

The Visibility of the Revolutionary Project and New Technologies

How to explain the weaknesses and failures of the revolutionary movements of the 20th century? What must be deduced for the future? It is in connection with these questions that, in a debate with Jacques Wajnsztein,¹ I had written:

“I believe that one of the things which was lacking most in 1917-1923 as in 1968-74 is the visibility of the revolutionary project and that, ‘tomorrow’, in particular thanks to the developments of ‘globalization’, including the catastrophes and threats that it entails, and the current technological upheavals (the exponential development of ‘information and communication technologies’), the project of a post-capitalist society, without borders or commodity exchange, could be much more easily envisaged, more perceptible.”

I had insisted on the importance of this “visibility” also in relation to the possible connection between proletarian economic demands and revolutionary struggles:

"It is far too limited to want to understand the possibilities of a connection between economic struggle and revolutionary struggle without taking into account the visibility of the revolutionary project. It is difficult to radically oppose capitalist logic if one remains convinced that it is the only one possible."

JW had sharply responded, to the first text in these terms:

“What you call ‘the visibility of the revolutionary project’ is only the consciousness of the revolution of capital and what it allows. The horrors of world war one and the fierce exploitation and impoverishment of Germany did not lead to a clear vision of the world, but were nevertheless seen as favorable conditions according to the theory of the proletariat. As for the end of the Sixties, one can say that they were a real opening to other social relations and that it was rather the political dimension that was lacking. While today, how can you speak of the visibility of a project when the single thought and idea that we live in the least bad kind of society prevails? (...) There is thus no need to discuss what there will be to do, as that is imposed on its own. (...) One could believe the discourse of capital on the necessity and the ineluctability of everything that it makes happen (...) Individuals can remain on their own. ‘Automatization and planetary communication’ shape everything! But if that is the case, there will never be a revolution, only the completion of capital or catastrophe and the barbarism of social relations.”

With different variants, the point of view of JW is unfortunately frequent among “the old” revolutionaries. From a justified denunciation of that which capitalism does and can do with new technologies, they end in a veritable technophobia, very much in the air in this period with its tendencies to despair, and, in a puerile way, attributing to machines the responsibility that belongs to the social system which governs them.²

1 Jacques Wajnsztein is one of the animators of the group *Temps critiques*, itself a part of the milieu in France designated as *communisateurs*, which is characterized by a critique of the “objectivism, the economic determinism, that they see as a hallmark of Marxism. The debates in question took place within a Francophone discussion network. (http://membres.lycos.fr/resdisint/Arch_capit/dynamique/indexRevolutionTechno.html)

2 In his latest book, *L'évanescence de la valeur*, (Jacques Guigou and Jacques Wajnsztein, editors, L'Harmattan), JW cites Marx on the Luddite movement, one of the first expressions of the worker's movement in England at the beginning of the 19th century, and which opposed the “industrialization” of the textile mills: “It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilizes those

I will try to answer some of these arguments and to show that capitalism does not have absolute control of all that new technologies are making possible; that new social practices, arising from the particular qualities of digital goods³ and from the development of the internet, occur on an openly non-commodity basis; that these practices are only going to develop and that they will constitute with time (perhaps 10 or 20 years?) a powerful element in the deployment of the visibility of the revolutionary project.

But, in order to avoid misunderstandings, let us start by specifying what I understand by the “**visibility of the revolutionary project**”.

I have employed the term “project” in its most traditional sense, such as one can find it defined in the dictionary: “the image of a situation, of a state that one thinks is attainable.” To have a revolutionary project is to have it in mind, with more or less precision to represent what the new society, the post-capitalist world, will be.

Henri Simon made a comment in relation to this during a discussion on the connection between economic struggles and revolutionary struggles: “*A project in the sense that Raoul understands, is inevitably very vague, in the negative rather than in the positive sense, and, if it is precise, it immediately becomes obsolete following the development in technologies and methods of production which flow from it*”. In the same sense, Marx already said in the 19th century that he did not want to make “recipes for the cooks of the future” and Rosa Luxemburg, at the beginning of 20th century insisted on the idea that to define the new society we only have signposts, especially negative ones.

It is true that it is difficult, if not practically impossible to envisage exactly what a post-capitalist society could be, inasmuch as, on the one hand, it will be the work of human beings who by definition will have changed and moved away from the alienating framework of capitalism and where, on the other hand, the techniques and relations of production will be radically overturned. However, it is absurd to think that after a century and a half of historical experience and technological development we do not have anything to add to the great and “vague” general principles formulated at the outset. Even if it is only in the negative sense, has the Russian experience and its failure taught us nothing? Don’t we have anything to add to the ideas on communism formulated at the time of the horse-drawn trolley and “telecommunications” by semaphore? I believe that, even while remaining on the very general level of the great principles and the “general signposts” there is already a little more to put meat on the revolutionary project than there was a century ago.

This said, it is not by putting on paper precise new formulas on how a post-capitalist society should or could be, which is central to the development of the revolutionary potential. Even reduced to the most general formulations, what is important, and what was most lacking in the past, is “the visibility” of this project, the possibility of seeing in reality the actual conditions for its realization.

In this sense, I can share the concern expressed by Christian⁴ when he responded to me on this subject: “*revolutionaries meet and work out their ideas for a communist project, a human community, based on what they know today. That comes down to the Leninist project: there are those who know and those who*

instruments.” (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Penguin Books, pp. 554-555) JW sees that as “one of the passages in Marx most deserving of criticism.” (p. 135)

3 These are goods in the form of a “text,” composed of “digits,” of numbers “1” and “0,” that can be used electronically. This can take the form of software that controls an automated assembly line in a car plant or a simple image on a computer. They can take the form of producer or consumer goods. What is unique about them is that they can be endlessly produced at an insignificant cost, and transmitted, by cable or wave, with the speed of electric current. Once created, they cannot easily be kept scarce, subject to the usual bounds of scarcity. “Digitable” goods are not necessarily digital. For example, a painting can be “digitalized,” but in contrast to software, is not originally so.

4 A participant in the discussion circle that meets in Paris.

do not know. The revolutionaries bring with them the Tables of the Law." I believe that indeed, until now, the idea of a communist society, without commodity exchange, classes, borders or States too often remained "a dogmatic abstraction", to use the expression of Karl Nesik: an abstraction to which reality did not seem to want to give flesh and bones, if it was not in the grotesque form of a ruthless state capitalism. Rarely did social evolution make the communist project visible. But here there arises a crucial question. The anti-capitalist revolution can only be the work of the immense majority of society and it must be a conscious work. Such a consciousness cannot be the product of the preaching – however well formulated – of a minority of "enlightened" revolutionaries. It is historical practice, the evolution of material and social conditions that alone can convince billions of individuals, including "revolutionaries," that their discourse has a solid foundation. As the Communist Manifesto says: *"The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes."*

Understood in this sense, the visibility of the revolutionary project during the 20th century remained basically limited. That is not what JW thought, when he wrote: *"The horrors of world war one and the fierce exploitation and impoverishment of Germany did not lead to a clear vision of the world, but were nevertheless seen as favorable conditions according to the theory of the proletariat. As for the end of the Sixties, one can say that they were a real opening to other social relations and that it is rather the political dimension that was lacking."*

The revolt against the horrors of the war and its outcome certainly constituted the principal stimulant of the revolutionary wave that would mark the end of the first world conflict. But by that very fact, the visibility of the revolutionary project found itself greatly limited. Generally, the first project aimed at by agitation directed against war – one that is understandable – is peace. And peace, in itself, could also be a capitalist peace. The German bourgeoisie had learned the lessons of the Russian revolution. As soon as the revolutionary movements against the war broke out, it immediately signed the Armistice. And, as soon as peace returned, the revolutionary movement lost the basis of its energy. The revolutionary attempts, which continued in Germany until 1923, were always the work of a small minority. Moreover, because revolutionary events occurred only in countries defeated during the war, the question of the future society inevitably tended to be posed in national and non-global terms. As for the "beacon" of the October revolution, with the famines of "war communism", with its new "horrors of war", civil this time, with the pitiless dictatorship of a totalitarian bureaucracy, it served just as much as a foil against the very idea of revolution as it did as a model of "state capitalism".

The revolutionary project was not that much clearer in the social movements at the end of the Sixties. The struggle against the Viet Nam war would play an important role in rebuilding the progressive image of "anti-imperialist", Stalinist regimes. In the younger generation, which played so important a part in the movements during those years, both in the universities and in the factories, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Yugoslav "self-management" models, etc., continued to weigh upon and distort the issue. Even if a part of the movement asserted its opposition to those models, as it had not for decades, it could not go much beyond the simple opposition of rejection. Capitalism still experienced its "thirty glorious years," of post-war boom, and in the demonstrations "against unemployment" one fought for "the maintenance of full employment", because that still seemed realistic. The question of knowing what a post-capitalist society might look like was a pressing concern only for a very small minority.

JW embellishes the reality of past experiences and expresses a low opinion of the consciousness of the present generation: *"Today how can you speak about the visibility of a project when a single thought and idea, that we live in the least bad of kind society, prevails? Even the opponents of globalization passed*

from the "anti" form to the "alter" form. It is striking to see to what extent one reasons within the terms of capital."

First of all, I do not say that currently, now, there is already a clear, generalized, visibility of the revolutionary project. I have not just landed from another planet. I situate myself within a perspective and speak about a process that can take years, even decades, but which is happening even now. In addition, and even before coming back to this point, I believe that it is not true that the prevailing thought today is that "we live in the least bad kind of society". In the ambient pessimism, it is rather the idea that this society is heading for planetary social and ecological disaster that prevails. What is generalizing is the idea that "children will live less well than their parents". The consciousness of the present generation is in certain ways clearer than those of the years 1917-23 or 1960-70, in particular on the questions which are fundamental from the point of view of a revolutionary perspective, namely the global vision of society and the system which governs it, on the one hand, and the loss of illusions in capitalism, on the other hand. The "thirty glorious years" ended a long time ago, and have given way to massive and chronic unemployment, to insecurity and fear about the future. It is still the lack of visibility of the revolutionary project that constitutes the principal difficulty, but, as we shall see, it is also what is changing.

However, I would first like to respond to the somewhat specious argument of JW according to which I claim that the revolution will be the automatic outcome of the technological development induced by capital. That will necessitate recalling the connection between development of the productive forces and the advent of a new society.

JW writes: *"There is no questioning of capital. One simply awaits its crisis or its degeneration, but one remains in thrall to the 'sense' of history. One would have to believe the discourse of capital about the necessity and ineluctability of all that happens (...) Individuals can sit on their hands, 'automatization and global communication' will do it all".*

JW deforms what I say or pretends not to understand it so as to dodge questions. I have never claimed that, from a revolutionary perspective, technological development under capitalism rendered the action of "individuals" or of classes useless. It is, on the contrary, starting from the problem of knowing what explains the weaknesses of the proletarian revolutionary struggle in the past, and what can make it possible to overcome those weaknesses tomorrow, that I grapple with the question of the present and future evolution of the productive forces. If I speak about "visibility" it is for individuals and for classes – of what else could it be a question? Machines?

What is it that JW wants to say? That revolutionary "individuals" have to tackle the question of the possibility of revolution independently of the technological evolution of the productive forces? Would building communism with computers and global means of communication be the same as doing it with the material means available at the beginning of the 19th century or, why not, with those of antiquity, say at the time of the Spartacus revolt? *"Men make their own history – said Marx – but they do not do it arbitrarily, under the conditions chosen by them, but rather in conditions directly given and inherited from the past."* The armies of Spartacus defeated the Roman legions and saw the numbers and disposition of their troops swell, but they could have no realistic project for a society with neither classes nor exploitation. No more than any of the other slave revolts of that time, could that of Spartacus, which was the most important and most dangerous for the Empire, seek to set up a new social order. And the attempts that did take place only ended by reproducing slave relations. The peasant jacqueries of the Middle Ages against the feudal nobility ran up against the same limits. It was necessary to await capitalism and the explosion of the productive forces that it initiated for the project of a society without exploitation to begin to take on a coherent, non-religious form, with its bases firmly anchored in reality.

Property, the right that it contains of allowing some to dispose of another human being, his life, his work, cannot disappear without destroying that which renders it "useful" for the life of society. Private property and its corollary, commodity exchange, are the most effective means of managing material scarcity. The project of a non-commodity society can rest only on the possibility of going beyond this state of scarcity. One cannot make a free product without making it abundant relative to needs. And that requires a degree of development of the productive forces that only begins to be reached with capitalism. Utopian socialism, anarchism, Marxism, all the socialist theories of the 19th century, were also products of the industrial revolution. The question of knowing what level of development of capitalism is necessary can be eventually be discussed, but the need for that development is obvious for whoever understands that the revolutionary project is not a simple religious incantation.

"Automation and global communication" are realities developed under modern capitalism and about them one thing is certain: their deployment and their impact on social life can only increase under capitalism, ever forced to increase the productivity of labor and the globalization of its markets. That constitutes part of the "*conditions directly given*", not "*chosen*" by men, to make their history in the future. The question of JW about what would happen if these realities "*were all there is*", as if "*individuals and classes*" could suddenly disappear, is of little interest and is only a dodge. The real question, simple but crucial, is: for individuals and classes desirous of overcoming the capitalist horror, will the evolution of new technologies facilitate or block the possibility of revolution, and more particularly the visibility of the revolutionary project?

Will the development of new technologies make it possible to better perceive what the new society can be?

One can distinguish two dimensions within which to envisage the effects of the development of new technologies on the visibility of the revolutionary project, even if in the reality the two are interconnected: the first relates to the increase in the productivity of labor, the second concerns the new kinds of social practice thereby made possible.

On the productivity of labor, I will only insist on recalling the fact that the condition for making products freely available, and therefore eliminating commodity exchange, depends on the possibility of abundance and that, beyond the question of natural limitations and on the form of social organization, that depends on the increase in the productivity of labor, or of productive activity, if one doesn't like the term labor.

The Nobel Prize winner Robert Solow declared in 1987: "*One sees computers everywhere, except in the statistics.*" At the time, indeed, productivity, such as it is measured by the ratio of production (measured in monetary terms) divided by employment (the number of people or hours worked), was not particularly marked by a more growth than in the past. Since the second half of the 1990's, things have changed and the effects of the introduction of "*computers everywhere*" can be seen in a spectacular way, including the problems thereby posed for employment levels in the Western economies. The importance of that growth is even more impressive when instead of measuring it in monetary terms (the price of the goods produced) one evaluates it "physically", in the use value produced by the same labor.

New technologies bring about a qualitative upheaval in the level of the growth of productivity, and thus in the possibility of a world without scarcity, where everyone can receive according to his needs and give according to his abilities, in the words of the old but still valid formula. The visibility of a project of a society freed from the laws of capital, which prevent such an outcome, would thus be enhanced. It is easier to dream of a world where goods are free when the necessary effort to satisfy human needs is being reduced at an accelerated rate, and when that becomes visible.

But it is especially on the new social practices made possible by modern technologies that I would like to insist. To fully understand the significance and the range today, I believe that there are two essential conditions: the first is situated at the qualitative level and consists in knowing how to recognize the authentically non-commodity, therefore non-capitalist, character of these practices; the second is situated at the quantitative level, and consists in seeing reality and the importance of its repercussions on social life within a temporal perspective of several years, or even decades.

Jacques W, and with him a number of revolutionary "technophobes" see in the evolution of technologies only what capital does and can do with them, and conclude that that can lead only to the "*barbarization of social relations*". They can thus show how the development of the Internet and all the applications of electronics lead to an expansion and intensification of commerce and the commercialization of social life, of control and spying on the life of individuals, of improvement in the means of destruction and self-destruction, etc. But they see only that, ignoring, often with an ironic contempt, the whole universe that develops with it, and which is built on non-commodity – therefore non-capitalist – bases. They see "*in misery only misery*", as Marx reproached Proudhon. They see the extension of commodity and capitalist relations to all aspects of social life but do not realize that simultaneously there also develops a sector that escapes that logic. Capitalist trade through the Internet represents a sector in full expansion and the world wide net is becoming an essential instrument for any competitive enterprise. But, simultaneously, the Internet constitutes as of now the greatest experiment in "sharing", in sharing non-commodifiable goods, in the history of humanity. The combination of the prospects of communication via the net and that of digital goods has generated, and is generating, an unprecedented development of "sharing." This phenomenon has three dimensions:

- The sharing of digital goods;
- The sharing of individual efforts for the development of a project, a common, public, work;
- The sharing of means materials (computers).

The sharing of digital goods (software, pieces of music, images, plans, films, books, comic strips, electronic games, in short, all that can be digitized) constitutes the most obvious form of this new type of practice. That can go from the individual who puts on the "web" his best vacation photographs and the history buff who "publishes" the results of his latest research, to the "hacker" who makes available software, that is normally subject to the payment of copyright fees, accompanied by a data-processing "key" allowing one to bypass commercial protection and "safety walls," and to make use of it for free, and including groups of engineers who publish construction plans. To make known what is available and to access it, placing it at the disposal of others, without having recourse to centralized forms, what is called the "P2P" ("peer-to-peer"), has been developed. This system has recourse to software which makes it possible "to download" directly onto a computer the digital goods "taken" from another computer. It is not a question of "exchange," in a strict sense of the term, because there is no systematic reciprocity. Each one can take from the heap what he/she wishes, independently of whether they also give something or not. It is a logic completely alien to commodity relations.

This practice is becoming a mass practice, in particular among young people. It is estimated, for example, that in 2004, "*nearly 4.6 million people at every moment exchange music via unauthorized sites in France*". It poses increasingly important problems for the film and music industries, as well as for data processing, the creators of proprietary software. The policies of the various governments against what they call "piracy" are fast developing. But they fear, rightly so, that a too systematic repression will do nothing but stimulate the development of a parallel world where, for example, musicians and other creators place their work free of charge on the net. It is interesting to note that certain "modern" economists had announced the failure of the P2P at its outset because its operation does not comply with the elementary rules of "economic rationality", founded on individual selfishness. They announced learnedly that everyone would be ready to take, but that nobody would be ready to give, to make the effort to

put something at the disposal of the others. Some recognized thereafter their error and the need to “reconsider” the theory. At least, they recognize that there is something new. The old but effective argument against the very idea of a truly communist society – “human selfishness” – has been shaken, not just on ethical grounds but in practice. We will come back to this point.

The sharing of individual efforts for the development of a collective work is a dimension relatively less known than the sharing of music and films, but it is perhaps more significant and heralds what the life of a post-capitalist society might be. I have already written some texts on “free software”⁵. I tried to show how free software, which can take the shape of consumer or production goods, depends for its creation, as well as its distribution, on non-commodity principles. Even if today certain commercial firms like IBM or Sun, take part in this production, for reasons of quality and also in their war against the monopoly of Microsoft, the bulk of free software is the fruit of co-operation of thousands of voluntary and impassioned programmers through the Internet. If one thinks of GNU/Linux (a system making possible the basic operation of a computer) as the best known and most widespread free software, it is estimated that it is the work of more than 3,000 programmers and a mass of more than 10,000 unknown contributors and testers, divided between 90 countries. Another significant example of the sharing of will and efforts is the Wikipedia encyclopedia. It is continuously produced by volunteers on the Internet and freely put at the disposal of all. With it, there is no commodity relation either in its production or distribution. The control of the contents is ensured by the participants themselves with a minimum of centralization or without any centralization at all. Technically it functions entirely with free software. Started in 2001, it now already exists in 80 languages. The English version which is naturally the most developed contained at the beginning of 2005 more than 450 000 articles; the second in importance, the German version contains 195 000 articles, the Japanese 97 000, the French 78 000... the Chinese version, the 13th in rank, 19 000. At the end 2004, it was estimated that more than 13 million pages of Wikipedia were consulted per day. How does such a collective work, which has neither police force nor government, continue to exist and not be destroyed by acts of “data-processing vandalism”, which obviously exists? It is the collective itself, the action of each participant, who ensures its protection and the compliance with certain implicit rules. There are really many more partisans of its existence than destroyers. And that has been enough, until now. The “Wiki” model is expanding into other spheres of activity. It constitutes a new form of cooperation and of collective production – and it is non-commercial.

The sharing of hardware is the third dimension of the new practices made possible by new technologies. It’s a matter, for the moment, of voluntarily sharing the power of personal computers. That especially concerns the work of scientific research requiring an astronomical number of calculations and normally requiring the use of computers as powerful as they are expensive. The idea was to replace the latter by thousands of personal computers connected by the Internet. These receive packages of data from a center through the Internet and return them, processed, to this center by the same way. The owners of personal computers can let make these calculations automatically with their computers while they are not using them or in tandem while they make use of it without using all its computing power. One of the first cases in which that was done was for the analysis of the gigantic mass of radio signals in space in the search for possible evidence of extra-terrestrial civilizations. In 1993 the American Congress decided to cut the appropriations allocated to NASA for this project. The scientists called upon volunteers on the Internet. They today number several million. Since then, this voluntary form of cooperation has developed in many scientific fields. It is employed, in particular, for research on protein folds by Stanford University. This research, which also requires calculations on a gigantic scale, can be crucial for the treatment of diseases like Alzheimer’s or cancer, in which it is thought that bad folds of proteins play a role.

These practices thrive and develop side by side with the commercial universe. Because of their new effectiveness, they are the prey of the voracity of the commercial undertakings which see a means to

5 See: “Free Software and Market Relations”, <http://raoulv.pagesperso-orange.fr/FreeSoft.rtf>

thereby appropriate free work, a weapon in the wars in which they are engaged, and even an instrument to adorn their image. In certain cases, some of these practices also face the repression of the State, and new legal structures are being set up to try to keep control of them. But, whatever the degree of interpenetration with the capitalist world, whatever the effort to control them that they encounter, they constitute a qualitatively new reality, one that is different from commodity relations. These new social practices are still, for the most part, just beginning, but the forms which they have taken until now are only the first in a universe which will not stop growing as it changes old activities and generates new ones. The possibilities opened up are infinite and to the extent that the world of the Internet grows, the creativity of new, possible, communities can only grow with it. It is estimated that there were nearly a billion Internet users at the beginning of 2005 and 1.2 billion are foreseen for 2006. That's a lot, if one takes into account what that number was only five years ago; it's only a little if one considers the part of humanity which still does not yet have access to the network of all networks. Besides, non-commodity practices are only one part of the reality of the Internet, which, moreover, has become an indispensable means of trade and of the organization of companies and governments. Nevertheless, these practices are a concrete demonstration that commercial exchange and the pecuniary search for profit are not the only motivations making it possible for humans to socially act and live together, contrary to what the dominant ideology repeats ad nauseam. And it is not unimportant, when it is a question of envisaging the possibility of a revolutionary project.

The influence of these practices in the social body, and within the exploited classes in particular, can only become significant with their development and extension, and that will take time. How much time? It would be foolhardy to guess. If the growth in the number of users of the Internet continued to grow at the current rate, in 6 years that number could equal almost half of humanity. It would exceed 6 billion in 10 years. That is only one mechanical projection and ignores some important questions, such as knowing socially who will have access to the Internet or what part non-commodity practices, sharing, will play in it. What we can be sure about is that their development is inescapable. There are two essential reasons for that:

1. The inevitable productivity race, the veritable nerve center of capitalist commercial war, leads to the increasingly intense and extended recourse to new digital technologies. Which means that the number of goods that can be digitized (thus freely reproduced), and the share of the "digital" in each good, can only increase;
2. Relations based on exemption from payment, free co-operation and the disdain of borders, constitute the most effective forms to manage new technologies of communication and data processing.

Here are the elements of the "*conditions directly given*" in which one can foresee that humans will make "*their own history*", to again use the words of Marx. But, the evolution and the taking advantage of these objective conditions depend on the consciousness of men. At present, what consciousness do the humans who now engage in those non-commodity practices made possible by the evolution of technology have? Can these practices contribute to the generalization of a revolutionary anti-capitalist consciousness?

JW tackles the question, indirectly, when, so as to insist on the completely negative character of any technological dynamic (which he completely identifies with the dynamics of the capital), he writes: "*The need to make visible other possibilities surely exists in various practical alternatives and it is for that reason that we say "alternative and revolution" and not alternative or revolution. But it is not the dynamic of capital that produces this. It is resistance to that dynamic. Cf. without mythifying this form of action: the anti-GMO actions.*"

Independently of knowing if JW, according to this logic, would propose "anti-Internet" actions, he seems to be unaware that the non-commodity practices related to new technologies often had their origin in opposition (more or less vague) if not to capitalism at least to fundamental aspects of it, in particular to the right of private property in digitized goods, the copyright. The Internet itself is mainly the product of this

state of mind. Admittedly, its primarily a matter of digitized goods, but we know the increasingly central place in the production process which these goods have, and, on another level, the importance of the question of property from the Marxist point of view: "*In this sense, Communists can summarize their theory in this single formula: the abolition of private property.*" (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*).

This kind of contestation can go from the elementary form of action of the teenager who "illegally" downloads a piece of music, "because it is less expensive", without raising any other questions, to theoretical developments as radical as *The dotCommunist Manifesto* of Eben Moglen who announces "*the downfall of property*" and "*the advent of a new social order*".

The contradiction between the development of the productive forces and social relations becomes even more glaring when it confronts the reality of free reproducible goods with the laws of capitalist property. As opposed to what JW in his last book affirms, namely that "*the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is no longer operative*",⁶ this contradiction is more real than ever and produces a powerful work of undermining the foundations of the capitalist commodity ideology.

It would take several pages to take account of the debates and tendencies that traverse the "hackers" milieu, on the potential of the new technologies. One of the principal cleavages occurs around the question of the attitude to take with respect to the commodity world, with, on one side, tendencies that seek to better integrate the new practices into the capitalist commodity world and, on the other, tendencies that seek to preserve their autonomy and assert themselves as alternatives to the practices of the dominant system. Partly, the capacity of these practices to fertilize the revolutionary potential of which society is the bearer will depend on the relative strength of these two tendencies.

Today, on the one hand, we see the struggles of wage workers that seem blocked in a dead end of powerlessness by the lack of any alternative to the logic of capital. The non-visibility of a revolutionary project leads to divisions, and to the discouragement of a struggle for... "a better form of exploitation". On the other hand, the communal movement of hackers runs up against the limits of the non-digitizable world, whose goods are not freely reproducible. Overcoming the limits that these two dynamics confront proceeds through their interpenetration, partly facilitated by the fact that the greatest number of hackers and protagonists of the new practices are proletarians, employees exploited by capital.

In any event, it seems to me not very serious to envisage the future of the revolutionary movement without being aware of the reality of these new practices, or worse to reject them out of hand as mere contributions to the "*barbarization of social relations*". I am always astonished to see the indifference, if not the contempt, with which certain "Marxists" see these realities. They are however luminous proofs of two essential ideas of Marxism, namely that the development of the productive forces tends to shape social relations, and that the development of the productivity of labor leads to the establishment of non-commodity relations.

Lastly, a word in connection with the argument advanced by Christian: "*If one awaits the effects of the technological revolution, I am afraid that meanwhile the world will become a dustbin*". It is true that the ecological evolution of capitalist society is alarming, as has just been confirmed by the very official report made by 1 360 experts to the United Nations in March 2005: "Evaluation of Ecosystems for the Millennium." This report puts 40 years as the point of no return. But, if one wants to have at least a chance

6 *L'evanescence de la valeur*, p.134.

to accelerate a revolutionary process, it is necessary to start by giving up all technophobia and discern the profound realities of the *"historical movement that is taking place under our very eyes."*

Raoul Victor
May 11, 2005