Simone Weil (1909–43)

Simone Weil was born in 1909 in Paris and died in London in 1943, at the age of thirty-four. In a period of less than two decades before her death, Weil was engaged in an extraordinary range of political, intellectual, and spiritual commitments that have won her the most intense hostility and devotion, ridicule and respect, isolation and acclaim, of any theorist of her time. In the same period, she produced a body of political and philosophical writings of exceptional brilliance and importance. Albert Camus wrote of her Oppression and Liberty that “Western political and social thought has not produced anything more penetrating and more prophetic since Marx” (McLellan, 91).

Weil studied with the philosopher Alain (Émile Chartier) at the Henri IV preparatory school and later went to the Sorbonne. There she met Simone de Beauvoir, on whom she made a strong but not congenial impression, consistent with Alain’s comment that Weil “was nothing like us and she judged us all in a sovereign manner” (Fiori, 27). As Weil later made clear, she took a harsh view of the left intellectuals who “never think at all of undermining the privileges of the intellectual caste—far from it; instead, they elaborate a complicated and mysterious doctrine which serves to maintain the bureaucratic oppression at the heart of the working class movement” (Oppression and Liberty).

Weil became engaged quite early in pacifist and left-wing activism but was never satisfied to join any party. She repudiated not only the Communist Party but also others including the anarcho-syndicalists with whom she felt more in common. She was drawn to Leon Trotsky’s ideas and in 1933 arranged to host him while in Paris at an apartment of her parents, allowing him to hold there what Trotsky, on departing, called the founding meeting of the Fourth International. But this did not prevent her, at twenty-four years of age, from engaging in a heated argument with her eminent guest. Weil rejected Trotsky’s view that the Soviet Union was still a workers’ state (even if “deformed”) and reproached him for his role in suppressing opposition to the early Soviet regime (Nevin, 94).

In the early 1930s, Weil taught philosophy to young women at the lycée Le Puy, where she was an unconventional yet inspirational teacher. At the same time, she became increasingly involved in labor action and politics. Indignant at the treatment of the local unemployed, who were required to break stones for a pitance, she joined them in presenting their demands, which subsequently led to a strike. She was attacked in the right-wing press as the “red virgin [a reference to Louise Michel, anarchist heroine of the Paris Commune] of the tribe of Levi, bearer of the Muscovite gospels.” Alain’s comment was: “Who else but she could start a strike among the unemployed!” (McLellan, 42). She became convinced that it was necessary to learn by personal experience the conditions of workers’ lives, and after several short-term jobs, she took a year’s leave from teaching in 1934 to work in factories, recording her observations and experiences in a journal, published later as “Factory Work.” This was also the period in which she wrote her “Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression” (1934, first published in 1955; see below).

Weil’s pacifist convictions were tested by the Spanish Civil War, when she went to join the anarchosyndicalist forces in the area of Barcelona in 1936. She was injured in an accident and returned to France confirmed in her revulsion against the excesses of violence in war. She wrote to Georges Bernanos of the pressure to encourage killing, of how “Right in the middle of a meal replete with comradeship, I have heard them recount with a good fraternal smile how many priests and how many Fascists . . . they had killed . . . Any possible revulsion is smothered, for fear of ‘lacking manhood’ . . .” (Fiori, 148; Panichas, 76–77). In the period from 1936 to 1939, Weil continued to oppose war, but with Hitler’s occupation of Czechoslovakia and the spread of Nazi and fascist domination throughout Europe, she concluded “despite my pacifist inclinations, that my first responsibility was to pursue the destruction of Hitler” (Fiori, 253). Written in 1939 at this crucial turning point in her life and thought, her powerful essay “The Illiad: Poem of Force” may be read as a compelling pacifist argument on the ultimate futility of force, even in the face of its overwhelming presence.

Like Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt, with whom Weil is sometimes compared, she was born into an assimilated Jewish family. In Weil’s case, the assimilation was so complete that she and her brother, famed mathematician André Weil, were not aware they were Jews until they entered school. In 1939, however, the Weils escaped to Vichy France, and in the period of hardship and reflection enforced upon her by her assigned status as a Jew, she developed a deep spiritual attachment to Catholicism, which had interested her for many years. Yet Weil never accepted baptism. In one of her last letters before her death, she wrote that while she believed in God, the Trinity, and other doctrines of
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Catholic faith, "I do not grant the Church any right to limit the operations of the mind or the illuminations of love in the realm of thought. . . . I do not grant her the right to impose her comments on the mysteries of faith as being the truth. Even less do I grant her the right to use threats and force. . . . to impose that truth" (Fiori, 317).

Among the most controversial and painful of her ideas were her ill-informed and contemptuous attacks on Judaism (bearing a bitter edge of shame in her forced identification as a Jew) and her proposals for the eradication of Jewish religion in France by a process of accelerated assimilation in which "Jewish racism" would be overcome by "the germ that cures," Christianity. After two or three generations following her prescriptions, she argued, "the only ones to remain conscious of being Jews would be fanatical racists," who should be deprived of French nationality (Nevin, 245). In his brilliant and balanced intellectual biography, Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew, Thomas Nevin argues that these aspects of Weil's thought must be taken seriously, not sealed off or excused. Despite her explicit rejection of her own Jewishness, Nevin claims, Weil was profoundly Jewish in her ideas and her being, even in "her passionate wrestling, often bitter and violent, with God," in her adoption of her role as "tzeddik, the just person," and her own description of her destiny: "that it had been prescribed to me to find myself alone, a stranger and in exile in relation to any human milieu whatsoever" (Nevin, 390, 389, 239). But he concludes: "That a mind of abundant energy, a mind that has cast brilliant lights on some of the abiding problems of this century, could do itself harm and give hurt to the Jewish people must be reckoned one of the intellectual and moral catastrophes of a dark age" (Nevin, 256).

In 1942 Weil and her family left France for New York, but Weil was unhappy there, having conceived a passionate desire to engage herself directly in some form of action against the forces of Nazism in Europe. She made her way to London later that year, hoping to gain permission to carry out some services to the Free French, but her proposals (including one to organize women for front-line nursing service) were rejected as fantastic. She fell seriously ill with tuberculosis and digestive problems and died in August 1943. Before her death she wrote The Need for Roots, in later years her most widely renowned work, to set forth her ideas and proposals for the postwar reconstruction of politics and society in France.

Like Rosa Luxemburg, whom she greatly admired, Simone Weil left an extensive body of writings, most published after her death and some not yet translated into English. Though less enmeshed in party politics and polemics than Luxemburg, Weil too has been the subject of many claims and counterclaims between those who see her as a potential Catholic saint, as a political conservative and intellectual anti-Semite, or as a "fanatical ascetic," and those who see her as a powerful spiritual philosopher or a radical theorist of liberation. Perhaps in consequence of these contested interpretations of her work, or simply in testimony to the wide-ranging impact her ideas have had, an extensive critical literature has developed around Weil's religious, philosophical, and political thought.

Among the major contributions identified by her critics and admirers are Weil's analyses of freedom and power, bureaucratic centralism, work, workers' control, and the necessity of liberated work as central to a free society. These are themes she put forward in her 1934 essay "Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression." The following selection is drawn from the 1973 publication of this essay in the volume Oppression and Liberty.

BAC

Sources and Suggested Readings


Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression (1934)

The present period is one of those when everything that seems normally to constitute a reason for living dwindles away, when one must, on pain of sinking into confusion or apathy, call everything in question again. That the triumph of authoritarian and nationalistic movements should blast almost everywhere the hopes that well-meaning people had placed in democracy and in pacifism is only a part of the evil from which we are suffering; it is far deeper and far more widespread. One may well ask oneself if there exists a single sphere of public or private life where the very spring-heads of activity and of hope have not been poisoned by the conditions under which we live. Work is no longer done with the proud consciousness that one is being useful, but with the humiliating and agonizing feeling of enjoying a privilege bestowed by a temporary stroke of fortune, a privilege from which one excludes several human beings by the mere fact that one enjoys, in short, a job. The leaders of industry themselves have lost that naive belief in unlimited economic progress which made them imagine that they had a mission. Technical progress seems to have gone bankrupt, since instead of happiness it has only brought the masses that physical and moral wretchedness in which we see them floundering; moreover, technical innovations are now banned everywhere, or nearly so, except in industries connected with war. As for scientific progress, it is difficult to see what can be the use of piling up still more knowledge on to a heap already much too vast to be able to be embraced by the minds even of specialists; and experience has shown that our forefathers were mistaken in believing in the spread of enlightenment, since all that can be revealed to the masses is a miserable caricature of modern scientific culture, a caricature which, far from forming their judgment, accustoms them to be credulous. Art itself suffers the backlash of the general confusion, which partly deprives it of its public, and by that very fact impairs inspiration. Finally, family life has become nothing but anxiety, now that society is closed to the young. The very generation for whom a feverish expectation of the future is the whole of life, vegetates, all over the world, with the feeling that it has no future, that there is no room for it in our world. But if this evil is felt more sharply by youth, it remains common to the whole of humanity today. We are living through a period bereft of a future. Waiting for that which is to come is no longer a matter of hope, but of anguish.

However, ever since 1789, there has been one magic word which contains within itself all imaginable futures, and is never so full of hope as in desperate situations—that word is revolution. That is why, for some time now, we have often been hearing it uttered. We ought, so it seems, to be in a period of full revolution; but in fact everything goes on as if the revolutionary movement were falling into decay with the very system it aspires to destroy. For more than a century, each new generation of revolutionaries has, in turn, placed its hopes in an impending revolution; today, these hopes have lost everything which was able to serve them as buttresses. Neither in the régime that emerged from the October Revolution, nor in the two Internationals, nor in the independent socialist or communist parties, nor in the trade unions, nor in the anarchist organizations, nor in the small youth groups that have sprung up in such profusion in recent times, can one find anything vigorous, healthy or pure; for a long time now the working class has shown no sign of that spontaneity on which Rosa Luxemburg counted, and which, moreover, has never manifested itself without being promptly drowned in blood; the middle classes are only attracted by revolution when it is conjured up for demagogic purposes by apprentice dictators. It is often said that the situation is objectively revolutionary, and that all that is lacking is the "subjective factor"; as if the complete absence of that very force which alone could transform the system were not
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an objective characteristic of the present situation, whose origins must be sought in the structure of our society! That is why the first duty the present period imposes on us is to have enough intellectual courage to ask ourselves if the term "revolution" is anything else but a name, if it has any precise content, if it is not simply one of the numerous lies produced by the capitalist system in its rise to power which the present crisis is doing us the service of dissipating.

Critique of Marxism

Up to now all those who have experienced the need to buttress their revolutionary feelings with precise concepts have found or thought they found these concepts in Marx. It is accepted once and for all that Marx, thanks to his general theory of history and to his analysis of bourgeois society, demonstrated the ineluctable necessity of an early upheaval, in which the oppression we suffer under capitalism would be abolished; and indeed, by dint of being persuaded of the fact, we generally dispense with examining the demonstration more closely. "Scientific socialism" has attained the status of a dogma, exactly in the same way as have all the results obtained by modern science, results in which each one thinks it is his duty to believe, without ever dreaming of enquiring into the method employed. As far as Marx is concerned, if one tries really to grasp his demonstration intellectually, one at once perceives that it contains very many more difficulties than the advocates of "scientific socialism" lead one to suppose.

Actually, Marx gives a first-rate account of the mechanism of capitalist oppression; but so good is it that one finds it hard to visualize how this mechanism could cease to function. As a rule, it is only the economic aspect of this oppression that holds our attention, that is to say the extortion of surplus value; and, if we confine ourselves to this point of view, it is certainly easy to explain the masses that this extortion is bound up with competition, which latter is in turn bound up with private property, and that the day when property becomes collective all will be well. Nevertheless, even within the limits of this apparently simple reasoning, a thousand difficulties present themselves on careful examination. For Marx showed clearly that the true reason for the exploitation of the workers is not any desire on the part of the capitalists to enjoy and consume, but the need to expand the undertaking as rapidly as possible so as to make it more powerful than its rivals. Now not only a business undertaking, but any sort of working collectivity, no matter what it may be, has to exercise the maximum restraint on the consumption of its members so as to devote as much time as possible to forging weapons for use against rival collectivities; so that as long as there is, on the surface of the globe, a struggle for power, and as long as the decisive factor in victory is industrial production, the workers will be exploited. As a matter of fact, what Marx assumed, without, however, proving it, was that every kind of struggle for power will disappear on the day socialism is established in all industrial countries; the only trouble is that, as Marx himself recognized, revolution cannot take place everywhere at once; and when it does take place in one country, it does not for that country do away with the need for exploiting and oppressing the mass of workers, but on the contrary accentuates the need, lest it be found weaker than the other nations. The history of the Russian Revolution furnishes a painful illustration of this.

If we consider other aspects of capitalist oppression, other still more formidable difficulties appear, or rather the same difficulty under a more glaring light. The power which the bourgeoisie has to exploit and oppress the workers lies at the very foundations of our social life, and cannot be destroyed by any political and juridical transformation. This power consists in the first place and essentially in the modern system of production itself, that is to say big industry. Pungent dicta abound in Marx's writings on this subject of living labour being enslaved to dead labour, "the reversal of the relationship between subject and object," "the subordination of the worker to the material conditions of work." "In the factory," he writes in Capital, "there exists a mechanism independent of the workers, which incorporates them as living cogs. . . . The separation of the spiritual forces that play a part in production from manual labour, and the transformation of the former into power exercised by capital over labour, attain their fulfilment in big industry founded on mechanism. The detail of the individual destiny of the machineworker fades into insignificance before the science, the tremendous natural forces and the collective labour which are incorporated in the machines as a whole and constitute with them the employer's power." Thus the worker's complete subordination to the undertaking and to those who run it is founded on the factory organization and not on the system of property. Similarly, "the separation of the spiritual forces that play a part in production from manual labour," or, according to another formula, "the degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual labour," is the very foundation of our culture, which is a culture of specialists. Science is a monopoly, not because public education is badly organized, but by its very nature; non-scientists have access only to the results, not to the methods, that is to say they can only believe, not asimilate. "Scientific socialism" has itself remained the
monopoly of a select few, and the "intellectuals" possess, unfortunately, the same privileges in the working-class movement as they do in bourgeois society. And the same applies, furthermore, on the political plane.

Marx had clearly perceived that State oppression is founded on the existence of organs of government that are permanent and distinct from the population, namely, the bureaucratic, military and police machines; but these permanent organs are the inevitable result of the radical distinction existing, in fact, between the managerial and executive functions. In this respect again, the working-class movement reproduces in full the vices of bourgeois society. At all levels we are brought up against the same obstacle. The whole of our civilization is founded on specialization, which implies the enslavement of those who execute to those who co-ordinate; and on such a basis one can only organize and perfect oppression, not lighten it. Far from capitalist society having developed within itself the material conditions for a regime of liberty and equality, the establishment of such a regime presupposes a preliminary transformation in the realm of production and that of culture.

We can only understand how Marx and his disciples could still believe in the possibility of a real democracy based on our present civilization if we take into account their theory of the development of productive forces. It is well known that, in Marx's eyes, this development constitutes, in the last analysis, the true motive power of history, and that it is practically unlimited. Every social system, every dominant class has the "task," the "historic mission," of carrying the productive forces to an even higher level, until the day when all further progress is arrested by the social cadres; at that moment the productive forces rebel, break up these cadres, and a new class takes over power. The recognition of the fact that the capitalist system grinds down millions of men only enables one to condemn it morally; what constitutes the historic condemnation of the system is the fact that, after having made productive progress possible, it is now an obstacle in its way. The essential task of revolutions consists in the emancipation not of men but of productive forces. As a matter of fact, it is clear that, as soon as these have reached a level of development high enough for production to be carried out at the cost of little effort, the two tasks coincide; and Marx assumed that such was the case in our time. It was this assumption that enabled him to establish a harmony, indispensable to his moral tranquility, between his idealistic aspirations and his materialistic conception of history. In his view, modern technique, once freed from capitalist forms of economy, can give men, here and now, sufficient leisure to enable them to develop their faculties harmoniously, and consequently bring about the disappearance, to a certain extent, of the degrading specialization created by capitalism; and above all the further development of technique must lighten more and more, day by day, the burden of material necessity, and as an immediate consequence that of social constraint, until humanity reaches at last a truly paradisal state in which the most abundant production would be at the cost of a trifling expenditure of effort and the ancient curse of work would be lifted; in short, in which the happiness of Adam and Eve before the fall would be regained.

One can understand very well, starting from this conception, the attitude of the Bolsheviks, and why all of them, including Trotsky, treat democratic ideas with supreme disdain. They have found themselves powerless to bring about the workers' democracy foreshadowed by Marx; but such a minor detail does not worry them, convinced as they are, on the one hand, that all attempts at social action which do not consist of developing productive forces are doomed to failure, on the other hand, that all progress in productive forces causes humanity to advance along the road leading to emancipation, even if it is at the cost of a temporary oppression. It is not surprising that, backed up by such moral certainty as this, they have astonished the world by their strength.

It is seldom, however, that comforting beliefs are at the same time rational. Before even examining the Marxist conception of productive forces, one is struck by the mythological character it presents in all socialist literature, where it is assumed as a postulate. Marx never explains why productive forces should tend to increase; by accepting without proof this mysterious tendency, he allies himself not with Darwin, as he liked to think, but with Lamarck, who in similar fashion founded his biological system on an inexplicable tendency of living creatures to adapt themselves. In the same way, why is it that, when social institutions are in opposition to the development of productive forces, victory should necessarily belong beforehand to the latter rather than the former? Marx evidently does not assume that men consciously transform their social conditions in order to improve their economic conditions; he knows perfectly well that up to the present social transformations have never been accompanied by any clear realization of their real long-term consequences; he therefore implicitly assumes that productive forces possess a secret virtue enabling them to overcome obstacles. Finally, why does he assert without demonstration, and as a self-evident truth, that the productive forces are capable of unlimited development?

The whole of this doctrine, on which the Marxist conception of revolution entirely rests, is absolutely

devoid of any scientific basis. In order to understand it, we must remember the Hegelian origins of Marxist thought. Hegel believed in a hidden mind at work in the universe, and that the history of the world is simply the history of this world mind, which, as in the case of everything spiritual, tends indefinitely towards perfection. Marx claimed to "put back on its feet" the Hegelian dialectic, which he accused of being "upside down," by substituting matter for mind as the motive power of history; but by an extraordinary paradox, he conceived history, starting from this rectification, as though he attributed to matter what is the very essence of mind—an unceasing aspiration towards the best. In this he was profoundly in keeping, moreover, with the general current of capitalist thought; to transfer the principle of progress from mind to things is to give a philosophical expression to that "reversal of the relationship between subject and object" in which Marx discerned the very essence of capitalism. The rise of big industry made of productive forces the divinity of a kind of religion whose influence Marx came under, despite himself, when formulating his conception of history. The term religion may seem surprising in connection with Marx; but to believe that our will coincides with a mysterious will which is at work in the universe and helps us to conquer is to think religiously, to believe in Providence. Besides, Marx's vocabulary itself testifies to this since it contains quasi-mystical expressions such as "the historic mission of the proletariat."

This religion of productive forces, in whose name generations of industrial employers have ground down the labouring masses without the slightest qualm, also constitutes a factor making for oppression within the socialist movement. All religions make man into a mere instrument of Providence, and socialism, too, puts men at the service of historical progress, that is to say of productive progress. That is why, whatever may be the insult inflicted on Marx's memory by the cult which the Russian oppressors of our time entertain for him, it is not altogether undeserved. Marx, it is true, never had any other motive except a generous yearning after liberty and equality; but this yearning, once separated from the materialistic religion with which it was merged in his mind, no longer belongs to anything except what Marx contemptuously called utopian socialism. If Marx's writings contained nothing more valuable than this, they might without loss be forgotten, at any rate except for his economic analyses.

But such is not the case; we find in Marx a different conception from that Hegelian doctrine turned inside out, namely, a materialism which no longer has anything religious about it and forms not a doctrine but a method of understanding and of action. It is no common thing to find thus in quite great minds two distinct and even incompatible conceptions mingling together under cover of the inevitable looseness of language; absorbed as they are in formulating new ideas, such minds have not the time to make a critical examination of what they have discovered. Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations. "Men make their own history, but within certain fixed conditions." To desire is nothing; we have got to know the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action; and in the social sphere these conditions are defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production. A methodical improvement in social organization presupposes a detailed study of the method of production, in order to try to find out on the one hand what we may expect from it, in the immediate or distant future, from the point of view of output, and on the other hand what forms of social and cultural organization are compatible with it, and, finally, how it may itself be transformed. Only irresponsible human beings can neglect such a study and yet claim the right to dominate over society; and, unfortunately, such is the case everywhere, as much in revolutionary circles as among the ruling classes. The materialistic method—that instrument which Marx bequeathed us—is an unfried instrument; no Marxist has ever really used it, beginning with Marx himself. The only really valuable idea to be found in Marx's writings is also the only one that has been completely neglected. It is not surprising that the social movements springing from Marx have failed.

The first question to consider is that concerning output. Are there any reasons for supposing that modern technique, at its present level, is capable—always supposing a fair distribution—of guaranteeing to everyone sufficient welfare and leisure so that the development of the individual may cease to be hampered by modern working conditions? It seems that on this subject there are many illusions, purposely kept alive by demagogic interests. It is not profits which have to be calculated; those of them that are reinvested in production would for the most part be taken away from the workers under any system. We should have to be able to calculate the total amount of labour that could be dispensed with at the cost of a transformation of the property system. Even that would not solve the problem; we must bear in mind the labour involved in the complete reorganization of the productive machine, a reorganization necessary for production to be adapted to its new end, namely, the welfare of the masses; we must not forget that the manufacture of armaments
would not be abandoned before the capitalist system had been everywhere destroyed; above all, we must provide for the fact that the abolition of individual profit, while causing certain forms of waste to disappear, would at the same time necessarily create others. It is impossible, of course, to make exact calculations; but they are not indispensable for discerning that the abolition of private property would be far from sufficient in itself to prevent work in the mines and in the factories from continuing to weigh as a servitude on those who are subjected to it.

But if the present state of technique is insufficient to liberate the workers, is there at any rate a reasonable hope that an unlimited development lies before it, which would imply an unlimited increase in productivity? This is what everybody assumes, both among capitalists and socialists, without the smallest preliminary study of the question; it is enough that the productivity of human effort should have increased in an unheard-of manner for the last three centuries for it to be expected that this increase will continue at the same rate. Our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them; and Marx, whose dialectical method should have saved him from such an error, fell into it on this point just like other people.

The problem is fundamental, and of a kind to determine all our future prospects; it must be formulated with the utmost precision. To this end, the first thing is to know in what technical progress consists, what factors play a part in it, and to examine each factor separately; for we mix up under the name of technical progress entirely different procedures that offer different possibilities of development.

The first procedure that offers itself to man for producing more with less effort is the utilization of natural sources of energy; and it is true, in a sense, that it is impossible to assign a precise limit to the benefits of this procedure, because we do not know what new sources of energy we shall one day be able to use; but this does not mean to say that there can be prospects of unlimited progress in this direction, nor that progress in it is, generally speaking, assured. For nature does not give us this energy, whatever may be the form in which it offers itself—animal power, coal or petroleum; we have to wrest it from her and transform it through our labour so as to adapt it to our own ends. Now, this labour does not necessarily become less as time goes on; at present the very opposite is happening to us, since the extraction of coal and petroleum becomes continually and automatically less profitable and more costly. What is more, the deposits at present known are destined to become exhausted at the end of a relatively short time. Perhaps new deposits will be found; but prospecting, the development of new workings, some of which will doubtless fail to pay—all that will be costly; furthermore, we do not know how many unknown deposits there are in general, and in any case their number will not be unlimited. We may also—and no doubt some day we are bound to—discover new sources of energy; but there is nothing to guarantee that their utilization will call for less labour than the utilization of coal or heavy oils; the opposite is just as possible. It may even happen, at the worst, that the utilization of a natural source of energy involves more labour than the human expenditure of energy one is seeking to replace. In this field it is chance which decides; for the discovery of a new and easily accessible source of energy or of an economic transformation process for a known source of energy is not one of those things one is sure of reaching on a basis of thinking methodically and spending the necessary time thereon.

Apart from this, there exists only one other resource making it possible to diminish the total sum of human effort, namely, what we may call, to use a modern expression, the rationalization of labour. Two aspects of it may be distinguished; one which concerns the relationship between simultaneous efforts, the other that between successive efforts; in both cases progress resides in increasing the productivity of the efforts by the way in which these are combined. It is clear that in this field one can, strictly speaking, leave chance out of account, and that here the notion of progress has meaning; the question is to know whether this progress is unlimited, and, if not, whether we are still a long way from the limit.

A serious study of the question ought, strictly speaking, to take many other elements into consideration. The various factors that go to increase productivity do not develop separately, although they have to be separated in analysis; they combine together, and these combinations produce results difficult to foresee. Besides, technical progress does not only serve to obtain at low cost what one used to obtain before with considerable effort; it also makes it possible to undertake what without it would have been almost unimaginable. It would be as well to examine the value of these new possibilities, while bearing in mind the fact that they are not only possibilities of construction, but also of destruction. But such a study would be forced to take into account the economic and social relations which necessarily go hand in hand with a given form of technical achievement. For the moment it is enough to have understood that the possibility of future progress so far as concerns productivity is not
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beyond question; that, to all appearances, we have at present as many reasons for expecting to see it diminish as increase; and, what is most important of all, that a continuous and unlimited increase in productivity is, strictly speaking, inconceivable. It is solely the frenzy produced by the speed of technical progress that has brought about the mad idea that work might one day become unnecessary. On the plane of pure science, this idea has found expression in the search for the "perpetual motion machine," that is to say a machine which would go on producing work indefinitely without ever consuming any; and the scientists made short work of it by propounding the law of the conservation of energy. In the social sphere, divergations are better received. The "higher stage of communism," regarded by Marx as the final term of social evolution, is, in effect, a utopia absolutely analogous to that of perpetual motion.

It is in the name of this utopia that revolutionaries have shed their blood. Or rather, they have shed their blood in the name either of this utopia or of the equally utopian belief that the present system of production could be placed by a mere decree at the service of a society of free and equal men. Is it surprising, then, if all this blood has been shed in vain? The history of the working-class movement is thus lit up with a cruel, but singularly vivid, light. The whole of it can be summarized by remarking that the working class has never manifested strength save in so far as it has served something other than the workers' revolution. The working-class movement was able to give the illusion of power as long as it was still a question for it of helping to liquidate the vestiges of feudalism or to prepare the way for capitalist domination, whether under the form of private capitalism or that of State capitalism, as happened in Russia; now that its role in that field is over and the industrial crisis confronts it with the problem of the effective seizure of power by the working masses, it is crumbling away and dissolving with a rapidity that breaks the hearts of those who had placed their faith in it. On its ruins interminable arguments are held which can only be smoothed over by the most ambiguous formulas; for among all those who still persist in talking about revolution, there are perhaps not two who attach the same content to the term. And that is not in the least surprising. The word "revolution" is a word for which you kill, for which you die, for which you send the labouring masses to their death, but which does not possess any content.

Yet perhaps one can give a meaning to the revolutionary ideal, if not as a possible prospect in view, at any rate as a theoretical limit of feasible social transformations. What we should ask of the revolution is the abolition of social oppression; but for this notion to have at least a chance of possessing some meaning, we must be careful to distinguish between oppression and subordination of personal whims to a social order. So long as such a thing as a society exists, it will circumscribe the life of individuals within quite narrow limits and impose its rules on them; but this inevitable constraint does not merit the name of oppression except in so far as, owing to the fact that it brings about a division between those who exercise it and those who are subject to it, places the latter at the disposal of the former and thus causes those who command to exert a crushing physical and moral pressure over those who execute. Even when this distinction has been made, nothing entitles us to assume a priori that the abolition of oppression is either possible or even simply conceivable by way of limit. Marx demonstrated forcibly, in the course of analyses of whose far-reaching scope he was himself unaware, that the present system of production, namely, big industry, reduces the worker to the position of a wheel in the factory and a mere instrument in the hands of his employers; and it is useless to hope that technical progress will, through a progressive and continuous reduction in productive effort, alleviate, to the point of almost causing it to disappear, the double burden imposed on man by nature and society.

The problem is, therefore, quite clear; it is a question of knowing whether it is possible to conceive of an organization of production which, though powerless to remove the necessities imposed by nature and the social constraint arising therefrom, would enable these at any rate to be exercised without grinding down souls and bodies under oppression. At a time like ours, to have grasped this problem clearly is perhaps a condition for being able to live at peace with oneself. If we can manage to conceive in concrete terms the conditions of this liberating organization, then it only remains for us to exercise, in order to move towards it, all the powers of action, small or great, at our disposal; and if, on the other hand, we realize clearly that the possibility of such a system of production is not even conceivable, we at least gain the advantage of being able legitimately to resign ourselves to oppression and of ceasing to regard ourselves as accomplices in it because we fail to do anything effective to prevent it.

Analysis of Oppression

The problem is, in short, to know what it is that links oppression in general and each form of oppression in particular to the system of production; in other words, to succeed in grasping the mechanism of oppression, in understanding by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, by what means, perhaps, it
might theoretically disappear. This is, to all intents and purposes, a novel question. For centuries past, noble minds have regarded the power of oppressors as constituting a usurpation pure and simple, which one had to try to oppose either by simply expressing a radical disapproval of it, or else by armed force placed at the service of justice. In either case, failure has always been complete; and never was it more strikingly so than when it took on momentarily the appearance of victory, as happened with the French Revolution, when, after having effectively succeeded in bringing about the disappearance of a certain form of oppression, people stood by, helpless, watching a new oppression immediately being set up in its place.

In his ponderings over this resounding failure, which had come to crown all previous ones, Marx finally came to understand that you cannot abolish oppression so long as the causes which make it inevitable remain, and that these causes reside in the objective—that is to say material—conditions of the social system. He consequently elaborated a completely new conception of oppression, no longer considered as the usurpation of a privilege, but as the organ of a social function. This function is that very one which consists in developing the productive forces, in so far as this development calls for severe efforts and serious hardships; and Marx and Engels perceived a reciprocal relationship between this development and social oppression.

In the first place, according to them, oppression becomes established only when improvements in production have brought about a division of labour sufficiently advanced for exchange, military command and government to constitute distinct functions; on the other hand, oppression, once established, stimulates the further development of the productive forces, and changes in form as and when this development so demands, until the day when, having become a hindrance to it instead of a help, it disappears purely and simply.

However brilliant the concrete analyses may be by which Marxists have illustrated this thesis, and although it constitutes an improvement on the naive expressions of indignation which it replaced, one cannot say that it throws light on the mechanism of oppression. It only partially describes its origins; for why should the division of labour necessarily turn into oppression? It by no means entitles us to a reasonable expectation of its ending; for if Marx believed himself to have shown how the capitalist system finally hinders production, he did not even attempt to prove that, in our day, any other oppressive system would hinder it in like manner. Furthermore, one fails to understand why oppression should not manage to continue, even after it has become a factor of economic regression. Above all, Marx omits to explain why oppression is invincible as long as it is useful, why the oppressed in revolt have never succeeded in founding a non-oppressive society, whether on the basis of the productive forces of their time, or even at the cost of an economic regression which could hardly increase their misery; and, lastly, he leaves completely in the dark the general principles of the mechanism by which a given form of oppression is replaced by another.

What is more, not only have Marxists not solved a single one of these problems, but they have not even thought it their duty to formulate them. It has seemed to them that they had sufficiently accounted for social oppression by assuming that it corresponds to a function in the struggle against nature. Even then, they have only really brought out this correspondence in the case of the capitalist system; but, in any case, to suppose that such a correspondence constitutes an explanation of the phenomenon is to apply unconsciously to social organisms Lamarck's famous principle, as unintelligible as it is convenient, "the function creates the organ." Biology only started to be a science on the day when Darwin replaced this principle by the notion of conditions of existence. . . .

It is clear that this luminous method is not only valid in biology, but wherever one is confronted by organized structures which have not been organized by anybody. In order to be able to appeal to science in social matters, we ought to have effected with respect to Marxism an improvement similar to that which Darwin effected with respect to Lamarck. The causes of social evolution must no longer be sought elsewhere than in the daily efforts of men considered as individuals. These efforts are certainly not directed haphazardly; they depend, in each individual case, on temperament, education, routine, customs, prejudices, natural or acquired needs, environment, and above all, broadly speaking, human nature, a term which, although difficult to define, is probably not devoid of meaning. But given the almost infinite diversity of individuals, and especially the fact that human nature includes among other things the ability to innovate, to create, to rise above oneself, this warp and woof of incoherent efforts would produce anything whatever in the way of social organization, were it not that chance found itself restricted in this field by the conditions of existence to which every society has to conform on pain of being either subdued or destroyed. The men who submit to these conditions of existence are more often than not unaware of them, for they act not by imposing a definite direction on the efforts of each one, but by rendering ineffective all efforts made in directions disallowed by them.
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These conditions of existence are determined in the first place, as in the case of living beings, on the one hand by the natural environment and on the other hand by the existence, activity and especially competition of other organisms of the same species, that is to say here of other social groups. But still a third factor enters into play, namely, the organization of the natural environment, capital equipment, armaments, methods of work and of warfare; and this factor occupies a special position owing to the fact that, though it acts upon the form of social organization, it in turn undergoes the latter’s reaction upon it. Furthermore, this factor is the only one over which the members of a society can perhaps exercise some control.

This outline is too abstract to serve as a guide; but if on the basis of this summary view we could arrive at some concrete analyses, it would at last become possible to formulate the social problem. The enlightened goodwill of men acting in an individual capacity is the only possible principle of social progress; if social necessities, once clearly perceived, were found to lie outside the range of this goodwill in the same way as those which govern the stars, each man would have nothing more to do but to watch history unfolding as one watches the seasons go by, while doing his best to spare himself and his loved ones the misfortune of being either an instrument or a victim of social oppression. If this is not so, it would be necessary first of all to define by way of an ideal limit the objective conditions that would permit of a social organization absolutely free from oppression; then seek out by what means and to what extent the conditions actually given can be transformed so as to bring them nearer to this ideal; find out what is the least oppressive form of social organization for a body of specific objective conditions; and lastly, define in this field the power of action and responsibilities of individuals as such. Only on this condition could political action become something analogous to a form of work, instead of being, as has been the case hitherto, either a game or a branch of magic.

Unfortunately, in order to reach this stage, what is required is not only searching, rigorous thinking, subjected, so as to avoid all possibility of error, to the most exacting checking, but also historical, technical and scientific investigations of an unparalleled range and precision, and conducted from an entirely new point of view. However, events do not wait; time will not stop in order to afford us leisure; the present forces itself urgently on our attention and threatens us with calamities which would bring in their train, amongst many other harrowing misfortunes, the material impossibility of studying or writing otherwise than in the service of the oppressors. What are we to do? There would be no point in letting oneself be swept along in the mêlée by an ill-considered enthusiasm. No one has the faintest idea of either the objectives or the means of what is still from force of habit called revolutionary action. As for reformism, the principle of the lesser evil on which it is based is certainly eminently reasonable, however discredited it may be through the fault of those who have hitherto made use of it; though remember, if it has so far served only as a pretext for capitulation, this is due not to the cowardice of a few leaders, but to an ignorance unfortunately common to all; for as long as the worst and the best have not been defined in terms of a clearly and concretely conceived ideal, and then the precise margin of possibilities determined, we do not know which is the lesser evil, and consequently we are compelled to accept under this name anything effectively imposed by those who dispense of force, since any existing evil whatever is always less than the possible evils which uncalculating action invariably runs the risk of bringing about. Broadly speaking, blind men such as we are in these days have only the choice between surrender and adventure. And yet we cannot avoid the duty of determining here and now the attitude to adopt with regard to the present situation. That is why, until we have — if, indeed, such a thing is possible — taken to pieces the social mechanism, it is permissible perhaps to try to outline its principles; provided it be clearly understood that such a rough sketch rules out any kind of categorical assertion, and aims solely at submitting a few ideas, by way of hypotheses, to the critical examination of honest people. Besides, we are far from being without a guide on the subject. If Marx’s system, in its broad outlines, is of little assistance, it is a different matter when it comes to the analyses he was led to make by the concrete study of capitalism, and in which, while believing that he was limiting himself to describing a system, he probably more than once seized upon the hidden nature of oppression itself.

Among all the forms of social organization which history has to show, there are very few which appear to be really free from oppression; and these few are not very well known. All of them correspond to an extremely low level of production, so low that the division of labour is pretty well unknown, except between the sexes, and each family produces little more than its own requirements. It is sufficiently obvious, moreover, that such material conditions necessarily rule out oppression, since each man, compelled to sustain himself personally, is continually at grips with outside nature; war itself, at this stage, is war of pillage and extermination, not of conquest, because the means of consolidating a conquest and especially of turning it to account are lacking. What is surprising is not that oppression should make its appearance only after
higher forms of economy have been reached, but that it should always accompany them. This means, therefore, that as between a completely primitive economy and more highly developed forms of economy there is a difference not only of degree, but also of kind. And, in fact, although from the point of view of consumption there is but a change-over to slightly better conditions, production, which is the decisive factor, is itself transformed in its very essence. This transformation consists at first sight in a progressive emancipation with respect to nature. In completely primitive forms of production—hunting, fishing, gathering—human effort appears as a simple reaction to the inexorable pressure continually exercised on man by nature, and that in two ways. To start with, it takes place, to all intents and purposes, under immediate compulsion, under the ever-present spur of natural needs; and, by an indirect consequence, the action seems to receive its form from nature herself, owing to the important part played therein by an intuition comparable to animal instinct and a patient observation of the most frequent natural phenomena, also owing to the indefinite repetition of methods that have often succeeded without men's knowing why, and which are doubtless regarded as being welcomed by nature with special favour. At this stage, each man is necessarily free with respect to other men, because he is in direct contact with the conditions of his own existence, and because nothing human interposes itself between them and him; but, on the other hand, and to the same extent, he is narrowly subjected to nature's dominion, and he shows this clearly enough by defying her. At higher stages of production, nature's compulsion continues certainly to be exercised, and still pitilessly, but in an apparently less immediate fashion; it seems to become more and more liberalized and to leave an increasing margin to man's freedom of choice, to his faculty of initiative and decision. Action is no longer tied moment by moment to nature's exigencies; men learn how to store up reserves on a long-term basis for meeting needs not yet actually felt; efforts which can be only of indirect usefulness become more and more numerous; at the same time a systematic co-ordination in time and in space becomes possible and necessary, and its importance increases continually. In short, man seems to pass by stages, with respect to nature, from servitude to dominion. At the same time nature gradually loses her divine character, and divinity more and more takes on human shape. Unfortunately, this emancipation is only a flattering semblance. In reality, at these higher stages, human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man. However, it is still the same pressure exerted by nature that continues to make itself felt, although indirectly; for oppression is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature.

The notion of force is far from simple, and yet it is the first that has to be elucidated in order to formulate the problems of society. Force and oppression—that makes two; but what needs to be understood above all is that it is not the manner in which use is made of some particular force, but its very nature, which determines whether it is oppressive or not. Marx clearly perceived this in connection with the State; he understood that this machine for grinding men down, cannot stop grinding as long as it goes on functioning, no matter in whose hands it may be. But this insight has a far more general application. Oppression proceeds exclusively from objective conditions. The first of these is the existence of privileges; and it is not men's laws or decrees which determine privileges, nor yet titles to property; it is the very nature of things. Certain circumstances, which correspond to stages, no doubt inevitable, in human development, give rise to forces which come between the ordinary man and his own conditions of existence, between the effort and the fruit of the effort, and which are, inherently, the monopoly of a few, owing to the fact that they cannot be shared among all; thenceforward these privileged beings, although they depend, in order to live, on the work of others, hold in their hands the fate of the very people on whom they depend, and equality is destroyed. This is what happens to begin with when the religious rites by which man thinks to win nature over to his side, having become too numerous and complicated to be known by all, finally become the secret and consequently the monopoly of a few priests; the priest then disposes, albeit only through a fiction, of all of nature's powers, and it is in their name that he exercises authority. Nothing essential is changed when this monopoly is no longer made up of rites but of scientific processes, and when those in possession of it are called scientists and technicians instead of priests.

Arms, too, give rise to a privilege from the day when, on the one hand, they are sufficiently powerful to render any defence by unarmed against armed men impossible, and, on the other, the handling of them has become sufficiently advanced, and consequently difficult, to require a long apprenticeship and continuous practice. For henceforth the workers are powerless to defend themselves, whereas the warriors, albeit incapable of production, can always take forcible possession of the fruits of other people's labour; the workers are thus at the mercy of the warriors, and not the other way about. The same thing applies to gold, and more generally to money, as soon as the division of labour is
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so far developed that no worker can live off his own products without having exchanged at any rate some of them for those of others; the organization of exchange then becomes necessarily the monopoly of a few specialists who, having money under their control, can both obtain for themselves, in order to live, the products of others’ labour, and at the same time deprive the producers of the indispensably necessary.

In short, wherever, in the struggle against men or against nature, efforts need to be multiplied and coordinated to be effective, co-ordination becomes the monopoly of a few leaders as soon as it reaches a certain degree of complexity, and execution’s primary law is then obedience; this is true both of the management of public affairs and for that of private undertakings. There may be other sources of privilege, but these are the chief ones; furthermore, except in the case of money, which appears at a given moment of history, all these factors enter into play under all the systems of oppression; what changes is the way in which they are distributed and combined, the degree of concentration of power, and also the more or less closed and consequently more or less mysterious character of each monopoly. Nevertheless, privileges, of themselves, are not sufficient to cause oppression. Inequality could be easily mitigated by the resistance of the weak and the feeling for justice of the strong; it would not lead to a still harsher form of necessity than that of natural needs themselves, were it not for the intervention of a further factor, namely, the struggle for power.

As Marx clearly understood in the case of capitalism, and as a few moralists have perceived in a more general way, power contains a sort of fatality which weighs as pitilessly on those who command as on those who obey; nay more, it is in so far as it enslaves the former that, through their agency, it presses down upon the latter. The struggle against nature entails certain inescapable necessities which nothing can turn aside, but these necessities contain within themselves their own limits; nature resists, but she does not defend herself, and where she alone is involved, each situation presents certain well-defined obstacles which arouse the best in human effort. It is altogether different as soon as relations between man and man take the place of direct contact between man and nature. The preservation of power is a vital necessity for the powerful, since it is their power which provides their sustenance; but they have to preserve it both against their rivals and against their inferiors, and these latter cannot do otherwise than try to rid themselves of dangerous masters; for, through a vicious circle, the master produces fear in the slave by the very fact that he is afraid of him, and vice versa; and the same is true as between rival powers.

What is more, the struggles that every man of power has to wage—first against those over whom he rules, secondly against his rivals—are inextricably bound up together and each is all the time rekindling the other. A power, whatever it may be, must always tend towards strengthening itself at home by means of successes gained abroad, for such successes provide it with more powerful means of coercion; besides, the struggle against its rivals rallies behind it its own slaves, who are under the illusion they have a personal interest in the result of the battle. But, in order to obtain from the slaves the obedience and sacrifices indispensable to victory, that power has to make itself more oppressive; to be in a position to exercise this oppression, it is still more imperatively compelled to turn outwards; and so on. We can follow out the same chain of events by starting from another link; show how a given social group, in order to be in a position to defend itself against the outside powers threatening to lay hands on it, must itself submit to an oppressive form of authority; how the power thus set up, in order to maintain its position, must stir up conflicts with rival powers; and so on, once again. Thus it is that the most fatal of vicious circles drags the whole society in the wake of its masters in a mad merry-go-round.

There are only two ways of breaking the circle, either by abolishing inequality, or else by setting up a stable power, a power such that there exists a balance between those who command and those who obey. It is this second solution that has been sought by all whom we call upholders of order, or at any rate all those among them who have been moved neither by servility nor by ambition; it was doubtless so with the Latin writers who praised “the immense majesty of the Roman peace,” with Dante, with the reactionary school at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Balzac, and is so today with sincere and thoughtful men of the Right. But this stability of power—objective of those who call themselves realists—shows itself to be a chimera, if one examines it closely, on the same grounds as the anarchists’ utopia.

Between man and matter, each action, whether successful or not, establishes a balance that can only be upset from outside; for matter is inert. A displaced stone accepts its new position; the wind consents to guide her destination the same ship which it would have sent off her course if sails and rudder had not been properly adjusted. But men are essentially active beings and have a faculty of self-determination which they can never renounce, even should they so desire, except on the day when, through death, they drop back into the state of inert matter; so that every victory won over men contains within itself the germ of a possible defeat, unless it goes as far as extermination. But ex-
termination abolishes power by abolishing its object. Thus there is, in the very essence of power, a fundamental contradiction that prevents it from ever existing in the true sense of the word; those who are called the masters, ceaselessly compelled to reinforce their power for fear of seeing it snatched away from them, are for ever seeking a dominion essentially impossible to attain; beautiful illustrations of this search are offered by the infernal torments in Greek mythology. It would be otherwise if one man could possess in himself a force superior to that of many other men put together; but such is never the case; the instruments of power—arms, gold, machines, magical or technical secrets—always exist independently of him who disposes of them, and can be taken up by others. Consequently all power is unstable.

Generally speaking, among human beings, since the relationships between rulers and ruled are never fully acceptable, they always constitute an irremediable disequilibrium which is continually aggravating itself; the same is true even in the sphere of private life, where love, for example, destroys all balance in the soul as soon as it seeks to dominate or to be dominated by its object. But here at any rate there is nothing external to prevent reason from returning and putting everything to rights by establishing liberty and equality; whereas social relationships, in so far as the very methods of labour and of warfare rule to equality, seem to cause madness to weigh down on mankind in the manner of an external fatality. For, owing to the fact that there is never power, but only a race for power, and that there is no term, no limit, no proportion set to this race, neither is there any limit or proportion set to the efforts that it exacts; those who give themselves up to it, compelled to do always better than their rivals, who in their turn strive to do better than they, must sacrifice not only the existence of the slaves, but their own also and that of their nearest and dearest; so it is that Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter lives again in the capitalists who, to maintain their privileges, acquiesce lightheartedly in wars that may rob them of their sons.

Thus the race for power enslaves everybody, strong and weak alike. Marx saw this clearly with reference to the capitalist system. Rosa Luxembourg used to inveigh against the aspect of “aimless merry-go-round” presented by the Marxist picture of capitalist accumulation, that picture in which consumption appears as a “necessary evil” to be reduced to the minimum, a mere means for keeping alive those who devote themselves, whether as leaders or as workers, to the supreme object, which is none other than the manufacture of capital equipment, that is to say of the means of production. And yet it is the profound absurdity of this picture which gives it its profound truth; a truth which extends singularly beyond the framework of the capitalist system. The only characteristic peculiar to this system is that the instruments of industrial production are at the same time the chief weapons in the race for power; but always the methods pursued in the race for power, whatever they may be, bring men under their subjection through the same frenzy and impose themselves on them as absolute ends. It is the reflection of this frenzy that lends an epic grandeur to works such as the Comédie Humaine, Shakespeare’s Histories, the chansons de geste, or the Iliad. The real subject of the Iliad is the sway exercised by war over the warriors, and, through them, over humanity in general; none of them knows why each sacrifices himself and all his family to a bloody and aimless war, and that is why, all through the poem, it is the gods who are credited with the mysterious influence which nullifies peace negotiations, continually revives hostilities, and brings together again the contending forces urged by a flash of good sense to abandon the struggle.

Thus in this ancient and wonderful poem there already appears the essential evil besetting humanity, the substitution of means for ends. At times war occupies the forefront, at other times the search for wealth, at other times production; but the evil remains the same. The common run of moralists complain that man is moved by his private interest: would to heaven it were so! Private interest is a self-centered principle of action, but at the same time restricted, reasonable and incapable of giving rise to unlimited evils. Whereas, on the other hand, the law of all activities governing social life, except in the case of primitive communities, is that here each one sacrifices human life—in himself and in others—to things which are only means to a better way of living. This sacrifice takes on various forms, but it all comes back to the question of power. Power, by definition, is only a means; or to put it better, to possess a power is simply to possess means of action which exceed the very limited force that a single individual has at his disposal. But power-seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends. It is this reversal of the relationship between means and end, it is this fundamental folly that accounts for all that is senseless and bloody right through history. Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men—oppressors and oppressed alike—the playing of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels.

Thus it is things, not men, that prescribe the limits
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and laws governing this giddy race for power. Men's desires are powerless to control it. The masters may well dream of moderation, but they are prohibited from practising this virtue, on pain of defeat, except to a very slight extent; so that, apart from a few almost miraculous exceptions, such as Marcus Aurelius, they quickly become incapable even of conceiving it. As for the oppressed, their permanent revolt, which is always simmering, though it only breaks out now and then, can operate in such a way as to aggravate the evil as well as to restrict it; and on the whole it rather constitutes an aggravating factor in that it forces the masters to make their power weigh ever more heavily for fear of losing it.

From time to time the oppressed manage to drive out one team of oppressors and to replace it by another, and sometimes even to change the form of oppression; but as for abolishing oppression itself, that would first mean abolishing the sources of it, abolishing all the monoplies, the magical and technical secrets that give a hold over nature, armaments, money, co-ordination of labour. Even if the oppressed were sufficiently conscious to make up their minds to do so, they could not succeed. It would be condemning themselves to immediate enslavement by the social groupings that had not carried out the same change; and even were this danger to be miraculously averted, it would be condemning themselves to death, for, once men have forgotten the methods of primitive production and have transformed the natural environment into which these fitted, they cannot recover immediate contact with nature.

It follows that, in spite of so many vague desires to put an end to madness and oppression, the concentration of power and the aggravation of its tyrannical character would know no bounds were these not by good fortune found in the nature of things. It behooves us to determine roughly what these bounds can be; and for this purpose we must keep in mind the fact that, if oppression is a necessity of social life, this necessity has nothing providential about it. It is not because it becomes detrimental to production that oppression can come to an end; the "revolt of the productive forces," so naïvely invoked by Trotsky as a factor in history, is a pure fiction. We should be mistaken likewise in assuming that oppression ceases to be ineluctable as soon as the productive forces have been sufficiently developed to ensure welfare and leisure for all. Aristotle admitted that there would no longer be anything to stand in the way of the abolition of slavery if it were possible to have the indispensable jobs done by "mechanical slaves," and when Marx attempted to forecast the future of the human species, all he did was to take up this idea and develop it. It would be true if men were guided by considerations of welfare; but from the days of the Iliad to our own times, the senseless demands made by the struggle for power have taken away even the leisure for thinking about welfare. The raising of the output of human effort will remain powerless to lighten the load of this effort as long as the social structure implies the reversal of the relationship between means and ends, in other words, as long as the methods of labour and of warfare give to a few men a discretionary power over the masses; for the fatigues and privations that have become unnecessary in the struggle against nature will be absorbed by the war carried on between men for the defence or acquisition of privileges. Once society is divided up into men who command and men who execute, the whole of social life is governed by the struggle for power, and the struggle for subsistence only enters in as one factor, indispensible to be sure, of the former.

The Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production, certainly remains the only sound basis for any historical investigation; only these relations must be considered first of all in terms of the problem of power, the means of subsistence forming simply one of the data of this problem. This order seems absurd, but it merely reflects the essential absurdity lying at the very heart of social life. A scientific study of history would thus be a study of the actions and reactions which are perpetually arising between the organization of power and the methods of production; for although power depends on the material conditions of life, it never ceases to transform these conditions themselves. Such a study goes very far beyond our possibilities at the moment; but before grasping with the infinite complexity of the facts, it is useful to make an abstract diagram of this interplay of actions and reactions, rather in the same way as astronomers have had to invent an imaginary celestial sphere so as to find their way about among the movements and positions of the stars.

We must try first of all to draw up a list of the inevitable necessities which limit all species of power. In the first place, any sort of power relies upon instruments which have in each situation a given scope. Thus you do not command in the same way, by means of soldiers armed with bows and arrows, spears and swords as you do by means of aeroplanes and incendiary bombs; the power of gold depends on the role played by exchanges in economic life; that of technical secrets is measured by the difference between what you can accomplish with their aid and what you can accomplish without them; and so on. As a matter of
fact, one must always include in this balance-sheet the subterfuges by which the powerful obtain through persuasion what they are totally unable to obtain by force, either by placing the oppressed in a situation such that they have or think they have an immediate interest in doing what is asked of them, or by inspiring them with a fanaticism calculated to make them accept any and every sacrifice. Secondly, since the power that a human being really exercises extends only to what is effectively under his control, power is always running up against the actual limits of the controlling faculty, and these are extremely narrow. For no single mind can encompass a whole mass of ideas at once; no man can be in several places at once; and for master and slave alike there are never more than twenty-four hours in a day. Collaboration apparently constitutes a remedy for this drawback; but as it is never absolutely free from rivalry, it gives rise to infinite complications. The faculties of examining, comparing, weighing, deciding, combining are essentially individual, and consequently the same thing applies also to power, whose exercise is inseparable from these faculties. Collective power is a fiction, at any rate in final analysis. As for the number of interests that can come under the control of one single man, that depends to a very large extent on individual factors such as breadth and quickness of intelligence, capacity for work, firmness of character; but it also depends on the objective conditions of the control exercised, more or less rapid methods of transport and communication, simplicity or otherwise of the machinery of power. Lastly, the exercise of any form of power is subject to the existence of a surplus in the production of commodities, and a sufficiently large surplus so that all those engaged, whether as masters or as slaves, in the struggle for power, may be able to live. Obviously, the extent of such surplus depends on the methods of production, and consequently also on the social organization. Here, therefore, are three factors that enable one to conceive political and social power as constituting at each moment something analogous to a measurable force. However in order to complete the picture, one must bear in mind that the men who find themselves in relationship, whether as masters or as slaves, with the phenomenon of power are unconscious of this analogy. The powerful, be they priests, military leaders, kings or capitalists, always believe that they command by divine right; and those who are under them feel themselves crushed by a power which seems to them either divine or diabolical, but in any case supernatural. Every oppressive society is cemented by this religion of power, which falsifies all social relations by enabling the powerful to command over and above what they are able to impose; it is only otherwise in times of popular agitation, times when, on the contrary, all—rebellious slaves and threatened masters alike—forget how heavy and how solid the chains of oppression are.

In general, one can only regard the world in which we live as subject to laws if one admits that every phenomenon in it is limited; and it is the same for the phenomenon of power, as Plato had understood. If we want to consider power as a conceivable phenomenon, we must think that it can extend the foundations on which it rests up to a certain point only, after which it comes up, as it were, against an impassable wall. But even so it is not in a position to stop; the spur of competition forces it to go ever farther and farther, that is to say to go beyond the limits within which it can be effectively exercised. It extends beyond what it is able to control; it commands over and above what it can impose; it spends in excess of its own resources. Such is the internal contradiction which every oppressive system carries within itself like a seed of death; it is made up of the opposition between the necessarily limited character of the material bases of power and the necessarily unlimited character of the race for power considered as relationship between men.

Generally speaking, the sudden reversal of the relationship between forces which is what we usually understand by the term "revolution" is not only a phenomenon unknown in history, but furthermore, if we examine it closely, something literally inconceivable, for it would be a victory of weakness over force, the equivalent of a balance whose lighter scale were to go down. What history offers us is slow transformations of regimes, in which the bloody events to which we give the name "revolutions" play a very secondary role, and from which they may even be absent.

We must pose once again the fundamental problem, namely, what constitutes the bond which seems hitherto to have united social oppressions in the relations between man and nature? If one considers human development as a whole up to our own time, if above all, one contrasts primitive tribes, organized practically without inequality, with our present-day civilization, it seems as if man cannot manage to lighten the yoke imposed by natural necessities without an equal increase in the weight of that imposed by social oppression, as though by the play of a mysterious equilibrium. And even, what is stranger still, it would seem that if, in fact, the human collectivity has to a large extent freed itself from the crushing burden which the gigantic forces of nature place on frail humanity, it has, on the other hand, taken in some sort nature's place to the point of crushing the individual in a similar manner.
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...Thus it is that man escapes to a certain extent from the caprices of blind nature only by handing himself over to the no less blind caprices of the struggle for power. This is never truer than when man reaches—as in our case—a technical development sufficiently advanced to give him the mastery over the forces of nature; for, in order that this may be so, cooperation has to take place on such a vast scale that the leaders find they have to deal with a mass of affairs which lie utterly beyond their capacity to control. As a result, humanity finds itself as much the plaything of the forces of nature, in the new form that technical progress has given them, as it ever was in primitive times; we have had, are having, and will continue to have bitter experience of this. As for attempts to preserve technique while shaking off oppression, they at once provoke such laziness and such confusion that those who have engaged in them are more often than not obliged to place themselves again almost immediately under the yoke; the experiment was tried out on a small scale in the producers' co-operatives, on a vast scale at the time of the Russian Revolution. It would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition.

Theoretical Picture of a Free Society

And yet nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty. Never, whatever may happen, can he accept servitude; for he is a thinking creature. He has never ceased to dream of a boundless liberty, whether as a past state of happiness of which a punishment has deprived him, or as a future state of happiness that is due to him by reason of a sort of pact with some mysterious providence. The communism imagined by Marx is the most recent form this dream has taken. This dream has always remained vain, as is the case with all dreams, or, if it has been able to bring consolation, this has only been in the form of an opium; the time has come to give up dreaming of liberty, and to make up one's mind to conceive it.

Perfect liberty is what we must try to represent clearly to ourselves, not in the hope of attaining it, but in the hope of attaining a less imperfect liberty than is our present condition; for the better can be conceived only by reference to the perfect. One can only steer towards an ideal. The ideal is just as unattainable as the dream, but differs from the dream in that it concerns reality; it enables one, as a mathematical limit, to grade situations, whether real or realizable, in an order of value from least to greatest. Perfect liberty cannot be conceived as consisting merely in the disappearance of that necessity whose pressure weighs continually upon us; as long as man goes on existing, that is to say as long as he continues to constitute an infinitesimal fraction of this pitiless universe, the pressure exerted by necessity will never be relaxed for one single moment. ... If one were to understand by liberty the mere absence of all necessity, the word would be emptied of all concrete meaning; but it would not then represent for us that which, when we are deprived of it, takes away the value from life.

One can understand by liberty something other than the possibility of obtaining without effort what is pleasurable. There exists a very different conception of liberty, an heroic conception which is that of common wisdom. True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end. It matters little whether the actions in themselves are easy or painful, or even whether they are crowned with success; pain and failure can make a man unhappy, but cannot humiliate him as long as it is he himself who disposes of his own capacity for action. And ordering one's own actions does not signify in any way acting arbitrarily; arbitrary actions do not proceed from any exercise of judgment, and cannot properly speaking be called free. Every judgment bears upon an objective set of circumstances, and consequently upon a warp and woof of necessities. Living man can on no account cease to be hemmed in on all sides by an absolutely inflexible necessity; but since he is a thinking creature, he can choose between either blindly submitting to the spur with which necessity pricks him on from outside, or else adapting himself to the inner representation of it that he forms in his own mind; and it is in this that the contrast between servitude and liberty lies. ...

Man would then have his fate constantly in his own hands; at each moment he would forge the conditions of his own existence by an act of mind. Mere desire, it is true, would lead him nowhere; he would receive nothing gratuitously; and even the possibilities of effective effort would for him be strictly limited. But the very fact of not being able to obtain anything without having brought into action, in order to acquire it, all the powers of mind and body would enable man to tear himself away for good from the blind grip of the passions. A clear view of what is possible and what impossible, what is easy and what difficult, of the labours that separate the project from its accomplishment—this alone does away with insatiable desires and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy. Besides,
the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and of falsity. It is not possible to conceive of a nobler destiny for man than that which brings him directly to grips with naked necessity, without his being able to expect anything except through his own exertions, and such that his life is a continual creation of himself by himself. Man is a limited being to whom it is not given to be, as in the case of the God of the theologians, the direct author of his own existence; but he would possess the human equivalent of that divine power if the material conditions that enable him to exist were exclusively the work of his mind directing the effort of his muscles. This would be true liberty.

Such liberty is only an ideal, and cannot be found in reality any more than a perfectly straight line can be drawn with a pencil. But it will be useful to conceive this ideal if we can discern at the same time what it is that separates us from it, and what are the circumstances that can cause us to move away from it or approach nearer to it. The first obstacle which appears is formed by the complexity and size of this world with which we have to deal: these infinitely outstrip our mental range. The difficulties of real life do not constitute problems made to our scale; they are like problems possessing an innumerable quantity of data, for matter is doubly indefinite, from the point of view of extent and from that of divisibility. That is why it is impossible for a human mind to take into account all the factors on which the success of what seems to be the simplest action depends; any given situation whatever leaves the door open to innumerable chance possibilities, and things escape our mind as water does between the fingers of our cupped hands. Hence it would seem that the mind is only able to exercise itself upon unreal combinations of signs, and that action must be reduced to the blindest form of groping. But, in fact, this is not so. It is true that we can never act with absolute certainty; but that does not matter so much as one might suppose. We can easily accept the fact that the results of our actions are dependent on accidents outside our control; what we must at all costs preserve from chance are our actions themselves, and that in such a way as to place them under the control of the mind. . . . The world is too full of situations whose complexity is beyond us for instinct, routine, trial and error, improvising ever to be able to cease playing a role in our labours; all man can do is to restrict this role more and more, thanks to scientific and technical progress. What matters is that this role should be subordinate and should not prevent method from constituting the very soul of work. It is also necessary that it should appear as provisional, and that routine and trial and error should always be regarded not as principles of action, but as make-shifts for the purpose of filling up the gaps in methodical conception; in this scientific hypotheses are a powerful aid by making us conceive half-understood phenomena as governed by laws comparable to those which determine the most clearly understood phenomena. And even in cases where we know nothing at all, we can still assume that similar laws are applicable; this is sufficient to eliminate, in default of ignorance, the feeling of mystery, and to make us understand that we live in a world in which man has only himself to look to for miracles.

There is, however, one source of mystery that we cannot eliminate, and which is none other than our own body. The extreme complexity of vital phenomena can perhaps be progressively unravelled, at any rate to a certain extent, but the immediate relationship linking our thoughts to our movements will always remain wrapped in impenetrable obscurity. . . . We can thus understand how primitive men, in spite of their very great dexterity in accomplishing all they have to do in order to continue to exist, visualize the relationship between man and the world under the aspect not of work but of magic. . . . These beliefs survive in the form of superstitions, and, contrary to what we like to think, no man is completely free from them; but their spell loses its potency in proportion as, in the struggle against nature, the living body assumes a secondary importance and passive instruments a primary importance. Such is the case when instruments, ceasing to be fashioned according to the structure of the human organism, force the latter, on the contrary, to adapt its movements to their own shape. Thenceforward there is no longer any correspondence between the motions to be carried out and the passions; the mind has to get away from desire and fear and apply itself solely to establishing an exact relationship between the movements imparted to the instruments and the objective aimed at. The docility of the body in such a case is a kind of miracle, but a miracle which the mind may ignore; the body, rendered as it were fluid through habit, to use Hegel’s beautiful expression, simply causes the movements conceived in the mind to pass into the instruments. The attention is directed exclusively to the combinations formed by the movements of inert matter, and the idea of necessity appears in its purity, without any admixture of magic. For example, on dry land and borne along by the desires and fears that move his legs for him, man often finds that he has passed from one place to another without being aware of it, on the sea, on the other hand, as desires and fears have no hold over the boat, one has continually to use craft and strategy, set sails and rudder, transmute the thrust of the wind by means of a series of devices which
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can only be the work of a clear intelligence. You cannot entirely reduce the human body to this docile intermediary role between mind and instrument, but you can reduce it more and more to that role; this is what every technical advance helps to bring about.

But, unfortunately, even if you did manage strictly and in full detail to subject all forms of work without exception to methodical thought, a new obstacle to liberty would immediately arise on account of the profound difference in kind which separates theoretical speculation from action. In reality, there is nothing in common between the solution of a problem and the carrying out of an even perfectly methodical piece of work, between the sequence of ideas and the sequence of movements. The man who tackles a difficulty of a theoretical order proceeds by moving from what is simple to what is complex, from what is clear to what is obscure; the movements of the manual worker, on the other hand, are not some of them clearer and simpler than others, it is merely that those which come before are the condition of those which come after. . . . Hence one is brought face to face with a paradoxical situation; namely, that there is method in the motions of work, but none in the mind of the worker. It would seem as though the method had transferred its abode from the mind into the matter. Automatic machines present the most striking image of this. From the moment when the mind which has worked out a method of action has no need to take part in the job of execution, this can be handed over to pieces of metal just as well as and better than to living members; and one is thus presented with the strange spectacle of machines in which the method has become so perfectly crystallized in metal that it seems as though it is they which do the thinking, and it is the men who serve them who are reduced to the condition of automata. . . .

But there is still another factor making for servitude; it is, in the case of each man, the existence of other men. And indeed, when we look into it more closely, it is strictly speaking, the only factor; man alone can enslave man. Even primitive men would not be the slaves of nature if they did not people her with imaginary beings comparable to man, whose wills are, furthermore, interpreted by men. In this case, as in all the others, it is the outside world that is the source of power; but if behind the infinite forces of nature there did not lie, whether as a result of fiction or in reality, divine or human wills, nature could break man, but she could not humiliate him. Matter can give the lie to expectations and ruin efforts, it remains none the less inert, made to be understood and handled from the outside; but the human mind can never be understood or handled from the outside. To the extent to which a man’s fate is dependent on other men, his own life escapes not only out of his hands, but also out of the control of his intelligence; judgment and resolution no longer have anything to which to apply themselves; instead of contriving and acting, one has to stoop to pleading or threatening; and the soul is plunged into bottomless abysses of desire and fear, for there are no bounds to the satisfactions and sufferings that a man can receive at the hands of other men. This degrading dependence is not the characteristic of the oppressed only; it is for the same reason, though in different ways, that of both the oppressed and the powerful. As the man of power lives only by his slaves, the existence of an inexcusable world escapes him almost entirely; his orders seem to him to contain within themselves some mysterious efficacy; he is never capable, strictly speaking, of willing, but is a prey to desires to which the clear perception of necessity never comes to assign any limit. Since he cannot conceive of any other mode of action than that of commanding, when he happens, as he inevitably does, to issue commands in vain, he passes all of a sudden from the feeling of absolute power to that of utter impotence, as often happens in dreams; and his fears are then all the more overwhelming in that he feels himself continually threatened by his rivals. As for the slaves, they are continually striving with material elements; only their lot does not depend on these material elements which they handle, but on masters whose whims are unaccountable and inatable.

But it would still be a small matter to be dependent on other beings who, although strangers, are at any rate real and whom one can, if not penetrate, at least see, hear, divine by analogy with oneself. Actually, in all oppressive societies, any man, whatever his rank may be, is dependent not only on those above or below him, but above all on the very play of collective life—a blind play which alone determines the social hierarchies; and it does not matter much in this respect whether power allows its essentially collective origin to appear or else seems to reside in certain specific individuals after the manner of the domitory virtue in opium. Now, if there is one thing in the world which is completely abstract, wholly mysterious, inaccessible to the senses and to the mind, it is the collectivity; the individual who is a member of it cannot, it would seem, reach up to or lay hold of it by any artifice, bring his weight to bear on it by the use of any lever, with respect to it he feels himself to be something infinitely small. If an individual’s caprices seem arbitrary to everybody else, the shocks produced by collective life seem to be so to the second power. Thus between man and this universe which is assigned to him by destiny as the sole matter of his thoughts and actions, the relation oppression—servitude permanently sets the impenetrable screen of human arbitrariness. Why be surprised, then,
if instead of ideas one encounters little but opinions, instead of action a blind agitation? One could only visualize the possibility of any progress in the true sense of the word, that is to say progress in the order of human values, if one could conceive as an ideal limit a society which armed man against the world without separating him from it.

Man is not made to be the plaything of the blind collectivities that he forms with his fellows, any more than he is made to be the plaything of a blind nature; but in order to cease being delivered over to society as passively as a drop of water is to the sea, he would have to be able both to understand and to act upon it. In all spheres, it is true, collective strength infinitely surpasses individual strength; thus you can no more easily conceive of an individual managing even a portion of the collective life than you can of a line extending itself by the addition of a point. Such, at any rate, is the appearance; but in reality there is one exception and one only, namely, the sphere of the mind. In the case of the mind, the relation is reversed; here the individual surpasses the collectivity to the same extent as something surpasses nothing, for thought only takes shape in a mind that is alone face to face with itself; collectivities do not think. It is true that mind by no means constitutes a force by itself. Archimedes was killed, so it is said, by a drunken soldier; and if he had been made to turn a millstone under the lash of a slave-overseer, he would have turned it in exactly the same manner as the most dull-witted man. To the extent to which the mind soars above the social mêlée, it can judge, but it cannot transform. All forms of force are material; the expression "spiritual force" is essentially contradictory; mind can only be a force to the extent to which it is materially indispensable. To express the same idea under another aspect, man has nothing essentially individual about him, nothing which is absolutely his own, apart from the faculty of thinking; and this society on which he is in close dependence every minute of his existence depends in its turn a little on him from the moment his thinking is necessary to it. For all the rest can be imposed from outside by force, including bodily movements, but nothing in the world can compel a man to exercise his powers of thought, nor take away from him the control over his own mind. If you require a slave to think, the lash had better be put away; otherwise you will run very little chance of obtaining high-quality results. Thus, if we wish to form in a purely theoretical way, the conception of a society in which collective life would be subject to men as individuals instead of subjecting them to itself, we must visualize a form of material existence wherein only efforts exclusively directed by a clear intelligence would take place, which would imply that each worker himself had to control, without referring to any external rule, not only the adaptation of his efforts to the piece of work to be produced, but also their co-ordination with the efforts of all the other members of the collectivity. The technique would have to be such as to make continual use of methodical thought; the analogy between the techniques employed in the various tasks would have to be sufficiently close, and technical education sufficiently widespread, to enable each worker to form a clear idea of all the specialized procedures; co-ordination would have to be arranged in sufficiently simple a manner to enable each one continually to have a precise knowledge of it, as concerns both co-operation between workers and exchange of products; collectivities would never be sufficiently vast to pass outside the range of a human mind; community of interests would be sufficiently patent to abolish competitive attitudes; and as each individual would be in a position to exercise control over the collective life as a whole, the latter would always be in accordance with the general will. Privileges founded upon the exchange of products, secrets of production or co-ordination of labour would automatically be done away with. The function of co-ordinating would no longer imply power, since a continual check exercised by each individual would render any arbitrary decision impossible. Generally speaking, men's dependence with regard to one another would no longer imply that their fate rested in the hands of arbitrary factors, and would cease to introduce into human life any mysterious element whatever, since each would be in a position to verify the activities of all the rest by using his own reason. There is but one single and identical reason for all men; they only become estranged from and impenetrable to each other when they depart from it; thus a society in which the whole of material existence had as its necessary and sufficient condition that each individual should exercise his reason could be absolutely clearly understood by each individual mind. As for the stimulus necessary to overcome fatigue, sufferings and dangers, each would find it in the desire to win the esteem of his fellows, but even more so in himself; in the case of creative work by the mind, outward constraint, having become useless and harmful, is replaced by a sort of inward constraint; the sight of the unfinished task attracts the free man as powerfully as the overseer's whip stimulates the slave. Such a society alone would be a society of men free, equal and brothers. Men would, it is true, be bound by collective ties, but exclusively in their capacity as men; they would never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in every work fellow another self occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins.
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Thus we should possess, over and above liberty, a still more precious good; for if nothing is more odious than the humiliation and degradation of man by man, nothing is so beautiful or so sweet as friendship.

The above picture, considered by itself, is, if possible, still farther removed from the actual conditions of human existence than is the fiction of a Golden Age. But, unlike that fiction, it is able to serve, by way of an ideal, as a standard for the analysis and evaluation of actual social patterns. The picture of a completely oppressive social life where every individual is subject to the operation of a blind mechanism was also purely theoretical; an analysis which situated a society with respect to these two pictures would already come much closer to reality, while still remaining very abstract. There thus emerges a new method of social analysis which is not that of Marx, although it starts, as Marx wanted, from the relationships of production; but whereas Marx, whose conception is in any case not very precise on this point, seems to have wanted to classify the modes of production in terms of output, these would be analysed in terms of the relationships between thought and action. It goes without saying that such a point of view in no way implies that humanity has evolved, in the course of history, from the least conscious to the most conscious forms of production; the idea of progress is indispensable for whoever seeks to design the future in advance, but it can only lead the mind astray when it is the past that is being studied. We must then replace it by the idea of a scale of values conceived outside time; but it is not possible, either, to arrange the various social patterns in serial order according to such a scale. What one can do is to refer to this scale such and such an aspect of social life, taken at a given period.

It is clear enough that one kind of work differs substantially from another by reason of something which has nothing to do with welfare, or leisure, or security, and yet which claims each man’s devotion; a fisherman battling against wind and waves in his little boat, although he suffers from cold, fatigue, lack of leisure and even of sleep, danger and a primitive level of existence, has a more enviable lot than the manual worker on a production-line, who is nevertheless better off as regards nearly all these matters. That is because his work resembles far more the work of a free man, despite the fact that routine and blind improvisation sometimes play a fairly large part in it. The craftsman of the Middle Ages also occupies, from this point of view, a fairly honourable position, although the “tricks of the trade” which play so large a part in all work carried out by hand are to a great extent something blind; as for the fully skilled worker, trained in modern technical methods, he perhaps resembles most closely the perfect workman.

Similar differences are found in collective action; a team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments the image of a free community appears almost in its purity. As for the relationship between the nature of the work and the condition of the worker, that, too, is clearly apparent, as soon as one takes a look at history or at our present-day society; even the slaves of antiquity were treated with consideration when they were employed as physicians or as pedagogues. However, all these remarks are still concerned only with details. A method enabling one to reach general views concerning the various modes of social organization in terms of the ideas of servitude and of liberty would be more valuable.

It would first of all be necessary to draw up something like a map of social life, a map indicating the spots where it is indispensable that thought should be exercised, and consequently, if one may so express it, the individual’s zones of influence over society. It is possible to distinguish three ways in which thought can play a part in social life; it can formulate purely theoretical speculations, the results of which will afterwards be applied by technicians; it can be exercised in execution; it can be exercised in command and management. In all these cases, it is only a question of a partial and, as it were, maimed exercise of thought, since the mind is never able fully to embrace its object; but it is enough to ensure that those who are obliged to think when they are discharging their social function preserve the human aspect better than others. This is true not only for the oppressed, but also for all degrees of the social scale. In a society founded on oppression, it is not only the weak but also the most powerful who are bondslaves to the blind demands of collective life, and in each case heart and mind suffer a diminution, though in different ways. If we compare two oppressive social strata such as, for example, the citizens of Athens and the Soviet bureaucracy, we find a distance between them at least as great as that between one of our skilled workmen and a Greek slave. As for the conditions under which thought plays a greater or lesser part in the exercise of power, it would be easy to tabulate them according to the degree of complexity and range of business, the general nature of the difficulties to be
solved and the allocation of functions. Thus the members of an oppressive society are not only distinguished according to the higher or lower position in the social mechanism to which they cling, but also by the more conscious or more passive character of their relationship with it, and this second distinction—the more important of the two—has no direct connection with the first. As for the influence that men charged with social functions subject to the control of their own intelligence can exercise on the society of which they form a part, that depends, of course, on the nature and importance of these functions; it would be very interesting, but also very difficult, to carry out a detailed analysis with regard to this point.

Another very important factor in the relations between social oppression and individuals arises from the more or less extensive powers of control that can be exercised over the various functions essentially concerned in co-ordinating by men who are not themselves invested with such powers; it is obvious that the more these functions cannot be controlled, the more crushing collective life becomes for the general body of individuals. Finally, one must bear in mind the nature of the ties which keep the individual in material dependence upon the society surrounding him; at times these ties are looser, at other times tighter, and considerable differences may be found at this point, according to whether a man is more or less forced, at every moment of his existence, to address himself to others in order to have the wherewithal to live, the wherewithal to produce, and to protect himself from outside danger. For example, a workman who has a large enough garden to supply himself with vegetables is more independent than those of his comrades who have to get all their food from the shopkeepers; an artisan who has his own tools is more independent than a factory worker whose hands become useless as soon as it pleases the boss to stop him from working his machine. As for protection against danger, the individual's position in this respect depends on the method of warfare practised by the society in which he finds himself; where fighting is the monopoly of those belonging to a certain social stratum, the security of everybody else depends on these privileged persons; where the destructive power of arms and the collective nature of warfare give the central government the monopoly of military force, that government disposes of the security of the citizens as it likes. To sum up, the least evil society is that in which the general run of men are most often obliged to think while acting, have the most opportunities for exercising control over collective life as a whole, and enjoy the greatest amount of independence. Furthermore, the necessary conditions for diminishing the oppressive weight of the social mechanism run counter to each other as soon as certain limits are overstepped; thus the thing to do is not to proceed forward as far as possible in a specific direction, but, what is much more difficult, to discover a certain optimum balance.

The purely negative idea of a lessening of social oppression cannot by itself provide an objective for people of good will. It is indispensable to form at any rate a vague mental picture of the sort of civilization one wishes humanity to reach; and it matters little if this mental picture is derived more from mere reverence than from real thought. If the foregoing analyses are correct, the most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labour constituted the supreme value. It is not a question of anything comparable to the religion of production which reigned in America during the period of prosperity, and has reigned in Russia since the Five Year Plan; for the true object of that religion is the product of work and not the worker, material objects and not man. It is not in relation to what it produces that manual labour must become the highest value, but in relation to the man who performs it; it must not be made the object of honours and rewards, but must constitute for each human being what he is most essentially in need of if his life is to take on of itself a meaning and a value in his own eyes... .

... Those who have so far maintained that applications are the goal of science meant to say that truth is not worth seeking and that success alone counts; but it could be understood differently; one can conceive of a science whose ultimate aim would be the perfecting of technique not by rendering it more powerful, but simply more conscious and more methodical. Besides, output might well increase in proportion with clear thinking; "seek ye first the kingdom of God... and all these things shall be added unto you." Such a science would be, in effect, a method for mastering nature, or a catalogue of concepts indispensable for attaining to such mastery, arranged according to an order that would make them palpably clear to the mind. Presumably Descartes conceived science after this fashion. As for the art of such a civilization, it would crystallize in its works the expression of that happy balance between mind and body, between man and the universe, which can exist in action only in the noblest forms of physical labour; moreover, even in the past, the purest works of art have always expressed the sentiment, or to speak perhaps with greater precision, the presentiment of such a balance. The essential aim of sport would be to give the human body that suppleness and, as Hegel says, that fluidity which renders it pervious to thought.
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and enables the latter to enter directly into contact with material objects. Social relations would be directly modelled upon the organizations of labour; men would group themselves in small working collectivities, where co-operation would be the sovereign law, and where each would be able to understand clearly and to verify the connection between the rules to which his life was subjected and the public interest. Moreover, every moment of existence would afford each the opportunity to understand and to feel how profoundly all men are one, since they all have to bring one same reason to bear on similar obstacles; and all human relations, from the most superficial to the very tenderest, would have about them something of that manly and brotherly feeling which forms the bond between workmates.

No doubt all this is purely utopian. But to give even a summary description of a state of things which would be better than what actually exists is always to build a utopia; yet nothing is more necessary to our life than such descriptions, provided it is always reason that is responsible for them. The whole of modern thought since the Renaissance is, moreover, impregnated with more or less vague aspirations towards such a utopian civilization; for some time it was even thought that this civilization was beginning to take shape, and that men were entering upon a period when Greek geometry would descend upon earth. Descartes certainly believed this, as also did some of his contemporaries. Furthermore, the idea of labour considered as a human value is doubtless the one and only spiritual conquest achieved by the human mind since the miracle of Greece; this was perhaps the only gap in the ideal of human life elaborated by Greece and left behind by her as an undying heritage. Bacon was the first to put forward this idea. For the ancient and heart-breaking curse contained in Genesis, which made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of men's servitude and abasement, he substituted in a flash of genius the veritable charter expressing the relations between man and the world: "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her." This simple pronouncement ought to form by itself the Bible of our times. It suffices to define true labour, the kind which forms free men, and that to the very extent to which it is an act of conscious submission to necessity. After Descartes, scientists progressively slipped into considering pure science as an end in itself; but the ideal of a life devoted to some free form of physical labour began, on the other hand, to be perceived by writers; and it even dominates the masterpiece of the poet usually regarded as the most aristocratic of all, namely, Goethe. Faust, a symbol of the human soul in its untried pursuit of the good, abandons with disgust the abstract search for truth, which has become in his eyes an empty and barren occupation; love merely leads him to destroy the loved one; political and military power reveals itself as nothing but a game of appearances; the meeting with beauty fulfils his dreams, but only for the space of a second; his position as industrial leader gives him a power which he believes to be substantial, but which nevertheless delivers him up to the tyranny of the passions. Finally, he longs to be stripped of his magic power, which can be regarded as the symbol of all forms of power, and he exclaims: "If I could stand before thee, Nature, simply as a man, then it would be worth while being a human creature"; and he ends by having, at the moment of death, a foretaste of the most complete happiness, by representing to himself a life spent freely among a free people and entirely taken up by hard and dangerous physical labour, which would, however, be carried out in the midst of brotherly co-operation. It would be easy to cite yet other famous names, amongst them Rousseau, Shelley and, above all, Tolstoy, who developed this theme throughout the whole of his work in matchless accents. As for the working-class movement, every time it has managed to escape from demagogy, it is on the dignity of labour that it has based the workers' demands. Proudhon dared to write: "The genius of the humblest artisan is as much superior to the materials with which he works as is the mind of a Newton to the lifeless spheres whose distances, masses and revolutions he calculates." Marx, whose work contains a good many contradictions, set down as man's essential characteristic, as opposed to the animals, the fact that he produces the conditions of his own existence and thus himself indirectly produces himself. The revolutionary syndicalists, who place at the core of the social problem the dignity of the producer as such, are linked up with the same current of ideas. On the whole, we may feel proud to belong to a civilization which has brought with it the presage of a new ideal.