Larry Law
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Revolutionary Self-Theory

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The world can only be turned right-side-up by the conscious collective activity of those who construct a theory of why it is upside-down. Spontaneous rebellion and insurrectionary subjectivity alone are not sufficient. An authentic revolution can only occur in a practical movement in which all the mystifications of the past are being consciously swept away.

Councilism (aka 'Workers' Control', 'Syndicalism') offers 'self-management' as a replacement for the capitalist system of production.

Real self-management is the direct management (unmediated by any separate leadership) of social production, distribution and communication by workers and their communities. The movement for self-management has appeared again and again all over the world in the course of social revolution. Russia in 1905 and 1917–21, Spain in 1936–7, Hungary in 1956, Algeria in 1960, Chile in 1972 and Portugal in 1975. The form of organisation most often created in the practice of self-management has been workers' councils: sovereign general assemblies of the producers and neighbourhoods that elect mandated delegates to co-ordinate their activities. The delegates are not representatives, but carry out decisions already made by their assemblies. Delegates can be recalled at any time, should the general assembly feel that its decisions are not being rigorously carried out.

Councilism is this historical practice and theory of self-management turned into an ideology. Whereas the participants in these uprisings lived a critique of the social totality, beginning with a critique of wage labour, of the commodity economy and exchange value, councilism makes a partial critique: it seeks not the self-managed, continuous and qualitative transformation of the whole world, but the static, quantitive self-management of the world as it is. The economy thus remains a separate realm cut off from the rest of daily life and dominating it. On the other hand a movement for generalised self- management seeks the transformation of all sectors of social life and all social relations (production, sexuality, housing, services, communications, etc), councilism thinks that a self-managed economy is all that matters. It misses, literally, the whole point: subjectivity and the desire to transform the whole of life. The problem with workers' control is that all it controls is work.

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practice is not the practice of revelutionary theory, it degenerates into altruistic militantism, 'revolutionary' activity as one's social duty.

We don't strive for a coherent theory purely as an end in itself. For us, the practical use value of coherence is that having a coherent self-theory makes it easier for someone to think. As an example, it's easier to get a handle on future developments in social control if you have a coherent understanding of modern social control ideologies and techniques up to the present.

Having a coherent theory makes it easier to conceive of the theoretical practice for realising your desires for your life.

XI

In the process of constructing self-theory, the last ideologies that have to be wrestled with and determinedly pinned down are the ones that most closely resemble revolutionary theory. These final mystifications are a) situationism b)councilism.

The Situationist International (1958–1971) was an international revolutionary organisation that made an immense contribution to revolutionary theory. Situationist theory is a body of critical theory that can be appropriated into one's self-theory, and nothing more. Anything more is the ideological misappropriation known as situationism.

For those who newly discover it, SI theory has a way of seeming like 'the answer I've been searching for for years', the answer to the riddle of one's dead life. But that's exactly when a new alertness and self-possession become necessary. Situationism can be quite the complete survival ideology, a defence mechanism against the wear and tear of daily life. Included in the ideology is the spectacular commodity-role of being 'a situationist', ie a radical jade and ardent esoteric.

totality of daily existence everywhere, from the perspective of the totality of one's desires.

Ranged against this project are all the politicians and bureaucrats, preachers and gurus, city planners and policemen, reformers and militants, central committees and censors, corporate managers and union leaders, male supremacists and feminist ideologues, psyche-sociologists and conservation capitalists who work to subordinate individual desire to a reified 'common good' that has supposedly designated them as its representatives. They are all forces of the old world, all bosses, priests and creeps who have something to lose if people extend the game of seizing back their minds into seizing back their lives.

Revolutionary theory and revolutionary ideology are enemies — and both know it.

X

By now it should be obvious that self-demystification and the construction of our own revolutionary theory doesn't eradicate our alienation: 'the world' (capital and the Spec tacle) goes on, reproducing itself every day.

Although this booklet had the construction of self-theory as its focus, we never intended to imply that revolutionary theory can exist separate from revolutionary practice. In order to be consequential, effectively to reconstruct the world, practice must seek its theory, and theory must be realised in practice. The revolutionary prospect of disalienation and the transformation of social relations requires that one's theory be nothing other than a theory of practice, of what we do and how we live. Otherwise theory will degenerate into an impotent contemplation of the world, and ultimately into survival ideology — a projected mental fogbank, a static body of reified thought, of intellectual armour, that acts as a buffer between the daily world and oneself. And if revolutionary

This booklet is for people who are dissatisfied with their lives. If you are happy with your present existence, we have no argument with you. However, if you are tired of waiting for your life to change…

Tired of waiting for authentic community, love and adventure…
Tired of waiting for the end of money and forced work…
Tired of looking for new pastimes to pass the time…
Tired of waiting for a lush, rich existence… Tired of waiting for a situation in which you can realise all your desires…
Tired of waiting for the end of all authorities, alienations, ideologies and moralities…

…then we think you'll find what follows to be quite handy.

I

One of the great secrets of our miserable yet potentially marvellous time is that thinking can be a pleasure. This is a manual for constructing your own self-theory. Constructing your self-theory is a revolutionary pleasure, the pleasure of constructing your self-theory of revolution.

Building your self-theory is a destructive/constructive pleasure, because you are building a theory-of-practice for the destructive/constructive transformation of this society.

Self-theory is a theory of adventure. It is as erotic and humorous as an authentic revolution.

The alienation felt as a result of having had your thinking done for you by the ideologies of our day, can lead to the search for the pleasurable negation of that alienation: thinking for yourself. It is the pleasure of making your mind your own.

Self-theory is the body of critical thought you construct for your own use. You construct it and use it when you make an analysis of why your life is the way it is, why the world is the way it is. (And 'thinking' and 'feeling' are inseparable, since thought comes from subjective, emotive experience.) You build your self-theory when you develop a theory of practice — a theory of how to get what you desire for your life.

Theory will be either a practical theory — a theory of revolutionary practice — or it will be nothing… nothing but an aquarium of ideas, a contemplative interpretation of the world. The realm of ideals is the eternal waiting-room of unrealised desire.

Those who assume (usually unconsciously) the impossibility of realising their life's desires, and of thus fighting for themselves, usually end up fighting for an ideal or cause instead (ie the illusion of selfactivity or self-practice). Those who know that this is the acceptance of alienation will now know that all ideals and causes are ideologies.

II

Whenever a system of ideas is structured with an abstraction at the centre — assigning a role or duties to you for its sake — this system is an ideology. An ideology is a system of false consciousness in which you no longer function as the subject in your relation to the world.

The various forms of ideology are all structured around different abstractions, yet they all serve the interests of a dominant (or aspiring dominant) class by giving you a sense of purpose in your sacrifice, suffering and submission.

Religious ideology is the oldest example, the fantastic projection called 'God' is the Supreme Subject of the cosmos, acting on every human being as 'His' subject.

solutist, but one who has given up hope of ever finding the ideal commodity.

VIII

The process of dialectical thinking is constructive thinking, a process of continually synthesising one's current body of self- theory with new observations and appropriations; a resolution of the contradictions between the previous body of theory and new theoretical elements. The resulting synthesis is thus not some quantitative summation of the previous and the new, but their qualitative supersession, a new totality.

This synthetic / dialectic method of constructing a theory is counter to the eclectic style which just collects a rag-bag of its favourite bits from favourite ideologies without ever confronting the resulting contradictions. Modern examples include libertarian capitalism, christian marxism and liberalism in general.

If we are continually conscious of how we want to live, we can critically appropriate from anything in the construction of our self-theory: ideologies, culture critics, technocratic experts, sociological studies, mystics and so forth. All the rubbish of the old world can be scavenged for useful material by those who desire to reconstruct it.

IX

The nature of modern society, its global and capitalist unity, indicates to us the necessity of making our self-theory a unitary critique. By this we mean a critique of all geographic areas where various forms of socio-economic domination exist (ie both the capitalism of the 'free' world and the state-capitalism of the 'communist' world), as well as a critique of all alienations (sexual poverty, enforced survival, urbanism, etc). In other words, a critique of the

or no power to do anything about it. We reject the false choice of 'sacrifice or selfishness' by calling for the destruction of the global social system whose existence forces that decision upon us. It isn't a case of tinkering with the system, of offering token sacrifices or calling for 'a little less selfishness'. Charities and reformers never break out of the terrain of the false choice.

Those who have a vested interest in maintaining the present situation constantly drag us back to their false choices — that is, any choice which keeps their power intact. With myths like 'If we shared it all out there wouldn't be enough to go round', they attempt to deny the existence of any other choices and to hide from us the fact that the material preconditions for social revolution already exist.

VII

Any journey towards self-demystification must avoid those two quagmires of lost thought — absolutism and cynicism; twin swamps that camouflage themselves as meadows of subjectivity.

Absolutism is the total acceptance or rejection of all components of particular ideologies, spectacles and reifications. An absolutist cannot see any other choice than complete acceptance or complete rejection .

The absolutist wanders along the shelves of the ideological supermarket looking for the ideal commodity, and then buys it — lock, stock and barrel. but the ideological supermarket — like any supermarket — is fit only for looting. It is more productive for us if we can move along the shelves, rip open the packets, take out what looks authentic and useful, and dump the rest.

Cynicism is a reaction to a world dominated by ideology and morality. Faced with conflicting ideologies the cynic says: "a plague on both your houses". The cynic is as much a consumer as the ab-

In the 'scientific' and 'democratic' ideologies of bourgeois enterprise, capital investment is the 'productive' subject directing world history — the 'invisible hand' guiding human development. The bourgeoisie had to attack and weaken the power that religious ideology once held. It exposed the mystification of the religious world in its technological investigation, expanding the realm of things and methods out of which it could make a profit.

The various brands of Leninism are 'revolutionary' ideologies in which their Party is the rightful subject to dictate world history, by leading its object — the proletariat — to the goal of replacing the bourgeois apparatus with a Leninist one.

The many other forms of the dominant ideologies can be seen daily. The rise of the new religiomsyticisms serve the dominant structure of social relations in a round about way. They provide a neat form in which the emptiness of daily life may be obscured, and like drugs, make it easier to live with. Volunteerism (shoulder to the wheel) and determinism (it'll all work out) prevent us from recognising our real place in the functioning of the world. In avant-garde ideology, novelty in (and of) itself is what's important. In survivalism, subjectivity is preempted by fear through the invocation of the image of an impending world catastrophe.

In accepting ideologies we accept an inversion of subject and object; things take on a human power and will, while human beings have their place as things. Ideology is upside-down theory. We further accept the separation between the narrow reality of our daily life, and the image of a world totality that's out of our grasp. Ideology offers us only a voyeur's relationship with the totality.

In this separation, and this acceptance of sacrifice for the cause, every ideology serves to protect the dominant social order. Authorities whose power depends on separation must deny us our subjectivity in order to survive themselves. Such denial comes in the form of demanding sacrifices for 'the common good','the national interest','the war effort','the revolution' …

III

We get rid of the blinkers of ideology by constantly asking ourselves… How do I feel?
Am I enjoying myself?
How's my life?
Am I getting what I want?
Why not?
What's keeping me from getting what I want?

This is having consciousness of the commonplace, awareness of one's everyday routine. That Everyday Life — real life — exists, is a public secret that gets less secret every day, as the poverty of daily life gets more and more visible.

IV

The construction of self-theory is based on thinking for yourself, being fully conscious of desires and their validity. It is the construction of radical subjectivity.

Authentic 'consciousness raising' can only be the 'raising' of people's thinking to the level' of positive (non-guilty) self-consciousness: developing their basic subjectivity, free of ideology and imposed morality in all its forms.

The essence of what many leftists, therapy-mongers, racism awareness trainers and sisterisers term 'consciousness raising' is their practice of beating people into unconsciousness with their ideological billyclubs.

The path from ideology (self-negation) to radical subjectivity (self-affirmation) passes through Point Zero, the capital city of nihilism. This is the windswept still point in social space and time… the social limbo wherein which one recognises that the present is devoid of life; that there is no life in one's daily existence. A nihilist knows the difference between surviving and living.

portation. Finally you have all the workers who produce all the other things necessary for the others to survive. That gives me a direct material relationship to several million people: in fact, to the immense majority of the world's population. They produce my life: and I help to produce theirs. In this light, all partial group identities and special interests fade into insignificance. Imagine the potential enrichment of one's life that is presently locked up in the frustrated creativity of those millions of workers, held back by obsolete and exhausting methods of production, strangled by alienation, warped by the insane rationale of capital accumulation! Here we begin to discover a real social identity: in people all over the world who are fighting to win back their lives, we find ourselves.

We are constantly being asked to choose between two sides in a false conflict. Governments, charities and propagandists of all kinds are fond of presenting us with choices that are no choice at all (eg the Central Electricity Generating Board presented its nuclear programme with the slogan 'Nuclear Age or Stone Age'. The CEGB would like us to believe that these are the only two alternatives — we have the illusion of choice, but as long as they control the choices we perceive as available to us, they also control the outcome).

The new moralists love to tell those in the rich West how they will 'have to make sacrifices', how they 'exploit the starving children of the Third World'. The choice we are given is between sacrificial altruism or narrow individualism. (Charities cash in on the resulting guilt by offering us a feeling of having done something, in exchange for a coin in the collecting tin.) Yes, by living in the rich West we do exploit the poor of the Third World — but not personally, not deliberately. We can make some changes in our life, boycott, make sacrifices, but the effects are marginal. We become aware of the false conflict we are being presented with when we realise that under this global social system we, as individuals, are as locked in our global role as 'exploiters' as others are in their global role as the exploited. We have a role in society, but little

the state bureaucracy, which does not permit domestic competition but engages in international competition as furiously as any other capitalist nation. Big difference.

An example of a false problem is that stupid conversational question, "What's your philosophy of life?". It poses an abstract concept of 'Life' that, despite the word's constant appearance in conversation, has nothing to do with real life, because it ignores the fact that 'living' is what we are doing at the present moment.

In the absence of real community, people cling to all kinds of phoney social identities, corresponding to their individual role in the Spectacle (in which people contemplate and consume images of what life is, so that they will forget how to live for themselves). These social identities can be ethnic ('Italian'), racial ('Black'), organisational ('Trade Unionist'), residential ('New Yorker'), sexual ('Gay'), cultural ('sports' fan'), and so on: but all are rooted in a common desire for affiliation, for belonging.

Obviously being 'black' is a lot more real as an identification than being a 'sports' fan', but beyond a certain point these identities only serve to mask our real position in society. Again, the only issue for us is how we live. Concretely, this means understanding the reasons for the nature of one's life in one's relation to society as a whole. To do this one has to shed all the false identities, the partial associations, and begin with oneself as the centre. From here we can examine the material basis of life, stripped of all mystification.

For example: suppose I want a cup of coffee from the machine at work. First of all, there is the cup of coffee itself: that involves the workers on the coffee plantation, the ones on the sugar plantations and in the refineries, the ones in the paper mill, and so on. Then you have all the workers who made the different parts of the machine and assembled it. Then the ones who extracted the iron ore and bauxite, smelted the steel, drilled the oil and refined it. Then all the workers who transported the raw materials and parts over three continents and two oceans. Then the clerks, typists and communications workers who co-ordinate the production and trans-

Nihilists go through a reversal or perspective on their life and the world. Nothing is true for them but their desires, their will to be. They refuse all ideology in their hatred for the miserable social relations in modern capitalist-global society. From this reversed perspective they see with a newly acquired clarity the upside-down world of reification[1], the inversion of subject and object, of abstract and concrete. It is the theatrical landscape of fetishised commodities, mental projections, separations and ideologies: art, God, city planning, ethics, smile buttons, radio stations that say they love you and detergents that have compassion for your hands.

Daily conversation offers sedatives like: "You can't always get what you want", "Life has its ups and downs", and other dogmas of the secular religion of survival.'Common sense' is just the nonsense of common alienation. Every day people are denied an authentic life and sold back its representation.

Nihilists constantly feel the urge to destroy the system which destroys them each day. They cannot go on living as they are, their minds are on fire. Soon enough they run up against the fact that they must come up with a coherent set of tactics that will have a practical effect on the world.

But if a nihilist does not know of the historical possibility for the transformation of the world, his or her subjective rage will coralise into a role: the suicide, the solitary murderer, the street hoodlum vandal, the neo-dadaist, the professional mental patient… all seeking compensation for a life of dead time.

The nihilists' mistake is that they do not realise that there are others who are also nihilists. Consequently they assume that common communication and participation in a project of self-realisation is impossible.

[1] reification — the act of converting people, abstract concepts, etc into things, ie commodities.

V

To have a 'political' orientation towards one's life is just to know that you can only change your life by changing the nature of life itself through transformation of the world — and that transformation of the world requires collective effort.

This project of collective self-realisation can properly be termed politics. However, 'politics' has become a mystified, separated category of human activity, Along with all the other socially enforced separations of human activity, 'politics' has become just another interest. It even has its specialists — be they politicians or politicos. It is possible to be interested (or not) in football, stamp collecting, disco music or fashion. What people see as 'politics' today is the social falsification of the project of collective self-realisation — and that suits those in power just fine.

Collective self-realisation is the revolutionary project. It is the collective seizure of the totality of nature and social relations and their transformation according to conscious desire.

Authentic therapy is changing one's life by changing the nature of social life. Therapy must be social if it is to be of any real consequence. Social therapy (the healing of society) and individual therapy (the healing of the individual) are linked together: each requires the other, each is a necessary part of the other.

For example: in spectacular society we are expected to repress our real feelings and play a role. This is called 'playing a part in society'. (How revealing that phrase is!) Individuals put on character armour — a steel-like suit of role playing is directly related to the end of social role playing.

VI

To think subjectively is to use your life — as it is now and as you want it to be — as the centre of your thinking. This positive self-

centring is accomplished by the continuous assault on externals: all the false issues, false conflicts, false problems, false identities and false dichotomies.

People are kept from analysing the totality of everyday existence by being asked their opinion of every detail: all the spectacular trifles, phoney controversies and false scandals. Are you for or against trades unions, cruise missiles, identity cards… what's your opinion of soft drugs, jogging, UFO's, progressive taxation?

These are false issues. The only issue for us is how we live.

There is an old Jewish saying, "If you have only two alternatives, then choose the third". It offers a way of getting the subject to search for a new perspective on the problem. We can give the lie to both sides of a false conflict by taking our 'third choice' — to view the situation from the perspective of radical subjectivity.

Being conscious of the third choice is refusing to choose between two supposedly opposite, but really equal, polarities that try to define themselves as the totality of a situation. In its simplest form, this consciousness is expressed by the worker who is brought to trial for armed robbery and asked, "Do you plead guilty or not guilty?". "I'm unemployed", he replies. A more theoretical but equally classic illustration is the refusal to acknowledge any essential difference between the corporate-capitalist ruling classes of the 'West' and the state-capitalist ruling classes of the 'East'. All we have to do is look at the basic social relations of production in the USA and Europe on the one hand, and the USSR and China on the other, to see that they are essentially the same: over there, as here, the vast majority go to work for a wage or salary in exchange for giving up control over both the means of production and what they produce (which is then sold back to them in the form of commodities).

In the case of the 'West' the surplus value (ie that which is produced over and above the value of the workers' wages) is the property of the corporate managements who keep up a show of domestic competition. In the 'East' the surplus value is the property of