

ALIENOCENE – DIS-JUNCTION

ANTI-CAMP

A SITUATIONIST CONTRIBUTION TO PHILOSOPHY



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I

The coat and the whatever

“A week ago I reached the pleasant point where I was unable to go out for want of the coats I have in pawn”. Without his overcoat, he could not go to the British Museum. I do not think there is a simple answer to why he could not go. No doubt, it was not advisable for a sick man to face an English winter without an overcoat. But social and ideological factors were probably equally significant. The Reading Room did not accept just *anyone* from off the streets, and a man without an overcoat, even if he had a ticket, was just anyone. Without his overcoat, Marx was, in an expression whose force it is hard to recapture, “not fit to be seen”ⁱ. Peter Stallybrass’ narrative of Marx’s overcoat lead us to consider how we relate to our use of the things, people and relationships in which we imprint our human brand. During the writing of *The capital*, between the 1850s and the early 1860s, Marx’s financial situation was so desperate that he was forced to repeatedly pledge his overcoat. The systematic loss in the comings and goings to the pawnshop, the alienation of the use of the coat and the anguish of waiting to take it up again led his reflections on capitalist society to take a powerful epistemological form. The overcoat determined whether his research for *The capital* could be finished or not, since to enter the British Museum and do his readings was necessary the material relationship with something whose existence seemed phantasmagorical to him. It is in the pawnshop that Marx observes the

transformation of the intimate coat into a commodity, as well as the overdetermination of the exchange-value over the use-value, which empties it of any useful function, turning it into a mere abstract universal. In analysing private property and commodity fetishism, among other themes addressed in his work, Marx reveals how the capitalist mode of production reigns: 'as an immense accumulation of commodities'.ⁱⁱ Beyond the biographical and poetic perspectives, Stallybrass indicates something further: Marx was a *whatever being*.

II

The inheritance and the suicidal

'Carefully prepared, his suicide holds no secret: Debord refused to the disease the right to take his independence away. He was not a "mysterious" man: he was a rare being, impossible to tame, coerce or manipulate. He did not alienate his freedom to anyone, neither to life, which he loved, nor to death, which he mastered'.ⁱⁱⁱ In his autobiography, *Panegyric*, Debord narrates how the poverty has provided him with great idleness. Since he did not have to manage assets, which were 'annihilated' by his parents, who left him no inheritance, nor dreamed of restoring them, he dedicated himself to the game, he fought boredom and he was not subdued to servitude. For having lived the idleness so well, Debord knew closely his spectacularisation, that is to say, his transformation into surplus value in a society in which the economy took all aspects of life and turned them into images. He observed that the capitalist economic system is the reality that dominates all human

relations, turning them into things through the logic of the commodity. The principle of market production is responsible for the alienation of creativity, for the transformation of life into commodity, for the abysmal fracture between the being and the life in which everything that was once directly lived vanishes into the smoke of separation. In social relations between people mediated by images, Debord identified the horror of the spectacular totality: social life has become an endless search for the accumulation of spectacles, that is, of products alienated and sacralised by the indulgencies of the commodity. Only in the dynamic locus of the game, in which every competitive element disappears, is it possible the common creation of playful environments that oppose to the static construction of the existence. The game is the experimentation of the life and its marginal and deviant existence is revolutionary. At each moment of life built, a game of events occurs in the excess of the experience. The idleness civilisation is organised by the experimental drifting. The situation carried out is the perspective of the future in the present. Instead of static, Guy left us an aesthetic as inheritance. An aesthetic of life.

III

The apparatus and the profane

‘Ivan Illich has observed that the conventional notion of life (not “a life”, but “life” in general) is perceived as a “scientific fact”, which has no relationship with the experience of the singular living person. It is something anonymous and generic, which can designate at times a spermatozoon, a person, a bee, a cell, a bear, an embryo. It is this

“scientific fact”, so generic that science has given up on defining it, that the Church has made the ultimate receptacle of the sacred and bioethics the key term of its impotent foolishness. In any case, “life” today has more to do with survival than with the vitality or form of life of the individual. Insofar as a sacral remainder has crept into it in this way, the secret that Guy pursued has become even more elusive. The Situationist attempt to bring life back to the political runs up against a further difficulty, but it is not for this reason less urgent^{iv}. In order to profane it is necessary to return what is separated to the common use of the living beings. Agamben’s observation is elucidative: life shall be taken as a game, thus profaning the apparatuses that in a myope and distorted way turn spectacular the use, transforming it into property. Free from sacred names, life takes on new forms in profanation, creating the possibility of a special type of use called negligence. The passage from the sacred to the profane occurs through a game that diverts humanity from its ‘destiny’, which was petrified by the capitalist religion. So, the gestures that were taken by consumption process are returned to new and possible uses. The apparatuses of the consumer society find their *arkhé* in the *oikonomy* that separates ontology and praxis, whose purpose is to manage, control and administer human gestures. For this reason, the spectacular State constitutes a technical formal structure that plays an essential role in the accumulation of apparatuses. Sovereignty, property, and representative democracy are disjunctive syntheses through which the *nomos* operate in the totality of life, ensuring the order, the authority, and the hierarchy of the spectacle, keeping the use of the constituent power alienated from itself. The profanation is the contra-apparatus by

which what has been separated and divided is returned to the common use. The oikonomic-managerial paradigm of political-juridical apparatuses in the spectacular society is a machine of de-subjectivating subjectivation. In this paradigm, the constituent power is found in a spectral form, channelled and limited by the metaphysics of the contemplation of the separated while separated; that is, of the appearance.

IV

The excess and the accumulation

One aspect in common that correlates the theoretical thoughts of Marx, Debord and Agamben is the criticism of accumulation. These three philosophers understand that the processes of economic accumulation have increasingly refined the alienation. Whether the accumulation of commodities, spectacles or apparatuses, the accumulation is the result of an economic process whose only purpose is its self-reproduction. In this context, the oikonomic-managerial machine of the spectacular State, in its legal division, also carries out accumulations: they are accumulations of rights. We have several. From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Constitutions of the States, countless rights are guaranteed, in an abstract-spectral level, as fundamental to a dignified life. Nevertheless, daily, the exercise of these rights is denied by the constituted power. The institutionalisation of the resistances makes us forget the *index* that the past brings with it. We deny then the redemption

of all the fallen generations that preceded us.^v The excess of democratic activity is fatal to the authority of the State, which does not allow constituent processes that act (or dis-act) *ultra legem*. It is necessary, therefore, to recognise that democratic vitality is not found in state processes, but outside them. Hobbes found in the biblical figure of the Leviathan, the King of the haughtiest, the metaphor to explain what the State is: 'For by art is created that great *Leviathan* called a *Commonwealth*, or *State* (in Latin, *Civitas*), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the *sovereignty* is an artificial *soul*, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the *magistrates* and other *officers* of judicature and execution, artificial *joints*; *reward* and *punishment* (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the *nerves*, that do the same in the body natural; the *wealth and riches* of all the particular members are the *strength*; *Salus Populi* (*the people's safety*) its *business*; *counsellors*, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the *memory*; *equity* and *laws*, an artificial *reason* and *will*; *concord*, *health*; *sedition*, *sickness*; and *civil war*, *death*. Lastly, the *pacts* and *covenants*, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *Fiat*, or the *Let us make man*, pronounced by God in the Creation'.^{vi} It is considering such a description that the amazement at the things that we see the State doing in violating human rights, indignant because they can still be so in the twenty-first century, is not a philosophical amazement.^{vii} The beast described by Hobbes can only be faced by a monstrous and multitudinous flesh,

without body, pure, disform and singular potency that refuses the organic unity of the state political body. The disruptive and de-instituent potency of the multitudinous processes is democratic excess. Only in this way can the process of knowledge be set in motion and the revolt of democracy be profaned by the democracy of revolt.

V

Anti-camp: democratic *potlatch*

Consumption is an act of accumulating. The money is the *fiat* of the society of the spectacle. The *homo economicus* is our ancestor. The *homo consumens* is the portrait of our political existence as commodities. The State is the expression of the *lex mercatoria* government. The human rights are piled in a collective ditch. The conservative philosophy is the theoretical contribution of the spectacular power. In this regard, it is interesting to recall the concept of fetish. In a regular dictionary, the term refers to the concept of an object to which supernatural or magical power is attributed and to which is worshipped. In psychology, it designates an inanimate object or part of the body regarded as holding magical or erotic qualities.^{viii} In its etymology, fetish derives from the French word *fétiche*, which means 'sortilege, amulet'. This, on the other hand, derives from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, as Agamben demonstrates in a dense book.^{ix} In the theological perspective, as opposed to the hosts and images of the Catholic Church, which, although manufactured, were considered 'true', the objects of popular fetish indicated mistrust of 'false' manufactures because they designated the material embodiment of a

thing that subjected the human body to the influence of certain objects that, even separated from the body, worked as controlling dimensions. In this context, the concept of fetish referred to the demonisation of the power that 'alien objects' had.^x Stallybrass further explains that 'what was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and loved and worn'.^{xi} For the Western European and Christian subjects, fetish objects referred to the cultures of colonised territories or were characteristic of primitive religions. With Mauss in his *Study on the Gift*, we observed that 'primitive' non-capitalist societies perform the *potlatch*, whose purpose is to deepen the collaboration between the collectivises that impose obligations to each other, establishing a total system of giving. Besides implying the obligation to give and to receive, the *potlatch* configures a moment of mockery before the possibility of accumulation of material goods, which are all exterminated in a great common festivity. In this regard, Marx ridiculed the bourgeois capitalist society that believed to be superior to 'primitive' societies. In fact, our societies only fetishise the commodity. The problem in Marxian criticism is not the fetish, but 'a specific *form* of fetishism that took as its object not the animized object of human labor and love but the evacuated nonobject that was the site of exchange'.^{xii} In the political-legal arena, the apparatuses of alienation are constantly fetishised. Lengthy discussions in plenary sessions of parliaments, countless seminars and academic events that outline the economic-state processes, political parties that base their speeches on the promise to rescue 'popular' sovereignty, endless legal studies on the need for democratisation and constitutionalising of state

policies, etc. For all this there is a certain philosophy to justify the spectacular power; it is a technique that, ironically, has never been able to overcome theology. Debord stated in the *Society of the spectacle* that 'as long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep'.^{xiii} Philosophy is radical when it takes the critical thinking to its analytical/deconstructive extremes. Andityas Matos explains what a radical philosophy is: 'by enabling a uncompromising thinking with the dualisms that cut the body of the human experience into the antipodes of being and non-being, subject and object, master and slave, radical philosophy proposes itself as an *experimentum* of thought capable of establishing not only a new cognition of the world centred on the periphery, on the fracture, on the flow and on the discontinuity, but also corresponding to the process that, moving ceaselessly among the living beings, reveals to them the political possibilities of the *an-archic* coexistence, that is, based on a justice that is not virtue nor law, but a state of the world in which flourishes the good of the good that cannot be appropriated. Therefore, happiness emerges no longer as an unequivocal historical purpose, but as a possibility for a potency: the ungovernable figure of political love'.^{xiv} The contra-apparatuses thought by Matos offer us the possibility to philosophise about democracy and the state of things that surrounds it without falling asleep in the spectacle, identifying the rhetoric that governs its illusory paradise. In this regard, the *an-archy* and the *a-nomy* denounce the hierarchical and separating structures of the spectacular State, indicating that they are articulated in

the tautology of the *nomos*. As they justify the *community that cannot be appropriated*, without vertical partitions between the oppressed and the oppressors, Mato's contra-apparatuses create the possibility of a living community in which democratic experiences are carried out without encapsulating their excess. The *anti-camp* is the *potlatch* of the democracy that makes present the potency, reinventing the collaborative relations 'based on existential postures indeterminate and decentralising, agonistic and adversarial, [...] committed to a radical project of democracy, proper to a *potential counter-society* that does not accept the shortcuts and lies of politics, always dressed up in the respectable mantle of representative liberal democracy'.^{xv} In *anti-camp*, living beings deepen the total system of giving of the potency, love and life. The philosophy of situation is the situation of the philosophy.

IT IS NOT ENOUGH THAT THE THOUGHT ATTEMPTS TO BECOME
REALITY, IT IS NECESSARY THAT REALITY DISCOVERS ITS THOUGHT.^{xvi}

ⁱ Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (Routledge: New York, 1998), 187.

ⁱⁱ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ricardo Paseyro, 'O meu último encontro com Guy Debord' [My last meeting with Guy Debord], in *Panegírico* [Panegyric], tomo primeiro, trans. Júlio Henriques (Lisboa: Antígona, 1995), 80. The author translated the quote from Portuguese to English.

^{iv} Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo sacer IV, 2*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 19.

^v Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis II, in *Select Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland

Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389.

^{vi} Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London, printed for Andrew Crooke, at the Green Dragon in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1651). Emphasis added by the author.

^{vii} I refer to Benjamin's idea: 'The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge - unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable' (Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis VIII, 392).

^{viii} Antônio Houaiss and Mauro de Salles Villar. 'Fetiche', in *Dicionário Houaiss da língua portuguesa* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2009), 889.

^{ix} Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1993).

^x Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', 185 and 186.

^{xi} Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', 186.

^{xii} Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', 186.

^{xiii} Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), §21, 7.

^{xiv} Andityas Soares de Moura Costa Matos, *Representação contra democracia radical: uma (ar)queologia do poder separado* [Representation against radical democracy: an (ar)chaeology of separate power] (Belo Horizonte: Fino Traço, 2019). Emphasis added by the author.

^{xv} Andityas Soares de Moura Costa Matos, *Filosofia radical e utopias da inapropriabilidade: uma aposta an-árquica na multidão. Belo Horizonte: Fino Traço, 2015*, [Radical philosophy and utopia of inappropriation: an-archic bet on the multitude] (Belo Horizonte: Fino Traço, 2015), 72. Emphasis added by the author.

^{xvi} VV. AA, *Da miséria no meio estudantil* [On the Poverty of Student Life], trans. Júlio Henriques (Lisboa: Antígona, 2018), 39. The author translated the quote from Portuguese to English.