Anti-economics and anti-politics

On the reformulation of social emancipation after the end of “marxism”

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In this 1997 essay, Robert Kurz discusses the question of the “embryonic form” of “the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society” (Marx); rejecting both the “all-or-nothing” view of the extreme left that sees such a project as doomed to integration into capitalism, and the reformist concept of “dual economy” where cooperative businesses produce for the capitalist market, he advocates a process of “disconnection” from the value matrix that incorporates aspects of both the old cooperative movement and modern “microelectronic” technology while preserving a commitment to overcoming the system of commodity production and a refusal to produce for the market.

Part One

1. Politics and the Question of the Embryonic Emancipatory Form

2. The Concept of the Productive Forces and the Microelectronic Revolution

3. The Supersession of Private Property in the Means of Production

Part Two

4. Disconnection from Commodity Production

5. Internet Movement and Cybernetic Subversion

Part One

1. Politics and the Question of the Embryonic Emancipatory Form

The misery of the radical critique of the commodity production system, that is, of a “mode of production based on value” (Marx), appears to reside in the fact that it is incapable of representing a historical praxis (not to be confused with just any little practical activity), of taking the initiative, of finding a way out and heralding a common mass consciousness, and is thus condemned to an esoteric existence, confined to socially remote domains of purely theoretical reflection or even philosophical speculation, and ultimately to a gradual descent into an eccentric
sectarian existence. Even if an emancipatory socialization eliminating fetishistic forms of the commodity and money were possible—it would still be a book sealed with seven seals for this form of critique.

Nor is minoritarian Marxism exempt from this fault, that Marxism which, up until now, understands itself “in some way” as a critique of value or disseminates more or less vaguely a critique of value. In fact, this type of Marxist critique of “commodity fetishism”, which hearkens back to the young Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, to the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer or also, in part, to the French Situationists and Guy Debord, either consciously denied the decline and limitation of the critique of fetishism in modern political economy, or failed to notice existentialist traits in its practical unfolding—when it was not transformed (as in the case of Lukács) into shameless apologetics for the commodity production system of “real socialism”. The communism of the new left, for its part, composed in part of Maoist ingredients, in part of Italian “workerism”, never went beyond, in the best of its hypotheses, a Platonic critique of “money-commodity relations”, lacking as it did a critique based in antieconomic and philosophical terms, and remained the prisoner of quite crude notions, and was reduced in practice to a hedonistic mask for the old ideology of the workers movement.

These now-historical peripheral currents of Marxism, which rose to predominance and coalesced in a changing form in the period of the reformulation of the New Left, have one thing in common (as has already been discussed countless times in *Krisis*); they categorically refuse to acknowledge the logical formula *negatio est determinatio*, i.e., they are as silent as the grave concerning the concrete overcoming of the fetishistic determination—imposed by value—of the capitalist form of reproduction. Such ignorance, which is above all theoretical, is nourished by the fact that the question of supersession is dissociated, on the one hand, into a simple negation (“by this means, we declare and uphold that we are against capitalism—imperialism and that we want to overthrow it”) and, on the other hand, in an absolutely empty pragmatic praxis of the “liberated society”, which must be established only after capitalism (after the “collapse” of capitalist power).

When the question of power is so resolved, then it would be easy, so to speak, according to the model of the advertiser’s slogan (“and then everything works on its own”), to regulate, for the benefit of all, the productive forces unleashed by capitalism. The two fossils of left radicalism and former Green fundamentalism in western Germany, Rainer Trampert and Thomas Ebermann, could even, during the ceremonies, vainly insist on drawing up the program for this in 15 minutes, but this is not exactly the problem in the face of a capitalism which rules without opposition.

An effective movement of supersession cannot be conceived in this manner. Between capitalism and non-capitalism one does not find only the question of power or of “available force”. The supersession of reproduction under the commodity form is not a more or less technical and organizational affair to be undertaken after the (political and juridical) “expropriation” of the capitalists, but the supersession of all relations and forms of social consciousness structured by value or by the “value-split” between the sexes (Roswitha Scholz). And this will not happen easily or without facing resistance (since the consciousness of the masses as well as theoretical consciousness have been conditioned, in a centuries-long process, by the commodity form), or as an instantaneous polar reversal of post-capitalist forms. Instead, the movement of radical critique and social emancipation from the capitalist creed is only susceptible of being understood by means of a particular project of conceivable “voluntary change”, since social negation and mediation would otherwise be impossible. And this project cannot by any
means remain suspended in the form of a moral or metaphorical indeterminacy until some “D-Day”, without penetrating the theoretical structure in the form of concrete definitions.

This is even more necessary because post-capitalist reproduction must not fall below but instead exceed the level attained by capitalist socialization. From such a perspective, it is utterly impossible to separate negation and positive supersession. While the potentials to which capitalism itself gave birth are manifested solely in the destructive aspect of the capitalist form, it is necessary to indicate in what manner said potentials, once superseded, will act in a different way and will be regulated by institutions of direct social communication, transcending bourgeois socialization within the parameters of the commodity form. This is the prerequisite for a movement of supersession to follow its course.

The above considerations also apply to all those factors that are presented in bourgeois economics as problems of “resource distribution”. How should the concrete aspect of the cooperation of millions of people in the functional division of their reproduction be manifested, from the flow of resources from metallurgy to mining, when all of this can no longer be administered by the “invisible hand” of the fetishistic form of value? Those so-called planning problems will by no means be resolved in 15 minutes by eminences like Trampert or Ebermann. Even if, in its general outlines, the question of planning were reformulated and resolved in theoretical and analytical terms that transcend the commodity and money forms, towards the end of putting post-capitalist experiences into practice, the problem of the transition always simultaneously arises; before the movement of transformation would be capable of developing on its own terrain, the problem of the practical movement of transformation, of the famous “approximation” to a reproduction whose matrix would not be the commodity form, would have to be addressed. Where and how to begin, within the existing capitalist form of socialization which rules over all reproduction, with the intention of finding in the latter, so to speak, an internal breach and to break free of it, to take the first step, to point out a formulable beginning for social emancipation?

The mainstream of the old Marxism of the workers movement simply avoided this problem and replaced it with another: a political and statist orientation towards the “question of power” (see the article, “Crisis and Liberation. Liberation within the Crisis. A Post-political Digression,” by Ernst Lohoff, in Krisis, No. 18). In other words, it was not organized in an anti-capitalist form with reference to reproduction and everyday life, but only politically, as a historical and abstract “expression of will”, without a reproductive basis in reality, that is, as a “political party” (and, in a similar fashion, the trade union struggle was waged for demands immanent to the system). It subordinated everything to the goal of the political seizure of power, so that later, by means of state interventions—and consequently “from above”—it would try somehow to “invert” capitalist reproduction in accordance with the socialist standards of the planned economy. Here, political power appears as the Archimedean point, and an alternative state apparatus (the “Workers State”) appears as the central lever of the inversion.

It is not by chance that, with the above operation, the problem of a system of reproduction no longer connected to value, and its corresponding “approximation”, disappeared completely. The struggle for demands immanent to the system, which by definition remain on the terrain of bourgeois relational forms, is held to be an “approximation” to the question of power and is therefore also immanent to the system (as an “introduction” to it). This is completely logical, since the question of power in the positive sense, as a question of the
establishment of an alternative state force, is also restricted to the ("political") sphere of bourgeois socialization.

As a result, value is not clarified, but transformed into a neutral, ontological object. Means and ends, reform and revolution, trade union struggle over the distribution of wealth and political program, can only be contained within a unity which, as "the struggle for water for tea and for State Power" (Bertolt Brecht), is unconditionally kept confined within the bourgeois form of reproduction of commercial and monetary relations. The critique of value within the context of the not-yet superseded Marxism of the workers movement—that critique which abdicated its own concretion—was forced to swim, directly or indirectly, in these political waters and, for that very reason, remained esoteric and non-existent as a critique of value.

In fact, the conduct of the old Marxism in either case, whether esoterically critical of value and timidly political or openly Statist and value-ontologizing, is essentially the same in terms of its "inconsistency", which is to say that anti-capitalism does not appear (even with regard to only its theoretically elaborated possibilities) as a formulable form of socioeconomic existence and reproduction (representable seminally) beyond capitalism, as a form which struggles for its right to exist and affirms itself against the dominant form of socialization, but instead appears as a simple indirect mobilization of abstract negation, which is not in itself contrary to the commodity form, since it always finds itself led towards a superficial abstract goal, an alleged transcendent point of transformation.

Social emancipation thus remained a simple promise of an imaginary future. First, it will be necessary to cross the vale of political tears, before seeing the promised land of "socialism" and occupying it in practice. This was actually the program of social reform, immanent to the commodity form, in the heartland of capitalism as well as in the "catch-up modernization" of the capitalist periphery; in the meantime, these two formations have been largely destroyed. The idea of a politically centered inversion—and, for that reason, an abstract one—in the political heaven, instead of on the socioeconomic earth, was identical to confinement in the fetish form of the bourgeois mode of socialization.

The problem outlined here is that of the "embryonic form". Historical materialism analytically demonstrated and recognized that capitalist and bourgeois socialization under the form of the commodity arose as an embryonic form within feudal society. It did not begin with the political revolution (such as the French Revolution, for example), but much earlier, so that later, gradually, after a long development, it would prove to be a conscious power with its own intentions regarding the question of political power. The embryonic socioeconomic forms of capitalism underwent a long period of development while the "parallel and superior" feudal power was still dominant. When "the feudal husk was cast off" in the bourgeois revolutions, bourgeois sociability under the form of the commodity was already practically established: not only indirectly, as a useless political form, but directly and positively, as a real form of socioeconomic production. The political movement did not precede the new form of reproduction, as an expression of an abstract symbolic will; to the contrary, it was the secondary consequence of the new form of reproduction, its necessary phenomenal form.

It is of great importance not to lose sight of this historical circumstance, since historical materialism "pisses its pants", so to speak, as soon as it is called upon to define the so-called socialist revolution. On the one hand, it blindly assimilates the bourgeois form of the political movement, in all its manifestations (from the concept of revolution to that of the political party), which indicates the character of the old Marxism as a simple secondary offshoot of the bourgeois
Enlightenment and of socialization via the commodity form. On the other hand, such an attitude, for that very reason, cannot base itself upon an already-existing non-bourgeois and non-commercial form of reproduction. The patent lie of the Marxism of the workers movement is revealed in this absence of an actually existing embryonic form. The properly bourgeois form of political action cannot correspond to a non-bourgeois and non-commercial form of existence.

One makes a virtue out of a necessity; the bourgeois character of political immobility was defined as a peculiar feature of political transformation. Supposedly, the specific characteristic that must distinguish the socialist from the bourgeois revolution was that the former is not capable of assuming a real embryonic form. According to this view, the potentials for the transformation of the development of the capitalist productive forces, thanks to their “total” character affecting society as a whole, must not be presented and mobilized according to the criterion of an embryonic social and communicative form that transcends value-mediated socialization, but in accordance with the criterion of directly social organization. That is, “all or nothing”; the total immediacy of the ruling form of value, without any intermediate socioeconomic movement. Instead, only the political movement—and thus a movement that is positively connected to the State—reflecting a contradiction inherent to the capital relation, which by virtue of its very essence must remain on the terrain of capitalist categories (value, commodity, money, capital, wage system, State, democracy). In practical terms, and with respect to the definition of the goal, this led to a bureaucratic vision which could only gain plausibility in the context of social democratic and “communist” state fetishism—in the respectful socialist idea of the “good” State, of the “Workers State”, or, to formulate it polemically, of the eschatological “Third Reich” of the “blue ants”, under the sign of the productive forces on a gigantic scale.

This idea, which is in many aspects more closely related to the academic socialism of Lassalle than to the socialism of Marx (although Marx and Engels themselves were not completely immune to its influence), with the vigorous collaboration of the trade union and socialist party apparatus—whose typology represented, generally, a chamber of horrors of the railroad uniformity of the proletariat, of the Prussian goose-stepping mentality, and above all of a belief in the State and in the authority of the “armies of labor”—suppressed all attempts to realize an autonomous “anti-economic” reproduction against the constraints of the totalitarian system of commodity production. Anything of that kind, however immature its form, appeared to compete with the strategy of “seizing power” and with the “top-down” principle of the total planned economy of the ant-State (whose basis was the commodity form).

It would, of course, be unjust to unilaterally pronounce this verdict on the trade union and political apparatus of the workers movement, however great its responsibility for obscuring and crushing the weak, insecure and immature beginnings of the “embryonic form”. In fact, the old cooperative movement of the 19th century, like the so-called alternative movements of the New Left of the late 1970s, summoned forth from the career politicians and fetishists of State Planning all the slanderous catch-phrases of the Marxist catechism: massive petit bourgeois-ism and confused mentality, abandonment of the whole perspective of the social totality, technological backwardness and self-exploitation, the brutalization of country life and, finally, retreat to bourgeois society in the form of bankruptcy or capitalist “professionalization”.

What survived, in the case of the oldest cooperatives of the workers movement, were the strictly capitalist enterprises, like the Co-Op or the Neue Heimat, both of which, as everyone knows, became laughingstocks as a result of their peculiar susceptibility to corruption scandals. What remained of the recent alternative movement, for its part, basically occupied niches in the market of casino-capitalism with an artisanal production of luxuries for an amiable and honorable
cliente, or with a noble or ethnic gastronomy, or with cultural properties (commercial or dependent on the State). Here, a potential middle class and petit bourgeois of the most sordid variety accumulated, which either yearned for Keynesian handouts, or feels “proud”, after such a long time, of its little property worked for and acquired “with its own hands”—the latter kind is consecrated to the Protestant masochism of labor and is politically situated between the mafia of the SPD and the Realos of the Green Party. From this sector, in a long crisis, a movement towards a social-nationalism of the “radical right” or of the “left” could issue. Although there are, in the rest of the alternative movement, people who did not renounce their emancipatory pretensions or their radical critique of society, they no longer find an adequate social terrain for their expression.

It is therefore not a question of once again disinterring, intact and unmediated, in opposition to the failed and ultimately never emancipatory State Socialism, the idea of the cooperative movement of the 19th century or of the alternative movement of the early 1980s. To the contrary, it is a matter of critically overcoming the false polarity between state-economic politics and the petit bourgeois socialism of the clodhoppers. The real question is to ascertain whether or not the radical critique of value should be driven forward, from the theoretical and practical point of view, towards the embryonic socioeconomic form of a transformation that can lead to a way out of fetishistic structures. A problematic of this kind is exposed not only to theoretical and practical difficulties (above all in a situation characterized by the economic peace of casino capitalism and of the evident paralysis of spontaneous movements), but is also affected by the current indolence of the old leftist pseudo-radicalism and its remains, which are still mumbling to themselves.

In fact, up until this point, the whole critique proffered by the various left radicalisms against the mainstream of the old workers movement has systematically avoided the problem of the embryonic form of an emancipation that would transcend commodity production. Just like their opponents, the partisans of State Socialism, the old left radicals completely ignore the question of the basic formal determination, in order to seek refuge in an illegitimate, bourgeois-enlightenment emphasis on the “class” subject or the “class struggle” or, barring that option, in order to practically implement the bourgeois revolutionary politics of a pretentious Jacobinism in a particularly martial form. As has been pointed out countless times in Krisis, explicitly anti-State left radicalism, descended from anarchism, remains even more strictly in thrall to the unsuperseded forms of mediation of the commodity production system, that is, at the other pole of bourgeois subjectivity, since the trend of argumentation linked to Proudhon opens the door to (tendentially anti-Semitic) formulations of a critique whose object is limited to interest-bearing capital.

Even the initiatives of the Paris Commune of 1871 and of the anarchists defeated in the Spanish Civil War do not arrive at any legitimate idea of non-commercial reproduction, although there always remains the task of critically reconstructing their history for the purpose of preparing, by means of historical reflection, a new movement of emancipation that transcends the commodity form. Those who are least capable of contributing to this project are obviously the “orthodox” managers of the plundering of Critical Theory, who want to remain in the situation of paralysis which incapacitates mediation, in order to leave the problem floating in esoteric reflection and to scold all those who want to supersede it.

2. The Concept of the Productive Forces and the Microelectronic Revolution
If we are not to allow ourselves to be confused by the past, we have to attempt to elaborate socioeconomic definitions of an embryonic form, beyond commodity production, at the current level of socialization, without falling into a vulgar practicality. It is thus not by any means a matter of direct plans of action (which can only be developed, furthermore, within the context of a social movement), but of theoretical and practical reflections to concretize the critique of value. The question of the embryonic form of a reproduction no longer mediated by monetary and commercial relations has to be approached historically, analytically and theoretically.

We can start with a celebrated Marxist problematic: the question of the productive forces and their relation to the relations of production. It is not by any means necessary, however, to accept a deterministic sequence of “increasingly progressive” social formations, whose crowning achievement would ultimately be “socialism”. In a way, one can say that the productive forces are always developing, since the human spirit never rests; this development, as is clear, can take completely different directions (and, for example, withdraw from production itself understood in the crude economic or material sense, when we understand social reproduction and its “forces” in an all-inclusive and consequently cultural sense). The direction taken by the process of development is decided in social confrontations. Concerning which, one can say that, in the late Middle Ages, after the plague, it was not absolutely certain or even determined that capitalism’s “time had come”. In that era, completely different directions of development were still possible, which might not necessarily have led to capitalism (or necessarily to direct emancipation from the forms of fetishistic relations, for that matter). This is a question that would be worth the trouble to investigate, since it could provide a measure of contrast with respect to the rigid historical determinism of the old Marxism. With another direction taken and another form of development, the very question of social emancipation would obviously be formulated in different terms.

But after capitalism, with its specific form of development of the productive forces, was imposed in the middle of the 19th century, the questions of social emancipation and of the supersession of a blind and unconscious sociability could only be formulated in the form of the supersession of the specifically capitalist fetishism and of its mode of socialization. Since, however, the fetishistic forms of production and consciousness established by the capitalist commodity exercised a predominance based on their long history of affirmation and even determined the mental framework of social critique (the Marxism of the workers movement provides obvious testimony concerning this fact), this formulation of emancipation initially had to remain an undercurrent within history and underwent a long period of incubation. Over the course of an entire epoch one could only investigate the historical disequilibrium within the husk of the modern system of commodity production, which means that the question of emancipation could only be posed in a truncated sense, a sense that was immanent to the immediate historical context—which took the form of the bourgeois emancipation of the working class as citizenry, or social reform, or even of the bourgeois emancipation of catch-up “modernization” in the historically backward societies of the capitalist periphery.

This constellation of ideas, whose heritage oppresses us today, is not by any means the result of an ontological predetermination, but is itself the consequence of an originally open and controversial history. But after the commodity production system was brutally imposed and became the universal form of consciousness, what Marx predicted in general terms came to pass in the social process: once a system is historically established, one cannot go back: it must go through, so to speak, its life cycle, until it becomes exhausted and reaches its internal limits. These limits are reached when the development of the productive forces arrives at a point where
the latter become incompatible with the relations of production. The petrified shell of the objectivized social forms then breaks apart violently with catastrophic eruptions, which must take place so that transformed and superior forms of sociability, compatible with the new productive forces, can be realized.

This schema of “historical materialism” must be subjected to criticism because it precipitously generalizes, in a suprahistorical form, what is probably only valid for the specific history of capitalism. Since we are, however, living in that history, we cannot simply discard Marx’s schema. In fact, he is not by any means “objectivist”, as his leftist critics always supposed, but only took into account the effective objectifications of fetishism, which are at the same time recognized as fundamentally vulnerable to being superseded. This supersession still represents a moment of historical conditioning, and the latter is the necessary moment of a movement from capitalism to non-capitalism, from fetishism to non-fetishism. An immediate supersession of conditioning would be a contradiction in terms. The Marxism of the workers movement remained within the horizons of bourgeois society not because it had accepted the moment of conditioning, but because its forward progress was incapable of going beyond the fetishistic form of value.

Marx’s schema concerning the role of the forces of production was mobilized by historical Marxism only with respect to the internal history of the commodity production system, but not in connection with the supersession of that system. In reality, the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production only leads to the absolute crisis at the end of the system’s history of development and at the threshold of its supersession. But since the beginning the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production was also the internal motor of capitalist development, which led to relative crises (“crises of affirmation”) and surpassed the obsolete historical formations of the commodity production system, without touching upon its basic form. Only in this “weak” form was Marxism capable of comprehending Marx’s concept of transformation, since it was the prisoner of the still-unconcluded history of the development of modernity. It was for this reason that socialism took possession of the legacy of liberalism, just as the latter took possession of the legacy of absolutism. Protestant or Calvinist reform and absolutist centralization, French or American revolution, the Russian Revolution of October or national and anti-colonialist liberation movements form one single continuum in the history of the affirmation of socialization by means of the commodity form, in which each and every moment of emancipation from the respective previous situation represented a new stage of repression and prohibition.

The State Socialism of the East and the national liberation movements of the South today find themselves so fundamentally discredited as paradigms of social emancipation that only historical idiots can cling to the “weak” concepts of transformation associated with these paradigms. If we understand the collapse of these paradigms, in accordance with their historical classification, not as a “victory” of western capitalism, but as the beginning of an absolute crisis of the commodity production system, in whose end all the historically-evolved chains of the value form are broken, then the “strong” version of Marx’s transformation schema makes its entrance onto the stage. On the plane of the productive forces, it is undoubtably microelectronics, as a universal technology of rationalization and communication, which leads to the threshold of a kind of transformation that is no longer immanent to the system. As the microelectronic revolution becomes the productive force that induces the crisis of the commodity production system, it might also become a productive force of social emancipation from the fetishistic forms of value.
This possibility already sheds light on a fundamental difference between the potential emancipatory use of microelectronics and the alternative movements of the seventies and eighties. The old notions of a “different way of life and production” were to a large extent linked to a “reactionary critique of the productive forces”. Microelectronics, computers, and the potentials for automation in industrial production were excommunicated. This critique of the productive forces could not and did not want to link the question of social emancipation to the supersession of “abstract labor” but, to the contrary, to the return to a lower historical level. Thus, the alternative movement remained imprisoned in the “jobs” system: it sided with “labor” (which had to be perfected in a supposedly alternative and socially satisfactory manner) against the productive forces created by capitalism. In this form, it even became compatible with conservative and culturally pessimistic ideologies, which since the end of the 18th century—in the shape of, for example, literary, political and socioeconomic romanticism—tried to make the wheel of history turn backwards (although this simple impulse was not the only concern of romanticism). In most cases, some earlier stage of development within the history of the affirmation of capitalism was fantastically transfigured and transformed into a “black”, reactionary utopia. The alternative movement was not identical with political and cultural conservatism but, to the extent that it wanted to resolve the question of social emancipation in retrograde terms, against the productive forces, it opened the door to the entry of politically conservative ideas into the “new social movements”. In the Green Party, all that was left of the debate on principles of the decade of the 1980s was almost exclusively the flirtation of the political coalition of a cabal that was “conservative with regard to value” with the CDU [the Christian Democratic Union], the governing party.

In opposition to this tendency, one must return, with reference to this point, to the radical movement of opposition proposed by Marx, that is, to the meaning of the “strong” transformation, to siding with the productive forces of microelectronics against the relations of production of capital. But this cannot be a mere continuation of the old Marxism and its fetishism of the productive forces—which is thoughtless and rests upon a superficial and simplified critique of value. This applies as much to the concept of the productive forces as to the question of their relevance in a transformative embryonic form of social relations not based on the commodity form. Most importantly, there must be an “improved” reworking of Marx’s concept of transformation rather than its simple repetition.

It is precisely this problem that the majority of the representatives of what remains of Critical Theory and “orthodox” Marxism neither want nor are able to comprehend. They think they can refute the alternative movement’s critique of the productive forces with a simple repetition of the Marxist fundamentals concerning the relation between the forces of production and the relations of production. In this manner they ignore a decisive moment, which always constituted the weak point of Marxism: the fact that the critique of the natural sciences, of technology and industrialism is not exclusively reactionary and irrational, but that it also—and not incorrectly—warns about the destructive and repressive character of the capitalist development of the productive forces (see “Weltgesellschaft ohne Geld” [“World Society without Money"] by Norbert Trenkle, in Krisis, No. 18). Marxism wanted to absolve the scientific and technological aspect of modernization of its repressive role, and to make repression an exclusive product of property and capitalist profit (which could only be conceived in an equally sociologically reduced form). Natural science, technology and industry had to be assimilated into “socialism”, without modification.

This corresponds, however, to the “weak” version of a simple transformation of internal history, in which Marxism/socialism involuntarily assumes the task—as was true of its still
weaker Keynesian cousin, during a certain era—of representing the most progressive (Fordist) productive forces of the time within a new wave of development of the commodity production system. Thus, the destructive and repressive side of capitalist use value in production and consumption could not be included in the critique as was the basic fetishistic form of value. This results necessarily in a double correlation: a critique limited to the internal history of the now-obsolete stages of development of the not yet exhausted commodity production system and a blind affirmation of the latest and most novel technical-material shape of capital comprise a unity as indissoluble as, conversely, a radical critique of the basic form of value and the corresponding critique of capitalist technical structure and use value. Since Marxism did not understand and could not criticize the “real abstraction” of value, it was inevitable that the very close logical and historical correlation between the liberated commodity form and scientific abstractions should also escape its understanding. In this manner, one aspect of the critique of capitalism remained obscure (even for Marx himself), which allowed its irrational adoption by reactionary romanticism, which accompanied the advance of modernization under the commodity form like a shadow.

Starting in the 1970s, when it became increasingly clear that the crisis of the Fordist stage of development also implied an ecological crisis, and when the terrible environmental devastation in the States of real socialism reached the public, the alternative movement of the Greens, successor to the revolt of 1968, largely abandoned Marxism and cast its lot with the anti-industrial trend and the critique of science. One can describe the then-ascendant ecological critique of the simplistically defined concept of the productive forces, in the sense of the Hegelian logic of supersession, as pure and simple negation. This negation was doubly insufficient: along with its destructive and repressive moments in the history of modernization, the development of the productive forces was rejected in general, which is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Consequently, this critique of the productive forces did not arrive at a critique of the value form and its fetishism, but only at various notions of petit bourgeois commodity production, so as to later regress, in “green political economics”, to Keynesian models. The Marxism of the workers movement and its ecological deficiencies were not, therefore, superseded, but only ideologically repressed.

As the absolute crisis of the commodity production system and, therefore, the “strong” transformation, become visible, the second negation becomes necessary in the matter of the productive forces, the “negation of the negation”, which, as is known, does not lead back to the starting point but instead supersedes the unmediated antagonistic elements. It is therefore necessary to take the side of the microelectronic forces against the capitalist relations of production but, at the same time, it is also necessary to overcome the destructive use value of the capitalist structure of production and consumption. This superseding critique must distinguish between the essence and the appearance of the microelectronic revolution. The essence of these new productive forces is the potential, or rather the possibility, that capitalism would not produce for its own benefit, but for the abstract end-in-itself of valorization. The apparent reality of that potential cannot but be affected by such a fact. In accordance with its material configuration, the concrete appearance of the microelectronic productive forces is also capitalist, and must be superseded together with its social form.

This negation of the negation is all the more necessary since, ironically, the postmodern left—as an unmediated reaction to Marxism’s inadequate, single-stage negation—now seems to be turning once again to the vulgar fetishism of the old workers movement in opposition to the critique of the productive forces made by the green alternative movement. Without any kind of reflection upon the totality (global or structural) of the conditions of reproduction within the
social and ecological arenas, the “last word” in the technology of capitalist consumption becomes a “must”, without even perceiving the painful limits of imbecility and the threat to the public.

The fetishistic inversion of social and material relations, which is also manifested in the aspect of capitalist use value, is acclaimed as a positive vision of the future. Such a stance renders all the emancipatory pretenses of the postmodernist left risible. It is not surprising that this postmodern tendency is accompanied by indifference with relation to the tacitly assumed forms of mediation of money, whose supersession does not constitute a serious topic of consideration for this tendency. The old Marxism of the workers movement, the alternative critique of the productive forces proclaimed by the Green Party, and the postmodern left, only represent variants of the same incapacity to address (and of the same distaste for) the overcoming the commodity production system. Against this, one must advocate a supersession of the fetishistic value form, which includes the supersessive negation of both the apparent form of the mediation of money as well as the phenomenal form of capitalist use value, taking advantage of the potentials of the microelectronic revolution precisely by means of the critical selection of capitalist artifacts, instead of unquestioningly submitting to the repressive logic of their use value.

This debate only becomes more confused when the question of the embryonic form is considered. Fearful of falling to a lower level of capitalist productive forces, critical Marxism and part of the postmodern left insist upon an immediate revolution affecting society as a whole even if, on the other hand, they criticize (at least in part) statism and politicism. Here a certain obscurity and incoherence is manifested, since the rejection of an embryonic form of socioeconomic reproduction that transcends value is necessarily linked to a statist conception of the revolution made “from above”, that is, from an Archimedean perfect vantage point.

The reference to councils as organs of social representation is also insufficient, since the councils, ultimately, have to represent something, that is, they must be composed of elements. The misery of the historical council movement consisted precisely in the fact that it was only capable of representing capitalist forms of “labor” (businesses or enterprises which establish the mediation between home and market), but not embryonic forms of a reproduction independent of socialization by means of the real abstraction of value. For precisely this reason, the councils’ organizational form falls back into the bourgeois form of the political party with a statist orientation, and for that reason was manipulated and absorbed.

This misery, of course, has something to do with the character of the productive forces at the culminating point of capitalist development. In a way, the old Marxism of the workers movement could cite, in favor of its statist and centralist concept of transformation, the situation of the productive forces themselves: from the time of the steam engine and the railroad to the heyday of the Fordist industries, the aggregations of the technical-scientific potentials were only representable in fact, on a relatively large social scale. This was applied, literally, to the machines, buildings and technologies of energy supply. The individual was small compared to monstrous machinery. And “big” was synonymous with progress. From this fact also resulted, so to speak, a certain childish megalomania: businesses and nations competed to construct the largest turbine in the world, the world’s largest building, the largest oil tanker or the largest warship.

As a consequence, the scale of organization was also big in order to create and mobilize such productive forces. This already constituted a factor in the spontaneous generation of capitalism. Actually, the oldest embryonic form of modernity, with reference to the productive forces, was a destructive force: innovation in firearms. The powerful cannons of the beginning of the modern era and the megalomaniacal fortifications characteristic of the same period could no
longer be represented in the decentralized and autochthonous form of the old agrarian societies, but demanded the mobilization of the armaments industry, of permanent armies, of a money-based economy and social centralization.

The embryonic forms of the capitalist mode of production could only develop upon that basis. And all the supporters of the onward march of development of the commodity production system, including socialism and its parties, remained prisoners of the idea of a hyper-centralized and pyramidal form of socialization. Not only the dictatorships of “catch-up modernization”, but also the most highly developed western democracies are negatively utopian “States of the Sun” and pyramid builders, without exception. The bureaucratic apparatuses and the vast national or continental markets correspond to productive or destructive forces whose aggregations can only be put in motion by enormous “armies of labor” and of war.

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The microelectronic revolution, in relation to this issue of the monstrous scale of labor mobilization of capitalist modernization, not only renders the living substance of capital, abstract “labor”, nugatory, but also transforms the social centralization promoted by the States and markets into an archaic and inconvenient form of organization, rendering modernity’s megalomania ridiculous. To the same extent that capitalism is technologically impelled to participate in a race for miniaturization by means of the productive forces it has itself created, not only does its substance disintegrate, but so does its external form. If, a few decades ago, the old computers filled entire rooms and required the mobilization of the capital of giant corporations, today laptop computers have much greater capabilities and can even be acquired by ordinary people.

Socialization does not lie in the vastness but, quite to the contrary, in the smallness of technology. The most developed potentials of computers, of robotics and communications media are mobilized on a small scale and no longer require any “labor armies” or social centralization. Reproduction can return to a decentralized form, but not to the decentralized and comparatively isolated and dispersed forms of reproduction of agrarian society, which were only superficially linked by structures of domination; in higher stages of development, it would have to evolve towards a decentralized structure, linked in a network of communications. Furthermore, this applies not only to microelectronics but also, at least potentially, to the replacement of fossil fuels by solar energy. If the energy systems of fossil fuels require large-scale technologies and centralized organizational forms, solar technology, for its part, is as decentralized and as utilizable on a small scale as microelectronics. Perhaps the representatives of capital are afraid of the inevitable development of solar energy because they foresee that it could cause capitalism and its centralized forms of domination to disappear.

The link between electronics and solar energy opens up the possibility that man could escape capitalism (partially, step by step) and break with its totalitarian pretensions, something which, in the past, was only possible by means of migration to regions unexplored by the latter (in the pioneer epoch of the United States, for example, this happened with the exodus bound for the far west, which was also often a flight from capitalist demands, which sounds unpleasant today and is thus silenced). Only today this possibility of flight, in a totally new and different way, has been created by the development of the productive forces themselves. The domain to which we can flee is no longer external or territorial, but internal and social. Nor is it a matter of a return to socialization to the primitive state, as the alternative movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s sought—that movement which criticized the productive forces and was, in the worst sense of the word, “romantic”. On the contrary, in the pores and upon the ruins of an increasingly archaic capitalist socialization the embryonic forms of a system of reproduction no
longer dictated by the commodity form can flourish, which can dispute and exchange with capital, affirm their right to exist and, finally, supersede capitalist reproduction in its totality.

The analysis of the relation between the forces and the relations of production in the context of the age of microelectronics also makes it clear that there is no longer the need for a central fulcrum, with direct support in society as a whole, for the “strong” transformation. This kind of thinking is still beholden to the old conception of the world of the pre-microelectronic modern productive forces. Today, the character of society as a whole appears, instead, when viewed from this perspective, as a form of movement, and not as a central act of the revolution. In the same way that the North American pioneers temporarily escaped capitalism, despite having brought tools (albeit simple ones) produced by capitalism, so also one can today, in a higher stage of development, escape from capitalist territory, using microelectronics and solar energy for the benefit of non-capitalist forms of reproduction.

But this also means that an embryonic form of social reproduction beyond value will not begin with the production, but with the utilization, of microchips. In fact, the production of the basic element of microelectronics requires a greater amount of capital than the old Fordist productive forces, but without their “labor armies”. The costs are concentrated above all in the complexity of the microchips’ conditions of production, which today even obliges international corporations to enter “strategic alliances” for the development of the next generation of technology.

Part of the reason for East Germany’s collapse into bankruptcy was its attempt to develop and produce its own microchips at any cost, which consumes many resources, instead of buying them at more modest prices on the world market. But this error in calculation was not by chance. It goes back to the inveterate understanding of centralized socialism that the metaphysical subjects, “party and class”, must from the beginning exercise absolute control over all of production, basic industries being especially decisive in this regard. For this reason socialist attention was concentrated, at the beginning, on the coal, iron and steel industries, whose employees were defined as the “nucleus of the class”. This reasoning was transposed to the microelectronic productive forces. A movement of supersession of the value form would attack the system of reproduction from a totally opposite perspective. Basic industrial production will not be the touchstone but the keystone of transformation. It is not a matter of centralist control, but of the constitution and development of social spaces of emancipation.

Something entirely different arises with the question of the use of microelectronics for emancipatory goals. If the technology of production must remain, for now, in the hands of capital, its use, on the other hand, does not need to correspond to models dictated by capitalism. And this comprises the first point of departure for a critique of the capitalist structure of use value. The apparent forms of utilization of microelectronic productive forces are absolutely directed towards capitalist ends of production and consumption, in which the end-in-itself of value and the fetishistic reification of the commodity are manifested.

While the postmodern Left clearly sees the reified and, with regard to its effects, highly destructive communism, this only causes it to swerve towards the field of capitalist action and the socio-psychological mechanisms of consumerist status and the self-affirmatory struggles of competition. The claim that this society has necessarily surrendered any claim to embody a critical potential as a result of (or solely and exclusively due to) the fact that capitalism is no longer capable of satisfying the needs that it has itself produced, is very simplistic. To the degree that the structure of needs results from the structure of specifically capitalist use value, it will be
an integral part of the fetishistic abstraction of value and, therefore, of man’s tutelage under the subjectless social forms. For this reason the appeal to these needs, for which a sufficient monetary income will no longer be produced, will never lead to an emancipatory movement. The contradiction between capitalism and the potentials that it has itself produced resides on a completely different plane and cannot be so easily mobilized.

The useful potentials of an embryonic emancipatory form cannot be found in Nintendo video games. Furthermore, even the specialists themselves debate whether the transition from vinyl to CDs, for example, represented an advance with regard to use value (that is, with regard to sound quality). That innovation only had the objective of attaining new levels of production, towards the end of keeping the labor machine running. This is only one among various examples of the fact that the end-in-itself of valorization has long since taken the structure of consumption into account. In opposition to this, a social movement against the commodity production system must direct the potentials of microelectronics towards emancipatory ends of reproduction. If the microelectronic apparatus increasingly consists of modules which reduce the opportunities for their users to engage in transformative initiatives, or even to make simple repairs, this tendency not only obeys economic reasons (“planned obsolescence”) but also the intention of social control: the treatment of the people with the products cannot be neutral; they have to follow, like fetishist idiots of consumption and labor, the predetermined structure of capitalist use value.

This is why the emancipatory utilization of microelectronics itself must be reformulated and subjected to experimentation, that is, a suitable combination of hardware and software has to be developed, determined by previously defined goals. The corresponding knowledge and participation of people capable of struggling with the potentials of microelectronics is therefore necessary. Ultimately, an effort will have to be made to disseminate this knowledge, in the form of, for example, a “polytechnic vocational training” in microelectronics and solar energy, which can just as well be organized autonomously as taught according to the requirements of the educational system. The old socialist ideas are therefore susceptible to complete restoration in analogous forms adapted to new tasks. The goal of emancipation cannot be the 100% automated idiot, but the self-reflective person, who consciously regulates the context of his life and is not dominated by dead things. This goal must figure in the embryonic forms of reproduction, since otherwise they would not merit the name.

3. The Supersession of Private Property in the Means of Production

The modified or “superseded” notion of the productive forces and its connection to the relations of production is obviously the precondition for solving the real problem: the supersession of the form of fetishistic value in social relations. On this point it is also necessary, first of all, to bridge the gap between the reductive conceptions, immanent to the system, of the Marxism of the workers movement and that of the alternative movement or the cooperatives. As in the question of the productive forces, we see these movements evincing a speculative and complementary attachment to fetishistic structures. Both political Marxism and the alternative movement reduce their goal to a critique and a supersession of private property in the means of production, although in different ways. When, however, one speaks of the institution, “private property”, it is clear that one is dealing with a moment of the commodity production system, i.e., of its juridical form. It is thus clear that this moment cannot be overcome alone, without overcoming the other moments of the value form and even the latter itself as such. The attempt to eliminate private property in the means of production and at the same time to maintain the forms of mediation of the commodity and money, can only lead to social paradoxes.
The fact that private property can be considered a factor in such an isolated way and that the responsibility for all capitalist evils are imputed to it derives from a typical, ingenuous error of the Enlightenment: private property is erroneously declared to be a simple “subjective force” at the disposal of the owners and “rulers”—the appearance of sovereignty and the alleged will on the part of the person found to be in command is accepted as a dogma. This is usually accompanied by the equally ingenuous and affirmative notion of capitalist wealth, which is only “distributed unequally and unjustly”. Some elements of this reductive concept of “private property” are also to be found in Marx and Engels, even though it was Marx himself who simultaneously provided the tools for the criticism of this conception.

Actually, the institution of private property is far from being resolved as a “subjective force”. Such a notion only sees the subjective calculation of the owners of the means of production, but not their formal objectivized determination which is imposed upon the supposed “powerful” as a principle of external coercion and instantly penalizes any deviation from the laws of motion and of the form of value. The evils of capitalism, therefore, must not be imputed to the subjective decisions of its functional agents, but to the subjectless and fetichistic form of reproduction and mediation itself. This experience was and still is necessarily learned by those who occupy factories in the attempt to take into their own hands an enterprise on the verge of economic collapse. During the 1980s, at the beginning of the crisis of the German shipbuilding industry, a publication of the old Marxism dazzled its readers with the title: “Just imagine! The shipyard belongs to us!” And what was gained by this? Absolutely nothing, since the laws of market competition continued to be in effect: the employees had to exploit themselves, and submit to workerist demagogy and rationalization, etc.; or else, with all the beauty which accompanies collective property, they would have to declare bankruptcy.

Both forms of property, cooperative and state-owned, which figure, in the reduced conception linked to a large extent to commercial production, as a supersession of private property, end up being deceived by that enlightenment error of “subjective power”. In reality, however, any form of property that rests upon the “valorization of value” and whose production can only therefore be socially mediated by market relations, is already, by definition, private property. The widespread and profoundly hierarchical functional division of social reproduction, which is not evident at first sight in ordinary communication and personal relations, but only a posteriori through the exchange of products, forms the matrix of a fetichistic socialization based on value, or on the apparent metaphysical quality of products, and not on the direct communication between people. This matrix imposes, a priori, the category of private property upon all involved units of production.

The value matrix is only remotely related to pre-capitalist money-commodity relations. In fact, in the old agrarian societies (not to speak of hunter-gatherer societies), the matrix of socialization was not value as a metaphysical quality of products, but a context of forms of subsistence that only marginally knew of commodity exchange, or only in their “interstices” (Marx); this means that only the surpluses or relatively few specific products entered market relations. A more extensive and profound functional division in the market is not, however, necessarily the result of the development of the productive forces, but is rather a logical consequence of capitalism, which makes value its social end-in-itself. Unlike what economic theory states, the functional division spread by the development of the productive forces does not lead, necessarily, to the totalization of money-commodity relations. This view confuses a historical fact with a logical datum. It is capitalism, as self-reference of value to itself (as a valorization machine), which makes the development of the productive forces appear to be identical with the universalization of the market. A universal and total market can only be born as
a sphere of realization of the abstract production of surplus value. For bourgeois consciousness, this is identical to the developed forces of production, since the latter always appear to bourgeois consciousness in the form of the value matrix.

State and cooperative property remain, in accordance with their concept, within this determination of the fetishistic form. The State is the juridical and thus political abstract universality of a society of commodity producers, just as money is its economic abstract universality. Such a universality or totality of social members is abstract by reason of not being mediated by concrete communication concerning the physical and concrete material relations of their joint reproduction, but by the abstraction of value. If the State becomes the owner of commodity-producing enterprises, the juridical-political pole would usurp the economic pole of abstract universality, which can be explained by certain historical conjunctures in the development of the commodity production system, although it would be dysfunctional in the long term, since the replacement of the mechanism of economic competition by political directives causes an enormous loss due to the friction with the production of value or surplus value this would cause.

Meanwhile, the character of private property applies to State property in two ways. First, the State apparatus presents itself to the producers—whenever it does not represent their own concrete collectivity, but an abstract universality which is external to them as individuals—behind the mask of a paradoxical “universal private sphere” (as universal executor of the “valorization of value”) and thus requires that, in relation to it, they should likewise present themselves in the form of a private sphere, so that they should behave like private owners of their means of production, “labor power”. As citizens, the latter find themselves no more involved in the determination of the means of production in State property than the stable-boys, as Christians, were involved in the feudal property of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages.

Secondly, the State apparatus, to the extent that it usurps entrepreneurial functions, necessarily splits into mutually opposed economic positions within the private property sphere, since, in the final accounting, the State enterprises are also mediated by market and money relations. In this manner the value form avenges itself on the totalizing pretensions of the State. Within the social circle of State Planning consonant with the categories of value, the State enterprises assume the opposed roles of isolated units of production, which can only appropriate social wealth in the monetary form and thus privately. In relation to this, the credulous declarations which descend from the political heaven possess scant importance. An analogous phenomenon, furthermore, occurs within capitalist enterprises, in the form of the neo-liberal project called “profit-centers”: it is no longer the enterprise as a whole that must be the vehicle of the “creation of value” but, directly, its isolated sections, which also behave among themselves like private producers, almost like “enterprises within the enterprise”. Over the long term, from the point of view of the enterprise as a whole, this project can only lead to paradoxical and dysfunctional outcomes.

Considered in its totality, State property is only a paradoxical form of private property. Nothing is changed when this State property is not administered by the bourgeois State, but by a “Workers State”, led by the metaphysical subjects of the “working class” and the (political) “party of the workers”. The structural relations that result from State property remain the same, independently of their social repositories. In this sense, the extremely controversial analysis of State Socialism made by Charles Bettelheim in the 1970s was inadequate and was still a prisoner of the conceptual horizon of the Marxism of the workers movement. Bettelheim conceived of the elements of the private sphere in a sociologically reductive way, as a mere subjective strategy
of a certain sociological group—corporate managers—in the use of their “power”. He did not perceive that the form of private property, independently of sociological declarations of good will, is inherent to any mode of production based on value. What particular historical subject is constituted by the respective systems of commodity production is of no importance: this system always produces analogous kinds of functional elites corresponding to the forms assumed by the “valorization of value”. In this sense, every State is, by definition, a bourgeois State, since every nation is, in its essence, a bourgeois nation, all money, as a universal form of mediation, is bourgeois money, and commodity production, as a universal form of social reproduction, is a bourgeois production of commodities. The predicate is, strictly speaking, superfluous; it only has relevance for a consciousness that can only think within bourgeois categories and attempts to resolve the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production on the terrain of these real bourgeois categories. The problem ultimately resides in structural relations, in the way the latter are dictated by the fetishistic social form of value, and not in secondary sociological interests (related a priori to that structure) of sociological groups, categories or classes, whose very existence is a historical product of the value form.

Cooperative property does no better than State property in this regard, where it is a commodity-producing enterprise that assumes the form of a cooperative. The owner of this property is not, in fact, an abstract juridical-political universality of society, but a particular collective subject. Since this collectivity represents a unit that can be grasped by the individual, the idea of the cooperative was always linked to the embryonic form of a reproduction liberated from capitalism. The alternative movement itself at the beginning of the 1980s spread the idea of “meaningful production” in “egalitarian structures without bosses” as an element of an alternative and emancipatory way of life. From the very beginning, however, its alternative character was limited to the internal social space of a nascent commodity production. Its social mediation, on the contrary, “obviously” ended up on the market, where the products of the cooperative or the alternative enterprise had to be sold.

Naturally, an operation of this kind does not lead to the supersession of the commodity form. The alternative enterprises are still part of the universal market economy, which can only exist as the sphere of capital’s realization. As a result, they still comprise part of capitalist reproduction and submit to the coercive laws of competition. As “money earners”, the members of such enterprises will continue to submit, regardless of their intentions, to the economic form of private interest. The abstract universality of money must be imposed, in the last instance, as the determination of their way of life and of production. For this reason, cooperative or alternative enterprises either sink or swim by dint of “self-exploitation”, so as to ultimately be transformed, under the pretext of “professionalization”, into petit bourgeois workshops under the strictest discipline, with bosses, pressures to increase production, etc., in order to qualify for bank loans.

It is thus clear that all social mediation by means of the economic value form necessarily leads to the corresponding juridical form of private property, in whatever guise it may assume. This is particularly true when reformist emancipatory zeal dares to attempt to encompass, in appearance, its own form of mediation, but, instead of the supersession of value, it only proposes to invent some kind of substitute for value. This becomes absolutely transparent in the “monetary fantasies”—as Marx referred to them—of, for example, a Proudhon or an economic sect like that represented by the followers of Silvio Gesell. As their critique of the capitalist form of mediation is limited to interest-bearing capital, all they attempt to do is to introduce a kind of “interest-free money” as direct compensation for production units, without perceiving the problem of the abstract value form as such. Such a reductive critique of the capitalist form of
mediation even fails to rise to the level of the critique of private property made by the old Marxism: since the solution appears to them, exclusively, to be “honest money”, for Proudhon, Gesell and his followers, private property in the means of production is particularly sacred. What they have in mind is no longer, by any means, social emancipation, but a society of petit bourgeois and the reduction of socialization through the commodity form to a capitalism of micro-enterprises, with all the repressive obtuseness of the fetishism of labor and production.

Even more obtuse and just as incapable of pursuing an emancipatory and critical trajectory are the “barter circles” which are now fashionable (and which, as a whole, are compatible with the Gesellian ideal). If the socialism of the cooperative still at least had in view emancipatory cooperation of an internal social space, and the latter was reduced, in the Gesellians, to a petit bourgeois capitalism of micro-enterprises, the “barter circles”, for their part, presuppose totally asocialized abstract individuals, who exchange services among themselves, without any involvement in the cooperative activity of production. The socioeconomic relation is limited to the organization of an alternative form of mediation of productive compensations, which flow parallel to the official market. Nor does this supersede private property; it is only restricted to the individual’s capacity to promote the exchange of any kind of production (child care, carpet weaving, etc.) with other individuals; the reproduction of those who are “weak in production”, like the disabled or ill, is absolutely not taken into account. Such a barter circle does not represent an alternative to the capitalist mode of production. It only offers an expedient, in dealing with secondary matters, to individuals who have completely surrendered their productive capacity of cooperation to capital and the State. In this sense, barter circles are not the promise of social emancipation, but just the latest decadent form of the old failed principles within the value form, today irremediably dissolved into social atoms.

These critical reflections necessarily lead to a second essential feature which distinguishes the embryonic forms of a new social emancipation from the old alternative movement: the new critique of State Socialism must not only take the side of the microelectronic productive forces against the capitalist relations of production, instead of rejecting these productive forces in favor of a lower level of unsuperseded “abstract labor”; for this same reason, it should not be organized in the form of commodity production cooperatives, nor should it be channeled into substitute forms for commercial exchange and “productive compensation” (“monetary fantasies”, barter circles). The task consists, rather, in persevering in the supersession of private property in the means of production, although no longer from that ingenuous Enlightenment perspective of a “power at the disposal” of a particular sociological group and, thus, not as a paradoxical State property, but as the disconnection of a social space of emancipatory cooperation from commercial exchange, the monetary relation and abstract productive compensation. In a word: it is about developing embryonic elements and forms of a “natural microelectronic economy” that fundamentally breaks with the principle of socialization of value and can no longer be assimilated by the latter.

At first sight, the expression, “natural microelectronic economy”, sounds paradoxical, since modern consciousness determined by the value form is accustomed to translate “natural economy” as “backwards agrarian social relations” and considers it to be incompatible with advanced industrial productive forces. It is, however, actually a neutral expression that merely indicates that certain reproductive activities do not assume the form of commodity production and that, as a result, they do not form part of monetary relations. In pre-capitalist societies, natural economic reproduction was linked to other forms of social fetishism that were not determined by value. It is not, of course, a matter of reanimating such forms, but of superseding fetishism in general with the help of microelectronics, utilized for emancipatory ends. In this
context, “natural economy” only indicates that reproduction does not assume the form of value, and that the means of production will be treated in accordance with the physical and material character of the products and with a view towards human pleasure, that is, that they will no longer be subjected to the fetishistic abstraction of the value form.

The stale taste of the concept of “natural economy” also derives from the fact that, to a great extent, it is used as a synonym for “subsistence economy” and the latter is, in turn, understood as “reduction to pure survival”. To this one should add the observation that, in the crisis-rich history of modernization, the projects of natural economy or of subsistence were almost always, in fact, unplanned reactions to major economic or military crises, without any properly developed conscious perspective, and thus could only be manifested as simple emergency measures or as “technologies of survival”, whose precondition consisted precisely in the undermining of the pre-crisis level of socialization and the forced return of people to primitive methods of production for survival. Cooperation, in such cases, can hardly go beyond the context of the family and is enclosed within forms of “natural exchange” which obviously do not represent a perspective beyond the value form, since they are basically conditioned by the lack of an acceptable currency or by the general absence of means of circulation.

As everyone knows, this was the case in Germany after the Second World War, when “cigarette money” was used, and “domestic rabbit breeding” flourished in the hallways of buildings (I can recall as a child watching while my grandfather caught one of these animals that were raised in the shed, which my father killed with a hammer and hung from the kitchen door in order to skin it). Nor is it different today in various economically ruined regions of the world, when, for example, in the hamlets around Moscow, they have to feed themselves from their small gardens, when the families of Kazakhstan are content to own a cow or when pigs are fattened in the bathtubs of houses in Havana. Such a “subsistence economy” only seems to allow for the hope that, as soon as possible, the market economy should get moving again. In the past this was effectively what happened, and the temporary breakdowns of socialization alternated with new waves of development of the commodity production system, while for today’s crisis-stricken regions it is more than doubtful whether they will ever be able get on their feet on the terrain of the market economy.

The representatives of “orthodox” Critical Theory and the postmodern Left, who dodge the problem of the supersession of the value form and reject its concretion, largely stifle all debate concerning an emancipatory form of socialization, supposing that the latter is only capable of resulting in the petit bourgeois production of commodities or in a primitive subsistence economy whose praxis would consist of raising a cow in the garage or a pig in the bathtub. This blind polemic, which simultaneously rejects all critique of the capitalist structure of use value, only reveals a petit bourgeois fear in the face of the crisis and their incapacity and bad faith with regard to the possibility of rethinking the question of a supersession of private property in the means of production which transcends the Marxism of the workers movement and its Statist illusions. The same problem that already impared their ability to address the question of the productive forces and their concept also handicaps, even more obviously, their ability to come to grips with the question of the supersession of the mediating bourgeois forms, defined by value.
Part Two

4. Disconnection from Commodity Production

So how is a “natural microelectronic economy” possible as an embryonic form? The difficulty consists in the fact that the capitalist form of the functional division of society, as in the case of the capitalist structure of use value, cannot be assimilated, without alterations, into an emancipatory reproduction. The personnel of an enterprise which, for example, produces ships, cannot emancipate themselves, such as they are, from the social form of value. Since they do not consume the ships and cannot satisfy their own needs with the means of production of their enterprise, and since, at the same time, the specific production of their enterprise is incorporated into a capitalist system of division of labor, they remain dependent on the production of commodities, with all the familiar social consequences.

The situation would not be at all different even if there were to be a mass movement in society with a base in all the enterprises that would attempt, as a result of a crisis in capitalist reproduction, for example, to immediately supersede the commodity form on a worldwide basis. The “councils” of all the capitalist enterprises would not only represent the totality of the capitalist structure of use value, but also a whole system of functional divisions increasingly shaped by the abstraction of value, from the arms industry to transportation. A large proportion of these enterprises, due to their absurdity or the threat they pose to the public, must be immediately shut down, and the rest must be completely remodeled and inserted into new social relations.

To this must be added the fact that, in a commodity-producing system, there is practically no social understanding of the total network of reproduction on a material and physical plane. The totality of the social aggregates is only manifested in the form of large scale abstract liquidities in monetary terms (income flows, expenditures, etc.), in such a way that they are represented by the “total political-economic calculus”, so that the isolated enterprises, in the material aspect, only know their own suppliers and clients, but not the whole material process linked into a network, of which they form a part. There is, therefore, a grotesque ignorance on the part of capitalist society and its members concerning the material aggregate of their own life context, which is as foreign as an unexplored continent. This is why, when some journalists reconstructed the fantastic peregrination through Europe of a prosaic cup of yogurt and the resulting senseless waste of resources, their research led to such surprising findings. This is just one example that became famous; the same problem is repeated in everything that is produced, from gas turbines to pins.

A representative social system composed of enterprise “councils” not only has to fight against the furies of the interests of particular enterprises or the interests of their substitutes but also against a structure of reproduction molded by the abstractions of value—a structure which, by itself, tends towards mediations marked by the commodity form or, if not, appears to demand a new political meta-application, which intervenes “from above”, in a now more, now less, stabilizing manner, with all the dangers of an autonomization of this application. But a territorial-based organizational alternative to the “councils” (the opposite of enterprise-based councils), with a base in residential areas, cannot solve this problem either since, on this plane, they will only find fragments of an unknown context of production. The old workers movement, in effect, oscillated between the enterprise-based and territorial form of organization, and it turned out that as a general rule the trade unions were organized upon the basis of the enterprise and the parties
territorially. This corresponded perfectly with the attachment to the economy of commodity production on the one hand, and to the complementary sphere of politics, on the other.

The organization of an emancipatory movement, therefore, cannot only be based on the structures of the capitalist division of labor (enterprises), or only on a territorial base (residential areas), but must instead contain within itself the (anti-) economic embryonic form of an alternative reproduction. An embryonic form such as that of a “microelectronic natural economy”, which supersedes private property in the means of production, cannot be represented at isolated points within the structure of reproduction (which at the beginning only exist in a capitalist form), but only at its end-points—where production becomes consumption. Only at these points is the constitution of a social space of cooperation possible whose activities do not lead back to the market, but are preferentially consumed, in their results, by the members themselves.

The economic split (and even that of individuals themselves) into the interests of the producer and the interests of the consumer is a basic characteristic of the commodity production system and of its corollary, private property in the means of production; the social and communicative identity of producers and consumers is thus a condition sine qua non for a supersession of the value form. Of course, this identity is not immediately possible for the whole of society, but must be mediated by institutions of direct social communication: “immediacy” in this context refers to people’s own environment, language and “discussions about” all the issues of reproduction—the opposite of the indirect, abstract, fetishistic, subjectless and mute environment like the one represented by value. This totally new kind of mediation, however, must itself first be mediated, exercised, tested, extended and refined, and this demands that the embryonic forms begin where the relation between production and consumption becomes palpable, without intermediaries. This is an unavoidable problem for the whole social emancipatory movement, regardless of the degree or stage of the crisis of capitalist reproduction in which it operates.

Historically, the market was always driven by raw materials and intermediate products, permanently encompassing new reproductive relations—and not only with relation to the acquisition of the final products that directly affect consumption, but also to the mediation of consumption itself, in the form of services, affecting even the private sphere. The economic totalitarianism inherent to capital obliged it to unconditionally dominate human reproduction and to leave as little space as possible outside the process of valorization (outside State bureaucratic “redistribution”, for example), except for activities which were in themselves unvalorized or only partially valorized which we call domestic labor, child care, etc. At the threshold of the historical limit of the value form that is just now coming into view, the integrating power of the totalitarian economic system is extinguished since the microelectronic revolution, in the most various ways, renders an increasing number of people dysfunctional and superfluous. At the same time, the system neither wants nor is able to abandon its totalitarian pretensions, and is attempting to reinforce its coercive aspect even when human and material resources can no longer be satisfactorily distributed.

With regard to an emancipatory movement which is conscious of the need to reproduce, starting from the embryonic forms, the social identity of production and consumption at a higher stage of development, it follows that it has to seize the market’s historical prey, in an exactly reversed sequence, beginning with the services and the final products which enter directly into consumption, for the purpose, starting with these final products, of developing and remodeling all of reproduction in an emancipatory form, all the way to raw materials and the supersession of
the system of commodity production. A necessary factor that is consonant with this goal is, above all, the utilization of the emancipatory potential of microelectronics, rather than attempting to produce microchips. In the basic terms of Marx’s reproduction schema, this process can be reduced to the following economic common denominator: in order to disconnect the social terrain of cooperative activities from the commodity form and to prevent the market’s return, one must not begin with Sector I (production of means of production), but with Sector II (production of means of consumption) and with services.

This perspective is as radically distinct from any idea of small autarchic communities as it is from all conceptions of so-called dual economy. Socioeconomic autarchy would not be an embryonic social form, but a form of subsistence, in the pejorative sense of the word, which neither wants nor is able to maintain the level of socialization and of the productive forces; it would regress to a state inferior even to the petit bourgeois model of commodity production and would in other respects reveal its illusory nature, since there is always some tool or some component of production which a small community is incapable of producing for itself. This notion of autarchy, whether on a regional, “ethnic” or national scale, only transposes the moment of isolation to a wider context and thus does not lead to the end of commodity production, but only to the mean-spirited (as well as racist and nationalist) delimitation of the corresponding system of relations.

If it could be established, a society implementing a system of autarchic reproduction would constitute a “coercive community” that would oppress the individual according to the model of the religious sects, as was already demonstrated by the idea of autarchic “spiritual communes” elaborated by Rudolph Bahro, a former East German dissident. Autarchy should not be confused with the aspiration for social autonomy. Autonomy does not mean making everything on one’s own and constraining reproduction to an obtuse communitarian ethos. Autonomy means exactly the opposite: it means that economic relations are no longer subject to an external, irrational, fetishistic coercive relation, and that they rest upon free and conscious communication, which allows the individual’s eccentricities leeway for either open expression or for inwardness and seclusion. It should therefore be a social terrain for the expression of autonomy in this sense, a social terrain which can only exist if it is not regressively isolated and embraces multiple and extensive relations, capable of breaking with and superseding (and not reinforcing) national, religious and “ethnic” relations, which were transformed into models of exclusion in the history of modernization.

The concepts of dual economy, on the other hand, are also incompatible with the embryonic forms of the “natural microelectronic economy”, since the latter do not promote a static exchange with the forms of the commodity production system and cannot “complement” it in peaceful coexistence. The ideas of dual economy do not lead to a progressive disconnection from the commodity form. In Andre Gorz, for example, one of the most important theoreticians of the dual economy, “autonomous” activities are preserved, in the last analysis, as a simple pastime, since they have to be subsidized by a “basic income”, which would be obtained from market sources, in the unsuperseded form of money. Gorz considers all of industrial reproduction as irremediably “heteronomous”, since such a characteristic would be founded on technological potential. He does not seriously address the problem of the fetishistic form of value, or the difference between the capitalist essence and appearance of the microelectronic productive forces.

Likewise, neither Gorz nor the other representatives of the movement for a “basic monetary income” reflect upon the fact that the realization of their demand would only be
possible by means of an apparatus of redistribution within a national economy. Contrary to what Gorz mistakenly believes, it is not merely a matter of everyone’s participation in the technical-material progress of productivity, since this would assume a social reproduction of economic exchange beyond the value form. In a system of commodity production, on the contrary, any increase in productivity has to first pass through the mediations of the value form and through its constraints. This means that a distribution of products according to productivity is not possible, only a distribution of money according to the result in the market and thus according to the successful realization of surplus value. For the system of national coordination of “basic income” this means, in turn, that in the competitive struggle in the world market, it would be obliged to compete successfully, for the purpose of collecting sufficient funds for monetary distribution. The notion of “basic income” implicitly contains, therefore, an unspoken nationalist and racist aspect: it is nothing but a social-nationalist derivative of left Keynesianism.

In practice, “basic income”, regardless of its form, will always be for the individual a very small amount for life and a very large amount for death, insofar as it will ultimately goad people towards “abstract labor” and harness them to the yoke of the market. It is for this reason that the liberals also flirt with this concept, since all of them seek, by way of a compensatory reduction of wage incomes, to prune acquired social rights (vacation, unemployment insurance) and to impose a rationed monetary diet upon the wage workers which would oblige them to accept, even at an advanced age, frankly miserable “jobs”.

Above all, the advocates of a dual economy completely ignore the crisis of the system of commodity production. Ingeniously enough, they assume the eternal survival of the market economy that will unfortunately remain “heteronomous”, and it is only for this reason that they can propose an inoffensive way of complementing the market system with various sectors of autonomy, which over the long term would create a balanced “dual” structure of reproduction. This issue, however, assumes a completely different aspect in a situation where not only does the intention of the sectors which must become autonomous point towards a radical critique and supersession of the commodity production system, instead of a simple peaceful coexistence, but also when the dynamic of the crisis nips in the bud any attempt at reformist pacification. Since the entire debate is already itself the result of the crisis, the unfolding social and economic controversies will no longer permit any long term attachment to the real categories of the value form.

In fact, no steps toward the creation of autonomous sectors of reproduction, disconnected from the value-form, can ameliorate the crisis; they would only aggravate it. Some years ago, in a debate in the journal, Junge Welt, the leftist economist Kurt Hübner, editor of the magazine, Prokla, argued that my proposal to disconnect certain sectors from commodity production would, if enacted during a period of crisis, “promote economic instability”. Nothing could be more correct. Everything that people do cooperatively, beyond market production, is seized from the market. This implies an accelerated “loss” of sales, jobs and purchasing power. As it affects the crisis dynamic, therefore, disconnection would necessarily constitute a self-reinforcing and “positive feedback”.

Furthermore, since during the first stages of disconnection the goal will be the production of consumer goods and above all the provision of services (on a cooperative and public basis), disconnection initiatives will also deal a hard blow to the hopes for a renovation of the market economy by means of the famous “service society”. This also applies to Gorz, who did not foresee such a result. The “service society” option is, in any event, an illusion, since a considerable part of the tertiary sector is not, in itself, productive in terms of capital, and can only
be commercially represented in a secondary and derivative form (banks, insurance, trade, etc.) or must be stimulated in the form of State consumption (infrastructure, education, etc.). Nevertheless, the effective consolidation of the disconnection project within the context of the crisis dynamic could become the target for accusations that it is “injuring” the market economy. Wolfgang Schäuble, leader of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) in the Bundestag and a fanatical supporter of conservative solutions for the stabilization of the total market economy, protested in all seriousness, in his book, *Und der Zukunft Zugewandt* (“And the Future Changed”) (1994), against the “do it yourself” movement, saying that the latter would steal terrain and possibilities from the market economy and would lead to a “shadow economy”.

With respect to this issue we can reverse the assessment of what the North American essayist Alvin Toffler still saw, in 1980, as a positive developmental tendency. Toffler then believed in the concept of a “prosumer”, the mixing of a “do it yourself” producer with a consumer of commodities. In fact, in the beginning, the disconnection movement itself will displace a part of “productive consumption” outside the system of commodity production, with the help of the goods produced by and acquired from the market. Toffler undoubtedly only saw the individual “prosumers” as a kind of centaur of economic relations, which, once again, must only represent a complement to the market economy (considered in its normal operation). In crisis conditions, however, and as an anti-market movement of cooperative forms of reproduction, this disconnection from the market could acquire an explosive social force. Against objections like those of Hübner or Schäuble, it must be pointed out that we do not have the least intention of assuming responsibilities for the market system and its “employees”. As our vocation is the supersession of this system, we must not burst into tears when each step of the disconnection simultaneously reinforces the crisis of reproduction dictated by the commodity form.

It is undoubtedly necessary to clarify exactly which spheres come to mind when assessing this new form of transformation. The theoretical definition which holds that this disconnection has to begin where the transition from production to consumption ends only offers a general concept which must in turn be concretized. From Section II, for example, come televisions, and among the service provision enterprises one finds the banks. It is clear that the disconnection cannot begin in these spheres. Rather, the initial objectives are the sectors within the immediate reach of social initiatives. The production of goods and services must not be deeply implicated in the capitalist division of labor. Besides, one must stay in contact with everyday life and instigate a palpable change from day to day. Only as sufficient socioeconomic terrain and experience are gained, and the proper know-how is generalized, will the field of autonomous reproduction be extended.

The initiatives of disconnected sectors of reproduction could well be called cooperatives, except that they will not be commodity-producing enterprises, but autonomous spheres, with a social identity of production and consumption. There is at least one example of such a project, abandoned by the old workers movement: consumers’ cooperatives. It must be observed—and this, in turn, demonstrates the ignorance of “orthodox” Marxists and the postmodern Left—that the simple mention of the term makes the monocles fall from their eyes. It is not a question here of an attempt to create, suddenly and from scratch, a new society of consumption. They comprise only one of many possibilities: an occasion to test autonomous reproduction in practice. In the beginning, it would just be a matter of critically laying the foundation, in the form of an example, for the history of the question of disconnection and illuminating its socioeconomic problematic. To approach this topic as something unimportant from the very beginning is completely ridiculous.
In economic terms, the consumers’ cooperatives founded by the social reformist and “utopian socialist” Robert Owen, were originally an effective step towards disconnection from the commodity form. In fact, the intention was to eliminate a whole sector of the market economy for their members, i.e., individual trade. In its place, there arose the autarchic organization of wholesale purchases. Thus, a moment of reproduction dictated by the commodity form was replaced by a moment of non-commercial self-organization. For the activists of the workers movement who organized these consumers’ cooperatives, this was undoubtedly a little-noticed side effect, since their historical horizon was not determined, even in the least, by the idea of a supersession of commodity production. What interested them was only the reduction of the costs of these transactions for the workers and their independence from the commonly usurious practices of the tradesmen and, above all, from the so-called “combined system” (which forced the workers to buy goods at exorbitant prices in the stores owned by their respective employers, making them, so to speak, doubly exploited as they received, in fact, a diminished “money wage”).

Overall, what is relevant in this attempt to form consumers’ cooperatives is that it was not a matter of “principle”, of an abstract altruism or anything like that, but of well defined practical goals of personal “cost reduction” and the improvement of the everyday lives of the participants. This motive will also be decisive for a future movement of disconnection. “Corporate cost-reduction” strategies can be completely defeated by an emancipatory strategy of “cost reduction” for household management which thus conquers a zone of independence from “abstract labor”. The power of autonomous cooperation, which is now totally dissolved in the market and the State, must be rediscovered precisely on the plane of daily reproduction and enriched with the potentials of the microelectronic productive forces. The time spent participating in cooperative self-organization is certainly less than what is gained by means of “personal cost-reduction”; it is enough to consider the volume of time and resources which individually atomized household administration wastes in an enormity of prosaic matters, and the latter to the exclusive profit of the respective “markets”.

With regard to such a project, the consumers’ cooperative is obviously a somewhat limited example, which falls short of establishing an autonomous activity as such and which remains historically linked to the existence of the market. The scope of such a project could be extended, however. The fact of having failed was not due to the level of the forces of production or to the workers’ lack of time, or to a lack of commitment. Around the turn of the century, more than one million people were organized in consumers’ cooperatives, and it seemed that this moment of reproduction could become an integral part of everyday life and of the workers movement. But this creation was not viewed with sympathy by political leaders, nor did the general population really disapprove of the campaign waged against the cooperatives by individual tradesmen, which finally succeeded in legally transforming the consumers’ cooperatives into commercial retail stores, operating under the most draconian regulations. In this way, their original intention was negated. The consumers’ associations became capitalist chain stores, with their retinue of curses, and their social interest disappeared, above all because the economic miracle after the Second World War appeared to eliminate the reason for their existence. The social and theoretical history of this attempt, in the context of a critique of the commodity production system, has yet to be written.

Any new attempts to found consumers’ cooperatives will evidently encounter quite different conditions in different countries. In Germany, at least, it is a matter of legality, since here no one can acquire a subway ticket or contemplate buying wholesale without attracting the suspicion that they are “scalpers” or profiteers. In some regions there are alternative purchasing
networks that, in general, promote direct contact between ecological agrarian producers and the population. But these efforts are usually limited to “luxury goods” in the form of fresh organic produce, or they suffer from a limited organizational scope as much as from an insufficient connection with a wider movement of social critique. In a more extensive field of relations, however, this project could perfectly well be reconstructed and could assume a rich social dimension in a context of conflict.

A second example is the house construction cooperative. This institution also has a long history, which at least had points of contact with the old workers movement and is also related to the other initiatives for social reform. The “garden city” movement, for example, which was born in England, was not without significance. In this instance, the criterion of disconnection from commodity production is significant in economic terms: constructing and maintaining houses used by the members themselves (identity of producers and consumers). It is also necessary, of course, to buy products from construction firms, but in comparison with commercial construction, a higher degree of communitarian activity is possible. This activity could grow, in the event that the construction (similar to the microelectronic sphere) was to be accompanied by the dissemination of “polytechnic” knowledge (architectural know-how, management of construction materials, installation, etc.).

It is essential that the product not be reintegrated into the market as a commodity, i.e., that cooperation does not represent a commodity-producing cooperative. This is its main difference with respect to commercial construction, which produces houses as commodities and rents or sells their use. The construction of habitations, desks, offices, communication centers, etc., becomes, in this manner, a source of revenues for capital. Since the investors of capital do not want to use the buildings for themselves, it is not enough for them to recoup the money spent on their construction and maintenance. They demand, in addition, that they obtain a certain profit, which must be competitive with the profits of other investors of capital and which must be contained in the rents, fees, etc. The users of the buildings, therefore, have to pay these profits beyond the costs of production and maintenance and, for this purpose, expend “abstract labor” in other capitalist fields. The capitalist regime compels, to the utmost possible extent, the whole construction industry to be the exclusive domain of capital investment. It is thus not by accident that self-organized and self-administering cooperatives are not the beneficiaries of favorable laws or tax rates and that, to the contrary, they are obstructed as much as possible and are made unattractive—the parallel with consumers’ associations is obvious. Here, too, it would be fitting to critically research the history of these early initiatives from the perspective of the critique of value.

Consumers’ associations and house construction cooperatives were not the only aborted attempts at disconnection. The problem, ultimately, is that these activities only possessed an obscure existence, at the margins of the Statist and political program of the old workers movement, and did not involve any reflection upon the concept of disconnection or any perspective of superseding the system of commodity production. For this reason, they remained limited (and, so to speak, “conceptless”) to isolated fields of praxis. To this one must add bureaucratic party control and, later, that of the socialist bureaucracy, whose goal was to prevent any initiative of self-organization and self-administration, as well as any autonomous “horizontal” communication of the basic units of organization among themselves. The unsuperseded expenditure of “abstract labor” under the Statist regime automatically tended to channel, to the utmost possible extent, the whole of available time into social reproduction and left communication to flow hierarchically, from the top down. As is well-known, it was for this reason that the distinction between one system and the other, even in their own textbooks, was
defined as that between a “centrally planned economy” and the “free market economy”, and not on the basis of the question of whether or not commodity production prevails. The social identity of production and consumption did not figure among the “socialist” goals (or it figured only in a distorted form, as pseudo-identity in the abstract universality of the State apparatus), and, as a result, the very question of disconnection could be neither named nor recognized in its respective initiatives.

In this way (and in unholy alliance with the defensive strategy of the capitalist regime), what failed were not just the initiatives of disconnection of the consumers and construction cooperatives; in addition, the corresponding “socio-cultural” potential of the old workers movement remained unexplored from a transformatory perspective. It is not, of course, a question of going back, for example, to the “culture of the public laundry and kitchens” of the old proletarian neighborhood. These socio-cultural forms were born from pure necessity and were bound to the level of the productive forces of their time. One must, however, recall that the new Fordist productive forces, which only became operational in Europe after the Second World War, completely stifled such socio-cultural initiatives under the processes of commercialization and abstract individualization. Even the old collective laundries were not modernized—to the contrary, the pressure exercised by an increasing capitalist supply was capable of adapting the Fordist production of household appliances to the structure of nuclear families. This led to an increase in abstract labor and in market volume. But the gain in available time for individuals, with socially atomized use and the demand for individual specialization, was much less, in reality, than what the potential of development of the productive forces was capable of generating.

The same is true of the other elements of the failed socio-cultural initiatives of the workers movements. The institutions of the workers movement administered numerous logistical structures such as schools, meeting halls, offices, etc. These establishments have also undoubtedly not been given the recognition due to them from a historical perspective. Here, the potential for socioeconomic disconnection never even arose, as in the case of what happened to the cooperatives. Instead, such initiatives were exclusively considered as simple expedients for the State-political goal, in such a way as to render them incapable of adopting their own manner of development. They were often added to the assets of the party or one of its members, and it was then managed commercially, towards the end of obtaining resources for the “war chest” of political propaganda. The movement of ’68 temporarily abandoned these establishments, which partly degenerated into bourgeois mini-businesses. Many of these businesses will be called into question within the context of a movement of disconnection and supersession.

This also applies to that economic complex that falls under the heading of “service provision”, managed in the form of the old “public canteens”, meeting halls, communications centers, etc. Establishments of this type were always an important part of all social movements, since people needed places to meet, discuss, eat and drink together. Cultural history provides famous examples of this kind. Consider, for example, the Jacobin “Street Clubs” of the French Revolution, the celebrated “salons” of the Romantics, and the literary culture of cafes or the English “clubs”. Although few people know this fact, it is still ironic that during the early days of the social democratic workers movement in Germany, innkeepers played an important role in the movement. Similarly, the alternative movement and that of 1968 provided a new stimulus to such establishments. The phenomenon reappeared, in West Germany, in the form of the widespread youth movements of the 1970s, with their demand for self-managed residential buildings. The rest of the communication centers which arose during that era (among which the one at Komm, in Nuremberg, is most famous) were later eliminated by the various city governments, due to increasing costs and conservative political policies.
The everyday needs linked to such establishments then came to be almost completely differentiated within capitalist forms. Their basis, in this sense, is constituted by the atomization into domestic micro-units, structured by a supply of Fordist kitchen appliances. Simultaneously, the capitalist furniture industry managed to create, under the rule of Fordism, an absurd invidious competition in relation to kitchen appliances, which was stupidly compounded in the form of “abstract labor”. This is not to question the desirable character of small kitchens that would be occasionally used, for example, to prepare a candlelight dinner for two. The incalculable waste of time and of resources which can be imposed daily—and without protest—upon the socially atomized masses, by means of the valorization process dictated by the structure of use value, must be defined as a mature product of the machinery of capitalist dreams.

Complementing the above, on the one hand, the proverbially miserable business of the canteens and kitchens of the large corporations and the establishments of the State bureaucracy are imposed, organized from the point of view of business-economic rationality, where the food always takes a back seat. Furthermore, commercial gastronomy gains ground: from the fast food chains based on low wages, to the family businesses with internal relations bordering on slavery and often dubious hygienic conditions, to the postmodern establishments founded and managed by savagely professional baby-yuppies, with Hitler haircuts, whose tiny portions would hardly satisfy a bird. As for the “new poor”, they are left with the donations from charity organizations—which are meanwhile being commercialized—or to the actions of socially infernal parish priests, who scrape together for the lost souls the abject leftovers of luxury feasts. Compared to this, the armed kidnapping of a hostage must be called an emancipatory action. And the local meeting places are firmly in the power of conservative German associations and municipal administrative apparatuses.

If there is not even one place for critical discussion of society, and it is impossible to have a meal with friends without shouting as loudly as you can to make yourself heard, the question arises concerning the plausibility, in this sector, of self-organized clubs as elements of a disconnected economy, where people would have access to the international press (and, perhaps, to a library), as well as the use of auditoriums for meetings, and where they could eat and drink. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, even in the United States, this was for many years an almost obvious moment of social life, although it was dismantled with the advance of capitalist development and never encompassed entire demographic sectors, zones or neighborhoods. The point is not to create a commercial enterprise for a certain public clientele that is dedicated to making money, but that people should create enterprises of this kind on their own, for their own needs. In economic terms, this means that each member would pay, in accordance with his abilities, a lump sum and/or periodic dues, with which provision would then be made for all that is necessary, without which the enterprise itself would return to the market—following the model, for example, of the self-organized nurseries, which are another example (and one of the few bequeathed to us by the movement of ’68). It does not matter that, with reference to necessary activities, some members might be partly subsidized; what is important is that the enterprise as a whole is not transformed into a market-oriented enterprise. And, obviously, an establishment of this kind—the opposite of an “enterprise” subject to a commercial rationale—would not need to be too fastidious and could even accept people who are well off.

All of this, of course, is not possible with only a handful of people. In purely socioeconomic terms, in today’s Germany it is not unthinkable that 100 people, for example, could gather together 10,000 marks each as a starting point, which would already be a cool million. One could also easily allow for these 100 people to pay 100 marks each month for a working enterprise (which constitutes the other 10,000 marks) and would no longer have to buy
the corresponding services on the market. But the left is too diminished and too dismembered into infinite branches which fight among themselves or, in the best cases, are ignorant of each other, so that it seems almost impossible, even in large cities, to gather together 100 people (and their families) for such a goal—and this is not to speak of the standardized capitalists. As horrible as it is, one must recognize that capitalism has managed, even in the simplest things, to raise almost insurmountable socio-psychological barriers between atomized individuals—barriers that only religious sects, for more or less obscure ends, are currently capable of surmounting.

The above examples, and many more like them could be adduced, undoubtedly intersect at some points with the conceptions of Andre Gorz, and the latter, for their part, intersect with the ideas of Anglo-Saxon “communitarianism”. One cannot formulate the necessary critique of such initiatives from the point of view, for example, of the old workers movement, as occasionally happens with part of hardcore orthodoxy, and thus abstractly deny the positive moments in Gorz and in “communitarianism” itself. But, as was already pointed out above in relation to a critique of dual economy, the idea of a disconnection critical of value emerges in a context of social critique that is completely different from that of Gorz or communitarian theory, despite any similarities they may have. This refers not only to the basic question of a new and radical critique, instead of a solicitous “complement” to the capitalist system. It is, rather, autonomous spheres, beyond the market and the State, which must be the point of departure for a movement of supersession that ultimately encompasses all of reproduction, and not the endpoint of a merely marginal “self-help” movement.

The socioeconomic “unfolding” of the whole system of reproduction can be imagined, at first (although in a restricted area), as a process in which, for example, many of these initiatives together incorporate, into their non-commercial context, a sector which until then represented a supply branch of the market. To give a simple example: various construction cooperatives could together administer a sand pit, a quarry or a ceramics workshop according to their needs. Or even, to provide another example that excludes all nationalist restrictions, the various cooperatives could order their coffee and furniture from a sister cooperative in Latin America.

The basic economic problem consists in the fact that the activities outlined above must not be linked through commodity exchange and the monetary relation, but that a mediated identity of producers and consumers should really be created on a vast scale. It is not a matter of a commercial kind of specialization, but of a polytechnical division of functions, enabling people to take turns doing different things—and this in regional and continental terms, since there is no reason not to produce, for a while, coffee in Latin America or to raise goats somewhere else (which only works, undoubtedly, when the basic know-how is disseminated as knowledge and when, at least in certain technologies, precision and “aptitude” reside more in programmed machines than in personal training). Besides, it is not a question of an exchange of abstract equivalents, in a simple natural form, but of a purely technical-material division of functions, in which what matters is only that, within a functional context, necessary things are produced in the necessary quantities and qualities. This can be imagined, on the one hand, as the division of functions within a workshop, only in an extended form; this recalls, however, the Marxist idea of the whole of society as a “factory”, still connected, however, to that concept of “labor armies”, which still does not transcend the system of “abstract labor”. Just as the external relation between units of reproduction was only considered as the natural exchange of abstract equivalents, the internal relation was only thought of as the natural form of business rationality. It would be possible, however, to regroup the functional divisions within a context of the identity of production and consumption—a context exclusively oriented to the needs of the members. This would only be possible, of course, if there were to be a widespread and graduated system of non-
commercial reproduction. During the transitional period, one could imagine that certain kinds of production would be supplied, in part, within an autonomous context, in a non-commercial form, and in part also within the market. Other forms are also thinkable. In fact, at this level the possibility of purely theoretical definitions ends, and, although venturing beyond the old Marxism’s rejection of concrete proposals, the sphere in which only the social practice of “learning by doing” is possible begins, accompanied by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of economists, technicians and critical organizers of society.

We must repeat that the examples cited above could also be practiced in isolation (and today this is praiseworthy above all with regard to those points that have implications for a basic logistics for theoretical social critique itself), but that at first one cannot achieve a social effect by means of the progressive universalization of isolated practical examples. This was the old idea and it was utopian in the pejorative sense of the word. In reality, the goal must be to elaborate some kind of program or outline of an answer to the inevitable question of a new social movement: what is to be done? And this despite, or precisely because of, the current social quiescence under the leaden sky of neo-liberalism.

As is well known, social movements cannot be picked off the shelf by theoreticians; in reality, they develop spontaneously, although not, of course, without a certain initial impulse or the purposeful activity of certain people. One cannot, however, determine where, by whom, and in what manner such movements will begin. What is essential, in the meantime, is that the ideas for a revolutionary praxis can only obtain a social dimension through a social movement. Only when many people, at the same time and in many places, begin to “break the mold”, since they no longer want, nor are they able, to live as they had lived before, is the theoretical possibility of a social praxis born.

On the other hand, however, the theoretical concretion of the question of supersession is not directly linked to the existence of a mass movement. If we take as our point of departure precisely the fact that in the future none of the questions concerning the transformation will be formulated any longer under the assumptions of a capitalist welfare society and of successful competition on the world market, but in an environment of serious economic, social and (post-)political upheavals, then it becomes even more urgent to theoretically concretize the problem of a supersession of the commodity production system and to initiate a debate on this issue. In this sense, the objection raised by the representatives of “orthodox” Critical Theory and the postmodern Left that the radical critique of value, with the concept of “disconnection” and its implications, would precipitously devote itself to an inferior and obtuse “praxis”, is not only senseless—since it erroneously considers the theme of the question of supersession in its false immediacy—but also grossly negligent, since it implies an attitude which does not take social disturbances into account and, in the best of cases, degrades the critique of value to a postmodern and academic hobby.

The historical crisis spreading throughout the world and its destructive social consequences also raises the question, from a comprehensive point of view, of a guarantee of basic necessities for all. And, in fact, all the examples referred to above, from consumers’ associations, clubs, meeting halls, or nurseries, all refer to basic material, social or cultural needs. One could even add sectors such as those of food, clothing, furniture and home electronics production, of cultural goods, of energy distribution (solar), part of the infrastructure, technical training, social services, etc. It is ridiculous to impute to this problematic a reductionist option for “subsistence”, in the sense of a diminution of the level of needs. To the contrary, the goal is precisely not only to affirm, against the crisis of the capitalist system, a higher level of needs on
the part of the autonomous sectors, but also to overcome the senseless restrictions of the market, which demand an enormous squandering of time and pleasure through abstract economic individualization.

On another level, one must ask oneself what wealth and luxury really are. Together with “abstract labor” and its historical fruit, the capitalist structure of use value, the capitalist concept of wealth and luxury should also be subjected to criticism. The mere idea that the option for basic needs should be an option for a poverty of needs is already revealing. Unconsciously, one thereby concedes that the basic needs themselves in capitalism became, in fact, impoverished. Capitalist luxury, in mass culture (and even more in its postmodern variant), refers above all to secondary things. The proud possession of a cellular phone or a week’s vacation in the Caribbean (a cultural offense against not just the Caribbean, but against the countryside of the whole world), with what people believe to be, in consumerist terms, the zenith of the productive forces, only dissimulates the fact that the extension of secondary wealth was followed, historically, by a complementary extension of basic poverty.

Over the course of capitalist modernization, time available for leisure was drastically diminished for the majority of people (even for management itself). Furthermore, simple things like fresh produce, hardwood furniture, etc., did not become relatively cheaper, but increasingly more expensive, until they are now luxury goods. Above all, the spatial frontier for individuals has constantly been shrinking. If we do not take as a standard the mass poverty produced by capitalist modernization, it is totally clear that living and habitational space have become smaller and smaller for the majority. The “workers mailbox”, an East German expression, could be generalized for construction, architecture, city planning and the politics of internal colonization of the whole system of commodity production, which transformed space and time into commodities. Against this, it would be fitting to propose, in opposition to the restrictions of the value form and without rejecting modern productive forces as such, a wealth of basic needs—or even a luxury of time and space. This also encompasses a certain indifference with respect to constant innovations in the production of autonomized objects, whose consumption no longer bears any relation to their utility. The cell phone, for example, and the possibility of speaking with two or three people simultaneously on the telephone, does not represent such a significant advance compared to the basic, one hundred year old invention of the telephone (similarly, the CD compared to the vinyl disc), that it would justify the delirious expenditure of time and resources required for their corresponding production and supply.

The perspective of autonomous sectors of disconnection from commodity production is subject to yet another objection: doubt concerning its “economic efficiency”. At first glance, it would seem that the autonomous forms of reproduction would never be capable of replacing the monstrous level of the capitalist division of labor and the increased concentration of capital, without immediately falling to a primitive level of “efficiency”. This argument not only does not take into account the peculiar character of the microelectronic productive forces, which have made a high potential of productivity utilizable on a small scale, but also remains imprisoned within the categories of commercial rationality.

Under the pressure of market competition, the expenditure of capital is not determined, essentially, by physical and material exigencies, but by the coercion of the average rate of profit, which represents a social abstraction. The fact that the production of apples and tomatoes, which is increasing almost everywhere, “is worth the trouble” in capitalist terms when it reaches, on the market, a gigantic volume which senselessly wastes transportation and energy, is solely and exclusively due to the standard of abstract valorization. When it is a question of commercial
“efficiency”, what is implicitly meant is always this standard, which, by itself, is not identical with rational methods of technical and material production. It would therefore be necessary to distinguish between the utilization of techniques of labor economy or forms of organization, on the one hand, and the concept of “efficiency” dictated by valorization, on the other. The technique of labor economy is only a partial moment of destructive commercial rationality, and, besides, under its dictates, it does not lead, for example, to improvement in labor, but only to simple “labor saving”, to unemployment.

In the concept of commercial “efficiency” one other aspect should be criticized, which is completely undesirable in the autonomous forms of reproduction, the so-called “maximum capacity”. This moment, under capitalist conditions, is manifested in an especially absurd, distorted manner: on the one hand, capacity is left inactive when the business cannot manage to win for itself sufficient buying power; on the other hand, for market orders, production must occupy 24 hours of the day, without taking into account the needs or well-being of the “employees”. Under the pressure of competition, managers today demand an “extension of the hours of machine operation”, and even night and Sunday labor. In a form of cooperation that is characterized by the identity of producers and consumers, this would not be considered as “efficiency” but only as the product of a sick mind.

Since people began, for example, to build stone houses, the material was extracted from quarries which otherwise would remain inactive. The same holds true for the context of autonomous cooperatives, and also for offices and means of production. On the other hand, however, a quarry as a capitalist business—in its condition of economically atomized commercial machine—will cut the maximum possible amount of rock and would be particularly “successful” if the whole region were to be quickly transformed into a lunar landscape. At the same time, during an “economic crisis” (the concept itself already indicates the irrational character of the form of reproduction), when the extraction of rock is no longer “profitable” in business terms, the business is “closed”, and a sign is posted with the words, “Trespassing Prohibited”, even if the population has to live in tents or caves.

It is therefore necessary to establish a fundamental difference between the absurdity of commercial rationality and an assessment of the cost-benefit relation as it refers to time, to resources, etc., in production for concrete needs. Internalized commercial criteria, which manifest a false obviousness, have to be consciously superseded and unmasked in their absurdity (the latter being, so to speak, a task for analytical or even “propagandistic” efforts). If we compare the personal expenditures of the members of a cooperative with the supplies of the market and the corresponding necessary expenditure of “abstract labor”, autonomous reproduction would, in many cases, be perfectly “capable of competing” in social terms. Logically, this does not apply to all spheres, and obviously not to the production of raw materials. It was absurd, for example, that in the Chinese campaign of the so-called “Great Leap Forward”, under Mao Tse-Tung, steel was forged in parks and backyards. Nor was this an instance of an initiative of the participants to satisfy their own previously discussed needs, but of a State campaign (which naturally failed) “from above”, for the purpose of increasing the abstract volume of “steel production”, one of the categories of political economy.

The socioeconomic alternative must preserve a plausible relation to expenditures. But the “self-exploitation” of the first alternative enterprises was not due to a simple technical or organizational defects, but in reality to their market-oriented production and their involvement in the capitalist form of the division of labor. In an immediate or institutionally mediated identity between producers and consumers, on the other hand, the question of the expenditure of time
can be managed flexibly. If, within an autonomous context, a person spends ten hours to produce something that, with the “abstract labor” mediated by the commodity form, could be made in ten minutes, the disparity would naturally be so great that this sphere would be the first to be restored to capitalist methods. Here, the disconnection from the commodity form could only be achieved with a much higher degree of interconnectedness. The case of a disparity of, let us say, one or two hours, is completely different. The abstract quantity of time, which is already a product of capitalism (cf. Gaston Valdivia’s article in the latest issue of *Krisis*, “Time and Money, Money and Time. From the Production of Time to Its Deconstruction by the Market Economy”), can by no means be the sole criterion. It is a palpable fact that one hour of “abstract labor” can be experienced as an eternity in comparison with two hours of activity in a satisfying social context.

The calculation of time disconnected from the production of commodities is enriched by criteria that have absolutely no existence in commercial rationality. The reduction of time to abstract quantities is a consequence of “abstract labor”, which is separated from all the other moments of life. The supersession of the value form signifies the supersession of the separation between “labor” and “free time” and, therefore, of “labor” as such. Obviously, this is not intended to imply that while operating complicated machinery one could have a cup of coffee or play chess. It would be ridiculous to think of the problem in these terms. That the social space of production should no longer be segregated under the aegis of commercial rationality, is another matter altogether, however; that it should be possible to “take one’s time”, that the time and space of productive activity should be suffused with social, cultural and aesthetic criteria, by pleasure, by contemplation, by reflection, etc.—and this also applies to architecture and the relation between the spheres of production and domestic life.

Even in various other aspects, calculations regarding the use of resources for the purposes of autonomous reproduction must be distinguished from the calculations of commercial rationality. If, for example, the production of fruit and vegetables for the market, as all the evidence indicates, is so inexpensive only because the products are cultivated in climate-controlled facilities, exposed to nuclear radiation and stored for months in gas-filled refrigerators, thus coming to approach tastelessness, or because a whole natural region is contaminated and the rivers have reached the point that it is recommended that one not swim in them, or even because miserable low-paid workers have to be exposed, without any protection, to pesticides and herbicides as if undergoing a wartime poison gas attack … then it is by no means acceptable to adopt the imposition of this capitalist calculus. And this is also true of everything else. A relative disconnection from commodity production means inexorably descending towards the roots, on the basis of self-reflection, in order to determine all the material and social conditions of life, thus disconnecting the necessary calculation of the expenditure of time and resources from the abstract capitalist calculation of time. In general, this would bring a great windfall in available time and, in particular, great modifications in calculation, as soon as one sets aside the deforming lenses of business economics.

There are more than enough reasons that make an anti-economy disconnected from commodity production, and the constitution of autonomous sectors, possible and necessary, and to make the former, the anti-economy, begin where the transition of production to consumption leaves off as well as on the plane of basic needs. What is essential, first of all, is that it should be linked, by way of the supersession of the socially miserable everyday life and by personal “cost reduction”, to a gain in available time and in satisfaction for individuals; in the second place, that a moment of autonomy and independence should be won from the constraints of capitalism; and thirdly, that the know-how and experience for an all-inclusive supersession of the system of
commodity production should spread throughout society. This disconnection is defined as anti-economic, since the concept of the economy, in the history of modernization, was established by the hierarchical forms of capitalist socialization.

It would, however, be a mistake to visualize the process in general from an evolutionist perspective. This would probably be the gist of the criticism that would be advanced by the hostile Marxist or postmodern reader, for whom disconnection “is not as a whole moving in the right direction”. Such a reader takes pleasure in forgetting, especially when he is confronted by undesirable arguments, and has thus probably already forgotten that the problem is not situated in the context of any kind of chimera, but within that of an ongoing world crisis of the system of commodity production, which will also reach him, if it has not already done so. Just as disconnection as a social praxis is impossible to achieve through the progressive generalization of isolated examples, but only by means of a social movement, neither could it creep evolutionarily, and totally peacefully, from sector to sector, across the system of social reproduction. The fact that the direction taken by the “unfolding” would be contrary to the program of the Marxism of the workers movement, that it would not proceed from raw materials industries towards the production of consumption goods, but that it would be the other way around, says nothing about the historical velocity of the process.

Here we see the basis of another essential difference concerning the question of the “embryonic form” that distinguishes the proto-capitalist transformation from a post-capitalist one. The dynamic of the capitalist crisis dramatically foreshortens the temporal horizon of the transition. We are not facing centuries of evolutionary development which, in a distant future, would arrive at a “political-revolutionary” culmination, but, instead, a transition which will last, at most, in an earthquake that affects all of world society, a few decades, in which everything will be decided, without the process ever assuming, however, the form of a “political revolution”. The “embryonic form” gestating within the modern system of commodity production thus possesses a completely different value than the “embryonic form” of the latter system as it emerged in the epoch of the prehistory of the bourgeoisie. It is a ferment which is necessary to break with commercial stupidity and to stabilize, in terms of reproduction, a social movement of supersession—although it would not be an “embryo” in the sense of the biological metaphor.

For this reason, any theory or analysis of disconnection must also be not only a theory and analysis of the crisis, but it should in addition be accompanied by a discussion concerning planning on the scale of world society. The theory of planning could be prioritized in the movement of disconnection, since the latter will most likely be obliged to organize the transformation not in a steady piecemeal fashion, but in a number of large outbursts. Theoretically, this transformation should unfold as much in the perspective of unmediated identity as in that of mediated identity—on the one side, the problem of the direct disconnection of basic needs, and on the other, the problem of the social proportioning of non-commercial reproduction. For this purpose, it is necessary to elaborate a historical debate concerning planning, and we are still far from that stage. Only the unity of crisis theory, the theory of disconnection and planning theory can develop a coherent anti-economic conceptual picture. It is not surprising at all that today the old Marxists, the representatives of “orthodox” Critical Theory and the postmodern Left should not see anything of interest in precisely these three theoretical issues, and prefer to repress them or set them aside.

5. Internet Movement and Cybernetic Subversion
One would have to be pretty naïve to assume that a new social movement, under the impact of the crisis, would immediately commence with a radical critique of the commodity production system. It is, rather, more likely that such a perspective can only be mediated by a public debate and by conceptual discussions in the midst of the social struggles and conflicts themselves. One does not start from zero, however. In societies in crisis, there are diverse initiatives for a “cheap economy” which, however, are still in the infant stage. These hardly do justice to a kind of reproduction “that transcends the market and the State”, since in most cases they rely on State (municipal) subsidies or else are restricted to creating enterprises based on the most basic developmental forms of the market and the State.

Taken as a whole, it is noteworthy that such clusters of cooperatives, which can be seen throughout the world, have already become the subject of sociological literature and are known by the term of “third sector” (cf. the short article by Volker Hildebrandt in the latest issue of *Krisis*, “The Third Sector. Ways Out of the Society of Labor”). What is interesting about this is that it has unwittingly given birth to a concept opposed to that of the “tertiary sector”, until now an attribute of the market. If the “tertiary sector” in economic theory encompasses all the service spheres which are not part of either Section I or Section II, although they are components of capitalist reproduction, then the “third sector”, for its part, indicates the activity of initiatives which are neither commercial nor State-sponsored, and which go by the name of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) or NPOs (Non-Profit Organizations).

It would be totally wrong to consider this “third sector”, in its current configuration, as the embryonic form of an emancipatory and non-commercial reproduction. Generally, the current forms of organization and consciousness within this sphere are very distant from such a conception, apart from the fact that they have not adopted, in most cases, the character of a great social movement. Nevertheless, it is very odd that the representatives of “orthodox” Marxism or Critical Theory, as well as the postmodern Leftists, do not actively but defensively and passively criticize the initiative of the “third sector”: they do not want to compromise themselves with an active critique, as if it were a matter of some kind of theoretical monstrosity. Behind such an illegitimate posture is the unelaborated and repressive Marxism of the workers movement, whose categories they proclaim to uphold. And, in such conditions, they prefer to persevere in the arrogant and Olympian attitude of the detached sage, and avoid getting their hands dirty avoiding any contact with the concepts of a changed reality.

For a new emancipatory theory, however, it is necessary to intervene critically in the debate concerning the “third sector”, radicalize it and unite it with the perspective of a supersession of the system of commodity production. This consists of not only the debate with neo-petit bourgeois or neo-reformist conceptions and their mediation with crisis theory, but also the historical reflection upon and critical supersession of the Marxism of the workers movement, together with its antiquated categories concerning the transformation. Instead of insisting on the unreflective and ignorant use of the blind and imprecise concepts of “socialism”, “world revolution”, “abolition of private property in the means of production”, etc., as if nothing had happened in the meantime, using them to box the ears of the activists (who were generally not socialized under the sign of Marxism) of the new, although yet un-crystallized, initiatives, it would be better, in the redefinition of a “transitional society” with fundamentally altered forms and contents, to provide answers to that which the workers movement, within a historically reduced conceptual horizon, was incapable of responding to in its way.

We cannot forget how difficult the mediation of “Marxism”, as a critical theory, was with respect to all the other forms of the radical social movement of the wage workers in the old
historical (today defunct) constellation that took shape after the middle of the 19th century. Nor, in this context, can we forget the fruitful debate concerning “the transition” and the “process of getting closer” to the social revolution. It is not by accident that what remains of “orthodoxy” and the postmodern Left have not raised the issue of the mediation between radical critique and these at first sight hardly radical socioeconomic initiatives, nor have they even considered the question of a “transition” under the new historical conditions. None of them can seriously argue on behalf of the old concretions, but neither do they want to develop new ones, since it would then be necessary to break with their theoretical paradigm. For this reason, they can only work with the empty toolbox of the words of the past, which are employed with a certain timidity and only on rare occasions, like the long-unfashionable family silver which is extracted from the peace of the china cabinet.

The debate concerning a new theory of social transformation, on the other hand, a debate that elaborates the paradigm of a disconnection from commodity production, must find its own social mediations. This also includes a new relation to the social conflicts immanent to the system that, during the period of crisis and transition, will continue for a long time. It is clear that the social State and minimum wage demands, which everywhere exhibit a defensive character in epochs of crisis, will no longer be able, unlike the old constellation of the workers movement, to be the decisive motor of transformation, precisely because the transcendence of the system no longer leads to a new stage of development of the commodity producing system, but to a break with the commodity form itself. The struggles for demands based on “abstract labor” can therefore only be models for a certain “starting point”. This does not mean, however, that they would not be important. One of the weaknesses of the current alternative movement and the initiatives of the “third sector” is that they are incapable of linking up with the struggles within wage labor; generally, this context is simply “set aside”, neglecting the social problems of the majority, and they wall themselves up in their own microeconomic stupidity.

A social movement that really wants to bring about a disconnection from commodity production would perceive the matter from a completely different perspective. In fact, disconnection means that, on the one hand, in a period of transition, the majority of the participants in this movement will still operate in some manner on the terrain of wage labor and the social State but that, in addition, they will escape the capitalist relation in partial spheres, by way of autonomous forms of reproduction. Unlike the conceptions of a dual economy, this is not a static but a dynamic relation, which is oriented towards the full supersession of commodity production. This could exercise a totally unexpected effect upon the social struggles immanent to the system, that is, it could result in their radicalization—and this precisely because they are less developed historical models in the process of “exhaustion”.

The old left radicalism, incapable of thinking beyond the value form, imagined that it could inflame struggles for wages and working conditions by means of their mere quantitative increase, until they resulted in the “revolution”. This calculation, however, was made without the knowledge of the interested parties. In reality, wage workers, who remained captives of the forms of fetishism (commodity fetish, money fetish, wage fetish) and sought their well being only within these forms, were fully conscious, of course, of the fact that they were obliged to respect the forms and limits of the system of which they were a part and from which they obtained their gratifications in the only form which seemed possible to them. For this reason, after their early days, trade unions did not base their demands on their desirability or their necessity for life, but on what was immanent to the system and compatible with the laws of the value form. Under crisis conditions and amidst the exasperating competition of the world market, this necessarily led
to the compromise of the wage workers and their trade unions with their “situation” and with the system’s survival.

On the high seas, when one has only one ship, everyone would be willing, even under the most adverse conditions, to subject themselves to destiny and to do whatever is necessary to keep that ship afloat. But if one discovers that another ship is available, and everyone wants to transfer to it one way or another, then it is possible, with all peace of mind, to set fire to the old one and to hang the mad captain Ahab from the highest yardarm. Insofar as the other form of reproduction only exists in the imagination and furthermore has to exist within the normal conditions proper to the old form, a radicality within that form would be impossible. Ironically, the social struggle based on wage labor and the social State can only be rejuvenated when the goal is no longer money wages. Only when sectors of an autonomous reproduction become palpable realities would it be possible to instigate a social battle immanent to the system in a totally unconditional and nihilistic fashion with regard to the destiny of the celebrated market economy.

The relation between a socioeconomic disconnection from commodity production and the social conflicts immanent to the system is not completely defined, however, by this mere negative aggravation, but also contains a positive moment in the disconnection itself. In this sense, there is a certain point of contact within this new paradigm between immanence and transcendence of the system, although with a modified objective. This applies, above all, to the creation of a reserve of time for activity in disconnected and autonomous sectors of reproduction. Here the old saying holds true: time is not money, but emancipation from money. The old struggle of the workers movement for the reduction of the working day can only be taken up once again in the interest of a new and different goal; in the context of today’s trade union sensibilities, under the pressure of the crisis and the “situationist” debate, it will be a long time before those sensibilities will be superseded and it will be very hard to seriously engage in propaganda for that goal.

If the aim is no longer getting “jobs” in the market economy, but the creation of a time fund for autonomous forms of reproduction, then, in accordance with this aim, totally distinct perspectives on the conflicts can be united, like the problem of the universal reduction of the working day and the abolition of overtime, on the one hand, and the demand for convenient and decently remunerated part-time work or the struggle against cuts in unemployment benefits and social security, on the other hand. Wage workers, part time and contract labor, the unemployed and the recipients of social assistance could join together in the common struggle for an autonomous and alternative time fund, which would put an end to their relative contradiction of interests within the value form. For this to be possible, of course, the new paradigm must be socially elaborated and must be present in both the trade union debate as well as in the movements of self-defense and of the unemployed.

The struggle for an autonomous social time fund corresponds to a demand for “natural” and material resources. One aspect of disconnection is certainly the collective and self-financed acquisition of means of production, in the widest sense of the term: before the old Marxist groans, he should recall that his patriarch Karl Marx considered the “total buy-out” of English capital by the associated English “working class” possible. What is thinkable on a grand scale is also possible on a reduced scale. This procedure, however, is obviously not enough for our purposes. It is, in addition, necessary to demand actual resources like land, buildings and means of production from the State and capital for free and autonomous utilization, especially now when, in the midst of the crisis, resources of all kinds remain idle. The movement of the youth centers and squats in West Germany, as well as the land occupation movement in many parts of the Third World, has already affirmed such demands in an embryonic form, from completely
different motives. It is not surprising that, until now, such movements have not acted in accordance with the perspective of a supersession of the system of commodity production. But this could change, to the degree that this perspective is elaborated and the options within the market economy are simultaneously revealed to be illusions.

With this, we see that there could be a way to link into a network—whether for information purposes or for organizing—the demands or conflicts immanent to the system and a movement of disconnection or of supersession. This would be, corresponding to the stage of development of the microelectronic productive forces, the future form of organization of the radical critique of society: instead of the duality of “party and trade union”, with the corresponding principle of static, hierarchical and authoritarian organization, in the image of their relation with the State and the market, a flexible form will arise (and one which would be hard to subjugate or “intimidate”) of a movement linked into a network of diverse initiatives, on diverse planes.

This applies equally to the content as well as the “multidimensional” character of the base organizations. What is essential is that the initiatives of a movement of disconnection do not allow themselves to be unilaterally restricted. To a broadly anti-economic orientation one must add the respective anti-political orientation. The conceptual definition of politics, on the left, leaves much to be desired. As it is generally understood, it includes the general activity of criticism of society, from the dissemination of theoretical contributions to anti-fascist action. In the strictly conceptual sense, however, “politics” is nothing but activity carried out positively in relation to the State, analogous to “economics” as an activity carried out positively in relation to capital’s system of commodity production. Thus, anti-politics would be an activity of autonomous criticism of society, which no longer has the State, as a structural form, as a positive goal, in the sense of “seizing power”, just as anti-economics, as a rudimentary form of a socially distinct kind of reproduction, no longer acts positively within the categories of the commodity form.

Towards this end, all categories of critique must be addressed, although with other objectives and contents. A movement of disconnection cannot limit itself to the anti-economic problematic of reproduction (which would have been the “economic struggle” in the old terminology). Anti-politics means the observation and incorporation, in practical terms, of all social phenomena: from cultural development to racism, from bourgeois production to the crisis of the nation State and international institutions. And, on a more fundamental plane, the relation between the sexes is an “anti-political” fact. The objective in these interventions no longer consists of “translating” commercial and monetary interests into the political system, but in showing, with respect to every domain, that the system of commodity production of modernity as well as its political institutions have reached their historic end and that they are capable of permanently crippling the life of humanity, and must therefore be replaced.

An important aspect is “practical research”, or the critical overturning of the whole material and physical reproduction of society (even where an autonomous sector has not yet been able to develop), with the goal of proving the senselessness and unhealthiness of the system. It is thus a question of following the ironic saying: “the citizens look after their own reproduction”, of deciphering the whole nexus of globally communicating vessels on the material plane and of radically criticizing it, of uncovering the “business secrets” of corporations and irresponsible bodies, of researching the terrain of the still unknown flow of resources throughout society (along the same lines as the exposé on the grotesque world tour of a cup of yogurt, for example), of focusing on the transport, energy, information, canal, drainage, etc., networks, and critically
presenting the findings—in a word: of carrying out anti-politics as a type of “sociological politics of unmasking”, without any half-measures.

To achieve this, one can draw upon the already existing material from social and economic initiatives. Taken as a whole, it must be made clear that the procedure outlined here has yet to be applied extensively or systematically—and this simply because material reproduction and its irrational interconnections through the system of commodity production cannot logically be an object for either economics or politics in bourgeois society. And as long as the social and environmentalist movements continue to act within economic and political terms, in the old sense of the words (or even from the illusory and regressive perspective of a “sociological market economy” and an “ecological reconstruction” of capitalist industrial society), they will be incapable of arriving at a systematic and inclusive politics of socio-ecological supersession and unmasking, nor will they be able to develop a correlative concept. Despite the fact that the material gathered by these movements and initiatives are opposed, by their very content, to the categories of economics and politics, its character can only be systematically understood and absorbed to the extent that the paradigm of the critique of value and disconnection becomes an “anti-political” fact.

In the wake of this new procedure, it may be possible to take advantage of certain ideas of the workerists and above all of the situationists, in an altered form. The workerist concept of “research” is restricted, sociologically, to a kind of “practical sociology” (like the term of “class composition” and its mutations), and it must therefore be reformulated as a “practical critique of value”. The situationist theme of research on the socioeconomic terrain of cities, regions and “fields” of socio-cultural reproduction can be understood in this sense. One could imagine “fields” like that of food production and its capitalist history, the transportation system (“production of automobiles”), architecture, the construction of houses and of cities, etc. It would be stimulating and maybe even entertaining to systematically investigate the material structure of reproduction and of use value within capitalist relations, and to subject it to critical exposure. This procedure could be accompanied by campaigns against the ideology and the culture of “labor”, which have been predominant in western societies since the Reformation and which today are spreading throughout the world. The critique and theoretical analysis of the value form, of “abstract labor” and the crisis could therefore include a vast field of anti-political activities, which will accompany and prepare the socioeconomic process of disconnection.

From these contents the other organizing structures of a “network movement” arise. Linking into a network could mean that diverse initiatives of the theoretical and analytic sphere, of practical and socioeconomic disconnection, of the struggle for demands immanent to the system, of antipolitical action and research, etc., create a common structure of communication and logistics. Linking into a network could also consist, however, in the fact that certain initiatives or grassroots organizations would not limit themselves to a one-dimensional project, but would instead always have something different in view. In this respect we possess a noteworthy structural example. In many Third World countries it is common for military or police units to also carry out economic activities, sometimes for lack of money for maintenance, or as part of a business oriented to the market. One could also deduce from this structure something similar for an anti-economic and anti-political movement of supersession: the employees of a commodity producing business could also organize a sector of autonomous reproduction (from nurseries to food production); a construction cooperative or a consumers association could promote an anti-racist campaign; a theoretical initiative could outline a project of disconnection; an autonomous food production cooperative could show a film against “labor”
or collaborate on an anti-political research project; and the organizers of an autonomous nursery could even start a subversive delivery service.

Such a multidimensional movement network would also give rise, at a certain point in its development, to concentrated institutions, from the local to the transnational plane, in the form of “councils”, for example. These councils would be organized on the territorial plane, but no longer as a political and abstract expression of will, but as organs of representation and comprehensions of a practical counter-society, which at the same time do not represent a superficial and delimited terrain of “exclusion”, but, in its flexible condition as a counter-system, will be a real obstacle to capitalism. Such a network movement, as an embryonic and developmental form of a society, will be identified and symbolized by capitalist institutions, and it will itself, in its position of negation of the system of commodity production, identify itself as such. This “negative identity”, however, does not install a new fetishistic “principle”, and, is in that respect capable of extinguishing itself and becoming historical, only becoming “society” when capitalism is superseded.

As a movement of negation, it is also a social network which, in its intentions, must above all be transnational. One could compare such a structure, for example, with the (informal) overseas network of Chinese emigrants or the transnational networks of religious sects, except that the content would be completely different and emancipatory. Any member of this network movement would also be able to relocate anywhere in the world, benefiting from this wave of negation, and would always “feel at home” wherever this network has a branch. The managerial theorist John Naisbitt (Hong Kong) considers networks analogous to those of the overseas Chinese as the organizational model of the 21st century, which will come to replace the nation state. Within the context of the system of commodity production, which Naisbitt would not want to abandon even in his wildest dreams, this form of organization nevertheless would fail or assume barbarous features. In the sense of a movement of disconnection and supersession, however, one can effectively speak of a similar model of organization for the future.

And the question of power? The Marxism of the workers movement was, naturally, obsessed with this question, since in its view, it came to replace the supersession of commodity production. If there is one thing that a movement critical of value could appropriate from postmodernist ideas, this could only be the rejection of the question of power in the old, positive sense—as a strategy of the so-called seizure of power. Power is a phenomenal form of fetishism. In this sense, one must criticize Hannah Arendt herself, who ontologized the concept of power and presented it as a simple moment of social life, since she never subjected the fetish form to an in-depth analysis and critique. It is not surprising that liberal and Marxist theoreticians, without distinction, come to grief on this question.

Power obviously exists, because fetishism still exists and structures the historical crisis. The emancipatory goal, however, can no longer conquer power, but only delegitimize it, which coincides with the supersession of the commodity form. It would, of course, be naïve to suppose that power will be delegitimized without conflicts. Capitalism will not suddenly exit the stage unexpectedly, like its derivative, State socialism. Thus, a negative relation to power does not mean a refusal to use pressure to attain goals. An abstract pacifism is as preposterous as the threat of military intervention. Violence is always lurking in the fetishist constitution, and in the crisis more so than ever. I am not only referring to State violence, but also to the violence of criminal gangs and of the products of the State’s fragmentation, such as, for example, the rogue “security” apparatuses which no longer respect even the honest citizens and demand a kind of pillage tax.
But it would be a mistake to concentrate the problem of the delegitimization of power under the aegis of the question of violence.

A social movement’s attack (and this is just what it is) against the dominant institutions begins and unfolds, generally, beneath the threshold of violence. This attack will therefore begin in a quite premature stage and on a local scale. Although the crisis can lead to all kinds of possible agreements with the apparatus of power, agreements that were once considered unthinkable, none of them should be considered to be a gift. The contrary is usually the case. When I was invited some time ago to give a presentation concerning the theme of the “crisis of the society of labor” for a group of party members critical of the SPD, I noticed that they all shook their heads negatively when I mentioned the idea of disconnection and autonomous reproduction as possible consequences of the crisis. But, surprisingly, this was not because these good subjects considered this perspective utopian and unrealizable in practical terms. Their argument almost unanimously consisted in the fact that this would never be permitted by the municipal administration! The latter’s principle interest, in fact, is to allow only activities which could pay and be taxed, which would bring more “jobs” in the market economy, etc. And it could be sure that one local association of SPD members knows the issue like the backs of their hands. A movement of disconnection and supersession will instigate, from the start, a struggle for survival against the “spontaneous” tendency of capitalist bureaucracy (against, precisely, the bloody social democratic “gondolier-mafia” and its retinue in the administrative apparatus), which is incapable of voluntarily opening any “extraterritorial” social space.

It is consequently necessary to bring social pressure to bear and to bring power to its knees. In the old workers movement, the principle means of pressure was not the “armed struggle” but, as everyone knows, the strike. Originally illegal, the “strike weapon” in a short time became a legal and ultimately ritualized expedient in the social debate immanent to the system. Nor will the strike disappear in the context of a new period of transformation, although today it has lost its former importance. The microelectronic productive forces contributed to cushioning the impact and effectiveness of the strike weapon. “If your strong arm wants it so/All the gears will have to stop”—this old saying of the workers movement is no longer valid. In strikes, in many cases, rationalized production is maintained almost without any problems by using emergency teams; sometimes, during these strikes new potentials for rationalization are even discovered.

Since a movement which is critical of value, a movement of disconnection and supersession, can no longer, for the reasons cited above, be centered on the workplace or simply emulate the capitalist structure of reproduction, it will have to invent another means of pressure for social struggle. This arises, almost automatically, from the network structure and contact with the microelectronic productive forces which, in fact, together with ecology, were the first to define the concept of network. A social movement of emancipation will not move within cybernetic structures, since the context of a social network can only be based on conscious communication and free decision, not on an unconscious code. With the new idea of the new productive forces, however, capitalism itself, especially in its microelectronic configuration, can be conceived of and attacked as a fetishistic cybernetic code. The means of social struggle of the future will therefore be cybernetic subversion, which can impose legitimate demands even without the support of official legality (in a certain fashion, analogously to the history of the strike).

Cybernetic subversion means, simply, the paralyzing of the nervous system of capitalist reproduction (transport and traffic, energy, information) by means of “interruptions”. Instead of
the strike, the interruption, which is possible anywhere. The blockade of highway entrance ramps by French trade union activists and truck drivers, the blockade of Castor rail transport routes by opponents of nuclear energy or the paralysis of traffic in Belgrade, purposefully staged by the opponents of the government, show that this kind of interruption is going to school. This is even more applicable to energy distribution and, above all, information access networks. A movement which would research and uncover the material interconnections of the capitalist structure of reproduction could quickly acquire and universalize the relevant know-how with the goal of intentionally paralyzing the capitalist nervous system.

It is, of course, impossible to theoretically anticipate a social movement of emancipation. But it is possible and necessary to theoretically and analytically concretize the question of supersession of the value form and to extend public debate on this issue. The theoretical focus of the value critique must develop the theory that is critical of fetishism and the value form, but this focus, in relation to the question of supersession, is not obliged to assume an irreducible silence in pure abstraction, nor does it have to await the social movement of the masses, like the eschatological Christians, awaiting the Last Judgment. The question of mediation is imposed from the beginning, and a theoretical initiative of the critique of value can generate its own “theoretical praxis” in accordance with the criteria of disconnection, unlike the bourgeois academic enterprise. The still-unexplored possibilities must be reflected on and promoted in practice.

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