the opposite: they project into the fiction of a solid reality the inverted image of this process of generalized lightening: 'Whatever the idea expressed in the public space, it is the lie of misery that writes the text. All

discourses are subject to the law that consists in re-translating the luxury that has come to power into the jargon of misery.<sup>2</sup> The guilty embarrassment experienced at the disappearance of gravity and misery is supposedly expressed upside down by adopting the old discourse of misery and victimization.

This analysis invites us to liberate ourselves from the forms and content of the critical tradition. But it only does so at the price of reproducing its logic. It once again tells us that we are victims of a comprehensive structure of illusion, victims of our ignorance and resistance to an irresistible total process of development of the productive forces: the process of dematerialization of wealth whose consequence is the loss of old beliefs and ideals. It is easy to recognize in this line of argument the indestructible logic of the *Communist Manifesto*. It is not for nothing that a putative postmodernism has had to borrow from it its canonical formula: 'All that is solid melts into air'. Everything supposedly becomes fluid, liquid, gaseous; and it only remains to laugh at ideologues who still believe in the reality of reality, misery and wars.

However provocative in intent, these theses remain trapped in the logic of the critical tradition. They remain faithful to the thesis of the ineluctable historical process and its necessary effect: the mechanism of inversion that transforms reality into illusion or illusion into reality, poverty into wealth or wealth into poverty. They continue to denounce an inability to know and a desire to ignore. And they still point to a culpability at the heart of that denial. This critique of the critical tradition therefore still employs its concepts and procedures. But something, it is true, has changed. Yesterday, these procedures still intended to create forms of consciousness and energies

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2 Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III. Schäume*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004.

directed towards a process of emancipation. Now they are either entirely disconnected from this horizon of emancipation or clearly directed against his dream.

Such is the context illustrated by the fable of the demonstrators and the dustbin. The photograph indeed shows no disapprobation of the demonstrators. After all, in the 1960s Godard was already waxing ironic about the 'children of Marx and Coca-Cola'. However, he marched with them because, when they marched against the Vietnam War, the children of the age of Coca-Cola were fighting, or at any rate thought they were fighting, alongside the children of Marx. What has changed in the past forty years is not that Marx has disappeared, absorbed by Coca-Cola. He has not disappeared. He has changed places. He is now lodged at the heart of the system as its ventriloquist's voice. He has become the infamous spectre or the infamous father who testifies to the shared infamy of the children of Marx and Coca-Cola. Gramsci once characterized the Soviet Revolution as a revolution against *Capital*, against the book by Marx that had become the Bible of bourgeois scientism. We might say the same of the Marxism that my generation grew up in: the Marxism of the denunciation of the mythologies of the commodity, of the illusions of the consumer society, and of the empire of the spectacle. Forty years ago, it was supposed to denounce the machinery of social domination in order to equip those challenging it with new weapons. Today, it has become exactly the opposite: a disenchanting knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, of the equivalence between everything and everything else and between everything and its own image. This post-Marxist and post-Situationist wisdom is not content to furnish a phantasmagorical depiction of a humanity completely buried beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. It also

depicts the law of domination as a force seizing on anything that claims to challenge it. It makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity. It makes it an expression of futility, but also a demonstration of culpability. The voice of the ventriloquist spectre tells us that we are doubly guilty, guilty for two opposite reasons: because we stick with the old verities of reality and culpability, affecting not to know that there is no longer anything to feel guilty about; but also because, through our own consumption of commodities, spectacles and protests, we contribute to the infamous reign of commodity equivalence. This dual inculpation involves a remarkable redistribution of political positions. On the one hand, the old left-wing denunciation of the empire of commodities and images has become a form of ironic or melancholic acquiescence to this ineluctable empire. On the other, activist energies have turned to the right, where they fuel a new critique of the commodity and the spectacle whose depredations are re-characterized as the crimes of democratic individuals.

Thus, on the one hand we have left-wing irony or melancholy. It urges us to admit that all our desires for subversion still obey the law of the market and that we are simply indulging in the new game available on the global market – that of unbounded experimentation with our own lives. It shows us absorbed into the belly of the beast, where even our capacities for autonomous, subversive practices, and the networks of interaction that we might utilize against it, serve the new power of the beast – that of immaterial production. The beast, so it is said, gets a stranglehold on the desires and capacities of its potential enemies by offering them, at the cheapest price, the most desirable of commodities – the capacity to experiment with one's life as a fertile ground for infinite possibilities. It thus offers everyone what they might desire: reality TV shows

for the cretinous and increased possibilities of self-enhancement for the malign. This, the melancholic discourse tells us, is the trap into which those who believed in bringing down capitalist power, and who instead furnished it with the means to rejuvenate itself by feeding off oppositional energies, have fallen. This discourse has found its fuel in Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. According to these sociologists, the slogans of the revolts of the 1960s, and especially of the student movement of May '68, supplied capitalism, which was in difficulty after the oil crisis of 1973, with the resources to regenerate itself. May '68 supposedly prioritized the themes of the 'artistic critique' of capitalism – protest against a disenchanting world and demands for authenticity, creativity and autonomy – as against its 'social' critique, specific to the working-class movement: the critique of inequalities and misery and the denunciation of the egotism that destroys the bonds of community. These are the themes that have arguably been incorporated by contemporary capitalism, supplying those desires for autonomy and authentic creativity with its newfound 'flexibility', its flexible supervision, its light, innovative structures, its appeal to individual initiative and the 'projective city'.

In itself, the thesis is pretty flimsy. There is a world of difference between the discourses for managerial seminars that supply it with its material and the reality of contemporary forms of capitalist domination, where labour 'flexibility' signifies forced adaptation to increased forms of productivity under the threat of redundancies, closures and relocations, rather than an appeal to the generalized creativity of the children of May '68. As it happens, concern for creativity at work was foreign to the slogans of the 1968 movement. Quite the reverse, it campaigned against the theme of 'participation' and

the invitation to educated, generous youth to participate in a modernized and humanized capitalism that were at the heart of 1960s neo-capitalist ideology and state reformism. The opposition between the artistic critique and the social critique is not based on any analysis of historical forms of protest. In line with Bourdieu's teaching, it makes do with attributing the struggle against misery and for community bonds to workers and the individualist desire for autonomous creativity to the fleetingly rebellious children of the big or petty bourgeoisie. But the collective struggle for working-class emancipation has never been separate from a new experience of individual existence and capacities, wrested from the constraint of old bonds of community. Social emancipation was simultaneously an aesthetic emancipation, a break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying that characterized working-class identity in the old hierarchical order. This solidarity of the social and the aesthetic, the discovery of individuality for all and the project of free collectivity, was at the heart of working-class emancipation. But by the same token it signified the disordering of classes and identities that the sociological view of the world has always rejected, against which it was itself constructed in the nineteenth century. It is perfectly natural for it to rediscover such disorder in the slogans of 1968, and one understands its anxiety finally to liquidate the disruption they caused to the rightful distribution of classes, their ways of being and forms of action.

It is therefore neither the novelty nor the strength of the thesis that has proved seductive, but the way in which it puts the 'critical' theme of the complicit illusion back to work. It thus provides fuel for the melancholic version of leftism, which feeds off the dual denunciation of the power of the beast and the illusions of those who serve it when they think they

are fighting it. It is true that the thesis of the recuperation of 'artistic' revolts leads to several conclusions: on occasion, it underpins proposals for a radicalism that would at last be radical: the mass defection of the forces of the General Intellect, today absorbed by Capital and the State, advocated by Paolo Virno; or the virtual subversion counter-posed to virtual capitalism by Brian Holmes.<sup>3</sup> It also fuels proposals for an inverted activism, aimed no longer at destroying but at saving a capitalism that has lost its spirit.<sup>4</sup> But its normal pitch is disenchanting registration of the impossibility of changing the ways of a world that lacks any solid point for opposing the reality of domination, which has become gaseous, liquid, immaterial. Indeed, what can the demonstrators/consumers photographed by Josephine Meckseper do when faced with a war which is described as follows by one of the eminent sociologists of our time?

The prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building, order-maintenance and the responsibility for the consequences of it all as well as of the necessity to bear the costs ... Blows delivered by stealthy fighter planes and 'smart' self-guided and target-seeking missiles -- delivered by surprise, coming from nowhere and immediately

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- 3 See Paolo Virno, *Miracle, virtuosité et 'déjà-vu'. Trois essais sur l'idée de 'monde'*, Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1996; Brian Holmes, 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique', in *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Arts and Politics in a Networked Era*, Paris and Zagreb: Broadcasting Project, 2002 (also available at [www.transform.eipcp.net](http://www.transform.eipcp.net)), as well as 'Réveiller les fantômes collectifs. Résistance réticulaire, personnalité flexible' ([www.republicart.net](http://www.republicart.net)).
- 4 Bernard Stiegler, *Mécréance et discrédit 3. L'esprit perdu du capitalisme*, Paris: Galilée, 2006.

vanishing from sight – replaced the territorial advances of the infantry troops and the effort to dispossess the enemy of its territory ... Military force and its ‘hit and run’ war-plan prefigured, embodied and portended what was really at stake in the new type of war in the era of liquid modernity: not the conquest of a new territory, but crushing the walls which stopped the flow of new, fluid global powers ...<sup>5</sup>

This diagnosis was published in 2000. It has scarcely been fully confirmed by the military actions of the past eight years. But melancholic prediction does not revolve around verifiable facts. It simply tells us: things are not what they seem to be. This is a proposition that does not run the risk of ever being refuted. Melancholy feeds on its own impotence. It is enough for it to be able to convert it into a generalized impotence and reserve for itself the position of the lucid mind casting a disenchanting eye over a world in which critical interpretation of the system has become an element of the system itself.

Opposite this left-wing melancholy we have seen a new right-wing frenzy developing that reformulates denunciation of the market, the media and the spectacle as a critique of the ravages of the democratic individual. By the term ‘democracy’, dominant opinion previously understood the convergence between a form of government based on public freedoms and an individual way of life based on the freedom to choose offered by the free market. As long as the Soviet Empire lasted, it counter-posed such democracy to the enemy dubbed totalitarianism. But consensus over the formula identifying democracy with the sum of human rights, free markets and

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5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, pp. 11–12.

individual free choice vanished with the disappearance of its enemy. Since 1989, increasingly enraged intellectual campaigns have denounced the deadly impact of the conjunction between human rights and individual free choice. Sociologists, political philosophers and moralists have taken turns explaining to us that human rights, as Marx had clearly seen, are the rights of the bourgeois egotistical individual, the rights of consumers of any commodity; and that these rights are now impelling those consumers to shatter any impediment to their frenzy and thereby destroy all the traditional forms of authority that used to place a limit on the power of the market: schools, religion and the family. That, they have argued, is the real meaning of the word 'democracy': the law of the individual concerned exclusively with satisfying her desires. Democratic individuals want equality. But the equality they want is that which obtains between the seller and the buyer of a commodity. Consequently, what they want is the triumph of the market in all human relations. And the more enamoured they are of equality, the more passionately they help bring about that triumph. On this basis it was easy to prove that the student movements of the 1960s, and in particular that of May '68 in France, aimed solely at the destruction of forms of traditional authority opposed to the generalized invasion of life by the law of Capital; and that their sole effect has been to transform our societies into free aggregates of disconnected molecules, lacking any affiliation, wholly amenable to the exclusive law of the market.

But this new critique of the commodity went a step further by identifying as the result of the democratic thirst for egalitarian consumption not only the reign of the market but also the terrorist and totalitarian destruction of social and human bonds. In the past, individualism was counter-posed to total-

itarianism. But in this new theorization, totalitarianism becomes the result of the individualistic fanaticism for free choice and boundless consumption. At the moment of the collapse of the Twin Towers, an eminent psychoanalyst, jurist and philosopher, Pierre Legendre, explained in *Le Monde* that the terrorist attack was the return of the Western repressed – punishment for the Western destruction of the symbolic order, encapsulated in homosexual marriage. Two years later, an eminent philosopher and linguist, Jean-Claude Milner, gave a more radical twist to this interpretation in his book *Les Penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*. The crime he imputed to democratic Europe was quite simply the extermination of Jews. Democracy, he argued, is the reign of social boundlessness; it is inspired by the desire for the unlimited expansion of this process of boundlessness. Because the Jewish people, by contrast, is the people loyal to the law of filiation and transmission, it represented the only obstacle to this tendency inherent in democracy. That is why the latter needed to eliminate it and was the sole beneficiary of this elimination. And in the riots in the French suburbs in November 2005, the spokesman of the French media intelligentsia, Alain Finkielkraut, perceived the direct consequence of the democratic terrorism of unimpeded consumption:

These people who destroy schools – what are they actually saying? Their message is not a call for help or a demand for more schools or better schools. It is the desire to liquidate the intermediaries between themselves and the objects of their desires. And what are the objects of their desires – it's simple: money, brands, and sometimes girls ... they want it all now, and what they want is the ideal of the consumer society. That's what they see on television.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Alain Finkielkraut, interview with *Haaretz*, 18 November 2005.

Since the same author asserted that these youth had been pushed into rioting by Islamist fanatics, in the end the demonstration reduced democracy, consumption, puerility, religious fanaticism and terrorist violence to a single figure. The critique of consumption and the spectacle was ultimately identified with the crudest themes of the clash of civilizations and the war on terror.

I have contrasted this right-wing frenzy of post-critical critique with left-wing melancholy. But they are two sides of the same coin. Both operate the same inversion of the critical model that claimed to reveal the law of the commodity as the ultimate truth of beautiful appearances, in order to arm the combatants in the social struggle. The revelation continues. But it is no longer thought to supply any weapon against the empire it denounces. Left-wing melancholy invites us to recognize that there is no alternative to the power of the beast and to admit that we are satisfied by it. Right-wing frenzy warns us that the more we try to break the power of the beast, the more we contribute to its triumph. But this disconnection between critical procedures and their purpose strips them of any hope of effectiveness. The melancholics and the prophets don the garb of enlightened reason deciphering the symptoms of a malady of civilization. But this enlightened reason emerges bereft of any impact on patients whose illness consists in not knowing themselves to be sick. The interminable critique of the system is finally identified with a demonstration of the reasons why this critique lacks any impact.

Obviously, the impotence of enlightened reason is not fortuitous. It is intrinsic to this variety of post-critical critique. The same prophets who deplore the defeat of Enlightenment reason when faced with the terrorism of 'democratic individualism' focus suspicion on that reason. In the 'terror' they

denounce they perceive the consequence of the free floating of individual atoms, released from the bonds of traditional institutions that held human beings together: family, school, religion, traditional solidarities. Now, this line of argument has a clearly identifiable history. It goes back to the counter-revolutionary analysis of the French Revolution. According to it, the French Revolution had destroyed the fabric of the collective institutions that assembled, educated and protected individuals: religion, monarchy, feudal ties of dependence, corporations and so forth. This was the fruit of the spirit of Enlightenment, which was that of Protestant individualism. As a result, these individuals, released, de-cultured and wanting protection, had become available for both mass terrorism and capitalist exploitation. The current anti-democratic campaign openly adopts this analysis of the link between democracy, market and terror. But if it can reduce the Marxist analysis of bourgeois revolution and commodity fetishism to it, it is because Marxism itself grew in this soil and derived more than one nutrient from it. The Marxist critique of human rights, bourgeois revolution and alienated social relations had in fact developed on the terrain of the post-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary interpretation of the democratic revolution as a bourgeois individualist revolution rending the fabric of community. And it is only natural that the critical reversal of the critical tradition derived from Marxism should lead back to it.

It is therefore false to say that the tradition of social and cultural critique is exhausted. It is doing very well, in the inverted form that now structures the dominant discourse. Quite simply, it has been restored to its original terrain: interpretation of modernity as an individualist sundering of the social bond and of democracy as mass individualism. Therewith it has been

restored to the original tension between the logic of this interpretation of 'democratic modernity' and the logic of social emancipation. The current disconnection between critique of the market and the spectacle and any emancipatory aim is the ultimate form of a tension which, from the start, has haunted the movement for social emancipation.

To understand this tension, we need to return to the original meaning of the word 'emancipation': emergence from a state of minority. This state of minority which the activists of social emancipation wanted to escape from is, in principle, the same thing as the 'harmonious fabric of community' that the thinkers of counter-revolution were dreaming about two centuries ago, and about which post-Marxist thinkers of the lost social bond feel misty-eyed today. The harmoniously structured community that is the subject of their nostalgia is one where everyone is in their place, their class, taken up with the duty allocated to them, and equipped with the sensory and intellectual equipment appropriate to that place and duty. It is Plato's community, where artisans must remain in their place because work does not wait – it does not allow time for going to chat in the agora, deliberate at the assembly and watch shadows in the theatre – but also because the divinity has given them the iron soul, the sensory and intellectual equipment, that adapts and fixes them to their occupation. This is what I call the 'police distribution of the sensible': the existence of a 'harmonious' relationship between an occupation and an equipment; between the fact of being in a specific time and place, practising particular occupations there, and being equipped with the capacities for feeling, saying and doing appropriate to those activities. In fact, social emancipation signified breaking this fit between an 'occupation' and a 'capacity', which entailed an incapacity to conquer a different space and a different time. It

signified dismantling the labouring body adapted to the occupation of an artisan who knows that work does not wait and whose senses are adapted to this 'absence of time'. Emancipated workers fashioned in the here and now a different body and a different 'soul' for this body – the body and soul of those who are not adapted to any specific occupation; who employ capacities for feeling and speaking, thinking and acting, that do not belong to any particular class, but which belong to anyone and everyone.

But this idea and this practice of emancipation were historically blended with a quite different idea of domination and liberation and, in the end, subjected to it: the one that linked domination with a process of separation and, in consequence, liberation with regaining a lost unity. According to this vision, summed up in exemplary fashion in the texts of the young Marx, subjection to the law of Capital was the law of a society whose unity had been shattered, whose wealth had been alienated, projected above or against it. Emancipation could then only appear as a general re-appropriation of a good lost by the community. And this re-appropriation could only be the result of knowledge of the total process of that separation. From this perspective, the forms of emancipation of those artisans who fashioned a new body to live in a new sensible world here and now could be an illusion, generated by the process of separation and by ignorance of that process. Emancipation could only occur as the end-point of the total process that had separated society from its truth.

On this basis, emancipation was no longer conceived as the construction of new capacities. It was the promise of science to those whose illusory capacities could be nothing but the reverse side of their real incapacity. But the very logic of science was that of an endless deferment of the promise. The

science that promised freedom was also the science of the total process whose effect is endlessly to generate its own ignorance. That is why it constantly had to set about deciphering deceptive images and unmasking the illusory forms of self-enrichment, which could only enclose individuals in the trap of illusion, subjection and misery that bit more. We know the degree of passion attained, between the time of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, by the critical reading of images and the unveiling of the deceptive messages they concealed. We also know how this passion for deciphering the deceptive messages of any image was inverted in the 1980s, with the disabused assertion that there was no longer any room for distinguishing between image and reality. But this inversion is simply the consequence of the original logic that conceives the total social process as a process of self-concealment. In the end, the hidden secret is nothing but the obvious functioning of the machine. That is the truth of the concept of spectacle as fixed by Guy Debord: the spectacle is not the display of images concealing reality. It is the existence of social activity and social wealth as a separate reality. The situation of those who live in the society of the spectacle is thus identical to that of the shackled prisoners in Plato's cave. The cave is the place where images are taken for realities, ignorance for knowledge, and poverty for wealth. And the more the prisoners imagine themselves capable of constructing their individual and collective lives differently, the more they sink into the servitude of the cave. But this declaration of impotence rebounds on the science that proclaims it. To know the law of the spectacle comes down to knowing the way in which it endlessly reproduces the falsification that is identical to its reality. Debord summarized the logic of this circle in a lapidary formula: 'In a

world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.<sup>7</sup> Thus, knowledge of the inversion itself belongs to the inverted world, knowledge of subjection to the world of subjection. That is why the critique of the illusion of images could be converted into a critique of the illusion of reality, and the critique of false wealth into a critique of false poverty. The putative postmodern turn is, in this sense, merely another turn in the same circle. There is no theoretical transition from modernist critique to postmodern nihilism. It is simply a question of reading the same equation of reality and the image, wealth and poverty, in a different direction. From the very beginning, the nihilism attributed to the postmodern temperament might well have been the hidden secret of the science that claimed to reveal the hidden secret of modern society. That science fed off the indestructibility of the secret and the endless reproduction of the process of falsification it denounced. The current disconnection between critical procedures and any prospect of emancipation simply reveals the disjunction at the heart of the critical paradigm. It can mock its illusions, but it reproduces its logic.

That is why a genuine 'critique of critique' cannot be a further inversion of its logic. It takes the form of a re-examination of its concepts and its procedures, their genealogy and the way in which they became intertwined with the logic of social emancipation. In particular, it takes the form of a new look at the history of the obsessive image around which inversion of the critical model occurred – the image, totally hackneyed and yet endlessly serviceable, of the poor cretin of an individual consumer, drowned by the flood of commodities and images

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7 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone Books, 1994, p. 14.

and seduced by their false promises. This obsessive concern with the baleful display of commodities and images, and this representation of their blind, self-satisfied victim, did not arise in the age of Barthes, Baudrillard and Debord. They became established in the second half of the nineteenth century, in a very specific context. It was when physiology discovered the multiplicity of nervous stimuli and circuits in place of what had been the unity and simplicity of the soul; and when, with Taine, psychology transformed the brain into a 'polyp of images'. The problem is that this scientific promotion of quantity coincided with another – that of the popular multitude which was the subject of the form of government called democracy; that of the multiplicity of those individuals without qualities whom the proliferation of reproduced texts and images, window displays in shopping precincts and lights in public towns, was transforming into full inhabitants of a shared world of knowledge and pleasures.

It was in this context that a rumour began to be heard: too many stimuli have been unleashed on all sides; too many thoughts and images are invading brains that have not been prepared for mastering this abundance; too many images of possible pleasures are held out to the sight of the poor in big towns; too many new pieces of knowledge are being thrust into the feeble skulls of the children of the common people. This stimulation of their nervous energy is a grave danger. What results is an unleashing of unknown appetites producing, in the short term, new assaults on the social order; in the long run, exhaustion of solid, hardworking stock. Lamentation about a surfeit of consumable commodities and images was first and foremost a depiction of democratic society as one in which there are too many individuals capable of appropriating words, images and forms of lived experience. Such was in fact the

great anxiety of nineteenth-century elites: anxiety about the circulation of these unprecedented forms of lived experience, likely to give any passerby, visitor or reader materials liable to contribute to the reconfiguration of her life-world. This multiplication of unprecedented encounters was also an awakening of original capacities in popular bodies. Emancipation – that is to say, the dismantling of the old distribution of what could be seen, thought and done – fed on this multiplication. Denunciation of the misleading seduction of the ‘consumer society’ was initially the deed of elites gripped by terror at the twin contemporary figures of popular experimentation with new forms of life: Emma Bovary and the International Workingmen’s Association. Obviously, this terror took the form of paternal solicitude for poor people whose fragile brains were incapable of mastering such multiplicity. In other words, the capacity to reinvent lives was transformed into an inability to judge situations.

This paternal concern, and the diagnosis of incapacity it involved, were widely adopted by those who wanted to use the science of social reality to enable the men and women of the people to become aware of their real situation disguised by mendacious images. They endorsed them because they espoused their own vision of the general dynamic of commodity production as automatic production of illusions for the agents subjected to them. In this way, they also endorsed the transformation of capacities dangerous for the social order into fatal incapacities. In effect, the procedures of social critique have as their goal treating the incapable: those who do not know how to see, who do not understand the meaning of what they see, who do not know how to transform acquired knowledge into activist energy. And doctors need these patients to look after. To treat incapacities, they need to reproduce

them indefinitely. Now, to ensure that reproduction, the twist suffices which periodically transforms health into sickness and sickness into health. Forty years ago, critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim, the 'imbeciles' have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. And now, naturally enough, recycled critical science makes us smile at the imbeciles who still think such things as concealed messages in images and a reality distinct from appearances exist. The machine can work in this way until the end of time, capitalizing on the impotence of the critique that unveils the impotence of the imbeciles.

Therefore, I do not want to add another twist to the reversals that forever maintain the same machinery. Instead, I have suggested the need and direction of a change of approach. At the heart of this approach is the attempt to uncouple the link between the emancipatory logic of capacity and the critical logic of collective inveiglement. To escape the circle is to start from different presuppositions, assumptions that are certainly unreasonable from the perspective of our oligarchic societies and the so-called critical logic that is its double. Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place. It would be assumed that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place and at any time. What 'dissensus' means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its

obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible. Collective understanding of emancipation is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection. It is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus. It is the employment of the capacity of anyone whatsoever, of the quality of human beings without qualities. As I have said, these are unreasonable hypotheses. Yet I believe that today there is more to be sought and found in the investigation of this power than in the endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast.