

H.T.

Elsewhere

2000

“Real life is absent. We are not in the world.” — A. Rimbaud

Existence is elsewhere. By now, we know this much too well. We cannot find the fullness capable of giving any meaning to our time on this earth either in a job that sends us traveling along through the crossroads of the career or in a daily life from that no longer holds any wonder for us. We may be able to *have*, but we no longer know how to *be*. All the things that surround us and are within our reach in the form of disposable commodities to be accumulated are only scented balms for mortal wounds, for festering open sores caused by the renunciation of the vital minimum. The vital minimum is the possibility of creating and acting with authentic meaning, in other words, autonomy.

The critique of the miserable daily life that people lead today cannot be separated from the critique of the social order that determines it: capitalism. Our whole world has been shaped by exchange values; it has been built according to the principles of interchangeability, of quantity, of passivity, of irresponsibility. Our thoughts retrace the commonplaces dear to public opinion. Our desires are measured in terms of what can be realized thanks to a current bank account. Our dreams pursue models taken on loan from television and movie screens. Our words are inspired by advertising slogans. The very environment that surrounds us is constrained to assume the form most suited to the needs of the market as metropolitan architecture or the massacre of the surroundings brought about for industrial purposes shows. This has reached the point that soon, the very boundary between what is natural and what is artificial will dissolve.

Our identification with a world constructed to the measurement of the bank that even the project of an *other world* doesn't seem to escape the blind alley into which we are forced. Even the activity of one who wants to put an end to a social system based on money doesn't manage to avoid prolonging it, crashing against the reef of social reproduction.

Against a politics that was always a tool in the hands of the ruling class, a new parliament (however alternative) is elected. Against an economy preoccupied exclusively with its profits, new credit institutions (however ethical) are founded. Against a technology that does not facilitate life but rather renders it superfluous, one demands its mass distribution (however democratic). Against work that does not realize the individual but rather alienates her, one asks for its multiplication (however minimal). Against a power that causes infinite harm, one calls for its renewal (however revocable). Against this world one demands . . . this world (whatever small changes may be changed).

Round and round in circles. The intolerable world in which we live is also the only world that we know, the only one we have experienced. Every project of social transformation is based on knowledge — on that with which we are familiar.

Starting from these premises, we analyze, we criticize, we denounce every sort of social poison present on our planet. But even though we are aware of the necessity to spew the poison out of our organism, we are seized with doubts: will we survive such a drastic treatment? What will become of us afterwards? In order to avert the risk that such an eventuality allows, we go in search of the formula for a painless antidote. Medical science rushes to our aid: the antidote to poison is a minimal dose of the poison itself (and the “cure” very quickly reveals itself to be not only useless but harmful, because it has no other effect than that of rendering the poison itself still more virulent). Thus, the critique of this world ends by proposing its models once again. Round and round in circles. But this is the surest way not to bring this world down.

Until recently, it seemed certain that the realm of freedom could find no place within the realm of necessity. The latter was limited to predicting and preparing the conditions for the advent of the former (from this we derive all the eulogies to the “development of the productive forces” and other pleasantries that favored “the mysterious identification of the capitalist economy with social revolution”). Under the rule of capital, happiness is elsewhere; this is impossible to doubt in view of the chains that leave their mark on our flesh, but its seed still had to hatch under the snow and one only needed to wait for the end of winter to see it blossom. This was what we were taught until recently. But now this certainty in the spontaneous succession of seasons has frozen to death along with the sporadic swallow that was occasionally seen on the horizon. And the weather becomes ever harsher. One cannot keep waiting for the spring. It is necessary to crate this spring, but the task is not easy. So why not just say that it has already started?

This is the way that some frozen victims of the social ice age have decided to get around this obstacle. A new ideological creed has replaced the old one; it is decided that the realm of freedom no longer comes after the realm of necessity, but rather flanks it, exists together with it. Freedom is no longer built on the ruins of the palaces of power, something that would first require their toilsome destruction. Instead it is built on their margins. The elsewhere in which one can finally be oneself is no longer an absent totality that is realized in the future, as soon as possible, but a partiality, already operating in the present. The state is not destroyed, but ignored, deserted, abandoned in favor of a “bipolar society” — in the stalinist version — or a “non-state public sphere” — in the libertarian version — into which one can enter, passing through the “crevices” of the capitalist megamachine.

It is only by hearing these two bells — the stalinist bell and the libertarian bell — at the same time that one can clearly perceive the identity of their ringing. Here the first one tolls: “It is necessary first of all to tend to the construction of these experiments in liberation, rather than tending to the organization of

the proletarian masses to the end of the rupture or supercession of the general arrangements of the system, because it is possible to carve out spaces of liberation even in the absence of this rupture or supercession, or precisely because liberation will come to pass through the gradual, molecular and interwoven expansion of these spaces. Thus, in this case, the state and the market would not be 'overthrown', but rather 'marginalized', 'extinguished.'" And now let's listen to the second: "Self-government submerges action tending to organize moments of collective participation extraneous to the presence of the state starting with a simulation in effect: 'as if' it were not there. The erosion of the aspects of existence ruled by the state mortgage can become a collective practice that makes participation trenchant if these moments are really laboratories of unheard-of resolutions for problems tied to social life. . . the spreading of moments of self-government acquires a sense of opposition that, from a phenomenon that is antagonistic or subordinately or subordinately reactive to a temporary lack of institutional services, is posed as an unpublished rough draft of projected organizations of society." The prose varies its range of expression, but isn't the refrain really the same?

And so the smaller one's desires are, the greater the possibility of satisfying them. The successes obtained through a realist politics cannot hide the naked reality that they have been paid for with the coin of renunciation. The "happy isle" carved out by an ocean of denials is not a free world. The "socially useful" job carried out in a small enterprise (no matter how collectively it is run) is not communism. The life passed inside the walls of "self-managed" spaces is not anarchy. Whatever their colors may be, flowers cultivated in an artificial hothouse are not the spring. The "experiments in liberation", the "moments of self-government", all these instances in which we feel that we are protagonists can certainly take place and perhaps even increase, but only to the extent to which they are granted. Only to the extent to which they would not constitute a danger to the social order that they would like to weaken. Only to the extent to which they represent the crumbs that fall at our feet from the table of those who rule us. A warning to insurgents: the state is not going to fade away on its own and it certainly has no intention of killing itself.

Until recently, revolutionary hope expressed the secular disguise of a messianic vision. The *great dusk* represented a kind of Final Judgment capable of splitting history in two, with the world before the revelation quickly disappearing as freedom, which has finally been acquired, erases the last traces of original sin. The disappearance of such millenarian assurances will never be adequately toasted. Only now we would be jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire if we were to replace it with the old Marxist idea of a freedom that "can only bloom on this reign of necessity." With its blackmail, necessity renders only the terrain of constraint fertile, certainly not the terrain of autonomy. If freedom is elsewhere,

we cease to experience shame when we do not know what will arise on the on the ashes of the prison in which we are presently enclosed.

If we want to be realists, we are finally such at bottom. A utopia cannot exist with both feet on the ground. What makes utopia subversive is the tension that it generates, the insatiability that leads it to never be contented and to never be resigned. To not look where one is going because one does not want to remain where the gaze reaches. On the other hand, the utopia that claims to be concrete, the one of modest practical reason, the one that is revealed in the contrast between the grandiosity of the ends and the cringing mediocrity of the means, the utopia of shopkeepers who want to subvert the world while still remaining at peace with every Christian neighbor, this utopia is only a reformist lie.

What else could reformism be if not the endeavor to find an artificial bridge — parties, conferences, social centers, nonprofit enterprises, rural communes, municipal lists . . . — capable of uniting means and ends, a supposedly unchangeable reality and the designated ideal, *after having abandoned the real forces of revolution*? Is not its psychological origin perhaps exposed by observation of the partial possibility of modifying social organization? Isn't its stimulus possibly born from the need for victory, the need to say goodbye to the long trail of defeats that the revolutionary idea has known? Couldn't its fortune derive from the radical opposition to extremism? It is of little importance to know whether its supporters sit in parliament in double-breasted suits or march in the streets in white overalls.

It is a cliché, but one worth remembering: *the world in which we live is one*. It is the world of authority, of money, of the market, of the state. It is the realm of necessity. Today in its pervasive presence, there is no elsewhere. There is no realm of freedom, miraculously preserved from the genocide in course, in which to find refuge. So if we are persuaded that existence is elsewhere, then we must realize that elsewhere here. Without deluding ourselves that the process of social becoming is automatic and irresistible, and that it will spontaneously understand all of the obstacles blocking its interests. On a practical level, this delusional perspective would work itself out in the renunciation of all active and conscious intervention aimed at fighting against the activities of domination. Without deluding ourselves that those who built this world in their image and likeness will turn it over to us without a fight in the face of our supposed greater "technical competence" in formulating adequate solutions to social problems. The nightmare in which we live will not end in a peaceful sunset.

Although the idea is no longer fashionable, the great game of freedom cannot do without a radical break, a social upheaval. Simply because its realization has all the characteristics of a wager: it is a risk that depends to great extent on chance. On her behalf, the player only has the passion for the game and the determination of his will. We leave the reassuring promises to advertisements. It is true that we

may never experience the enchantment of being in the world. It is true that we may never live our existence here, feeling instead that it is elsewhere. But why not try it? Is there really anything better for which it is worthwhile to take the trouble of living?

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