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Art and Revolution

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In the twentieth century, Marxist theories of art turned upon a number of important themes – totality, autonomy, mimesis – recorded in the historical literature and frequently debated even now. Mutually entangled, these concepts produce familiar oppositions: Theodor Adorno's modernism against Walter Benjamin's avant-gardism, György Lukács's realism against Bertolt Brecht's didactic theater. We may, however, reorganize our account of these critical concepts and the art and literary movements they take as their objects through a study of a less shopworn concept the above-mentioned terms imply: participation. Avant-garde and modern art movements conceived of themselves as emancipatory, in part, by imagining themselves enablers of mass cultural participation, aspiring to a totalizing abolition of the barriers of skill that prevented proletarians from participating in art as makers or writers and the barriers of access that prevented them from participating as viewers or readers. Frequently, these movements aimed to abolish altogether the division between cultural producers and cultural consumers. The most prominent twentieth-century Marxist critics of art, Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács in particular, developed their ideas in large part by reflecting critically upon these movements and the potentials and problems that such aspirations introduced. Though Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism are particularly important to such discussions, no single artistic figure looms as large here as Bertolt Brecht. A sophisticated Marxist theorist in his own right, Brecht becomes for many of these writers a metonym for the avant-garde as such, and Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács often articulate their differences from each other by way of Brecht. Participation looms large in these debates in part because of its importance for Brecht's 'epic theater', designed to recruit the participation of audiences, if not as actors or writers then as critical interlocutors.

MARXISM AND SELF-ACTIVITY

From the earliest moments of their association, the communist theory Karl Marx develops independently and with Friedrich Engels distinguishes itself from nineteenth-century socialism and communism by its emphasis on 'self-activity' (Marx and Engels, 1976). As the declaration of the First International described it, '[t]he emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself' (Marx and Engels, 1989: 262). As opposed to the didactic and moral socialisms of their day, Marx and Engels saw the working class as capable of self-organization and self-education, developing the tactics and strategies necessary for the revolutionary overthrow of society without the intervention of extrinsic authorities or leaders. In this view, history is the unfolding of self-organized class struggle, and militant intellectuals such as Marx and Engels simply reflect, catalyze, and disseminate forms of awareness and consciousness already immanent within those struggles. Marx illuminates his anti-didactic theory of self-activity and self-organization in an early letter:

> [We] do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it *has to* acquire, even if it does not want to. (Marx, 1992: 208–9)

Though Marx never elaborates this theory of self-activity with regard to art or literature, later writers will. If the masses are capable of creative, rational activity, independent of whatever moral, political, or aesthetic education they receive from life experience, then an art and literature should take account of this, looking with skepticism on the barriers that prevent mass participation in the enjoyment or production of art. Artists might, in fact, address themselves positively toward these mass creative capacities and negatively toward the institutions and other social forces that prevent their expression.

Perhaps the most lucid early account of these social and aesthetic energies can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin. Among the Frankfurt School accounts most sympathetic to the avant-garde movements that adopted these positions, Benjamin's essays of the 1930s, reflecting in part on the Soviet avant-gardes of the 1920s, make explicit the connection between emancipatory politics and participation. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1935), Benjamin attaches the 'mass existence' of technically reproduced art, such as film, to the 'mass movements' of his time (Benjamin, 2008: 22). Whereas many of the writers – Guy Debord, Theodor Adorno – discussed in the following pages will identify film and other mass media with passive consumption, Benjamin links mass reproduction to an appropriative and perhaps expropriative frenzy on the part of popular subjects: 'the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness [*Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit*] by assimilating it as a reproduction' (22). For Benjamin artworks are riven by two contradictory measures of value – on the one hand, a cult value, which attempts to remove artwork from circulation, and values it according to its distance from perception, and on the other, an exhibition value, in which that artwork is valued the more it is made available (25–6). Technologically reproducible artworks inaugurate an era in which exhibition value triumphs over cult value, introducing forms of art designed for mass rather than restricted audiences and produced by growing numbers of people. These new technologies are mass media in a number of senses: first of all, anybody might be the subject of such arts – 'any person today can lay claim to being filmed' – but also the growth of the press turns readers into writers through such things as 'letters

to the editor'. The result is an overcoming of the barriers of expertise that have heretofore excluded proletarians. The emancipatory character of these transformations is clear to Benjamin:

> Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic character … At any moment the reader is ready to become a writer. As an expert – which he has had to become in any case in a highly specialized work process, even if only in some minor capacity – the reader gains access to authorship. Work itself is given a voice. And the ability to describe a job in words now forms part of the expertise needed to carry it out. Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized higher education but on polytechnic education, and thus is common property. (34)

Benjamin thus sees the participatory overcoming of the aesthetic division of labor – the division between writers and their publics – occurring as a result of the technical division of labor within capitalist industry. This illuminates one of the complexities of the concept of participation, which may mean the overcoming of all barriers – in other words, a situation in which anyone can participate in any activity – or rather a reorganization of the relationships of parts to wholes and the absorption of individuals into a differentiated division of labor. The Latin derivation of the term is formed from the roots for 'part' and 'take' – as with the verb 'partake' – and thus concerns the relationship of parts to wholes. A part may partake or participate in the whole in a differentiated and unequal way.

Benjamin quotes this very passage in a later essay, 'The Author as Producer' (1934), concerned with similar questions. There, he argues that an emancipatory art practice must overcome the divisions between the arts and between various artistic labors. Writers such as himself must 'take up photography', Benjamin says:

> Technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress … [O]nly by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production – a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order – can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers opposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces they were set up to divide. The author as producer discovers – even as he discovers his solidarity with the proletariat – his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern him. (Benjamin, 1996: 775)

Though he is vague about the precise relationship between the division of artistic labor and the division of labor more generally, he identifies class struggle as the catalytic element of this overcoming, suggesting that the 'state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which' the boundaries between genres and forms break down, 'entering the growing, molten mass from which the new forms are cast' (776).

THE ANTINOMIES OF PARTICIPATION

For Benjamin, no single figure better emblematizes the new participatory aesthetic and the overcoming of artistic boundaries and the artistic division of labor than Brecht, whose collaborations with musicians such as Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler united music and literary language. Benjamin uses Brecht's term *Umfunktionierung* – usually translated in English as 'refunctioning' – to describe the recasting of the artistic division of labor. By uniting word and music, Brecht and Eisler's didactic short plays, such as *The Measures Taken*, 'effect[ed] the transformation … of a concert into a political meeting' and 'eliminate[d] the antithesis … between performers and listeners' (776). Brecht's theater was anti-illusionistic, first and foremost, opposed to the Aristotelian conventions of theater in which characters were primarily the objects of the audience's empathic feelings: 'epic theater … appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason' (Brecht, 1964: 37). Brechtian theater 'turns the spectator into an observer but arouses his capacity for action … forces him to take decisions'.

The chief instrument here is what Brecht called the alienation effect [*verfrumdungseffekt*], an anti-illusionistic practice in which the gap between character and actor was intensified. Defamiliarized, the objects and scenes presented force audiences to reflect on their meaning rather than accept them as mimesis of action. Unlike later formulations of a participatory art, in which meaning is entirely elaborated by the audience, the active role of the audience in epic theater sits in tension with the didactic character of the scenes, especially in the learning-plays [*Lehrstücke*] such as *The Measures Taken*, where the actions of characters are presented in the form of lectures or overlaid with such. The didactic and the participatory are brought together, in Brecht's plays, in the oft-repeated figure of the trial, implicitly placing audiences in the place of judge or jury and asking them to evaluate, rationally, the polemical material with which they are confronted.

Some of Brecht's critics, Adorno most forcefully, felt that the didactic character of his work essentially overrode the claims to audience participation, making the plays into a delivery vehicle for Bolshevik dogma with emancipatory trappings (Adorno, 2007: 182–3). If this critique is correct, then the participatory becomes a powerful mechanism of domination, recruiting viewers or readers in such a way that they feel themselves to have independently decided upon an outcome determined in advance. In Adorno's letters to his friend Benjamin, responding to 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', he 'doubts the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports and suggests that 'the laughter of the audience at the cinema is anything but good and revolutionary; instead it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism' (Jameson, 2007: 123). His letters express his wish 'to hold [Benjamin's] arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters'. Throughout his writings on art, Adorno uses the term participation in primarily a negative sense, to mean the subordination of the individual person or work of art to social or other forms of heteronomy.[1] For Adorno, the emancipatory character of the work of art is vouchsafed chiefly by its resistance to external forces. The social work it does is not through its direct participation in society but by its resistance to such participation:

> Art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. (Adorno, 1997: 225–6)

The mark of the authentic artwork is nonparticipation and negativity. If the work of art turns toward the viewer directly, attempting to provoke action or reflection, it risks either engaging in instrumental domination of its audience or subordinating itself to the evaluative schema that viewers bring to the work of art. At the same time, this autonomy can never be expressed as a simple positive feature of the work of art, lest the omnipresence of heteronomy be belied. Adorno proposes a dialectical account of autonomy and heteronomy: 'If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others' (237). It is precisely in this fraught space of heteronomy and autonomy that art's emancipatory value can be found, not through any instrumental effects, but as a kind of placeholder: '[o]nly what does not submit to that principle [heteronomy] acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value' (227).

Adorno's powerful defense of aesthetic autonomy amounts to a wholesale rejection of any attempt to overcome the boundaries that prevent mass proletarian participation in the

arts, as makers or as viewers. In the face of an 'all-powerful system of communication' artworks 'must rid themselves of any communicative means that would perhaps make them accessible to the public' (243). The rebarbative character of modern art – as protest against the instrumentalization of culture – vouchsafes forms of free aesthetic experience beyond the 'false needs of a degraded humanity', but any attempt to actually make these forms of experience available in a durable way destroys them. Artworks thus remain marked, ineluctably, 'by the guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labor' (227). The debate between Adorno, on the one hand, and Benjamin and Brecht, on the other, reveals not only two opposed concepts of artistic participation, but also two dangers inherent within twentieth-century art movements. Brechtian participation can become a vehicle for dogma and domination, disguised by a pseudo-democratic formalism. Adornian autonomy, though, is at best a stalling measure, defending the thin forms of freedom permitted to a small number of people within bourgeois society against a future catastrophe in which even these possibilities vanish. The position makes sense for an aesthetic philosophy 'crippled by resignation before reality', where 'praxis, delayed for the foreseeable future' offers little chance of reorganizing, in any emancipatory way, the social division of labor that is the basis of art's guilty autonomy (Adorno, 1981: 3). The differences between these positions in a certain sense derive from their optimism or pessimism about the possibilities for social revolution as well as the historical period in which they emerge. Written during the 1930s, before the extent of the Stalinist counter-revolution was evident, Benjamin's essays as well as Brecht's works assume that art and social revolution were in a mutually defining relationship and that revolution was still possible. Adorno's most prominent essays date from the post-war period, and look back on decades marked by Stalinist and fascist counter-revolution, on the one hand, and the triumph of post-war US-dominated capitalism, on the other.

POST-WAR

One solution to the antinomies of aesthetic participation was to radicalize it, evacuating the Brechtian model of its didactic character. This was often the position taken up by neo-avantgarde and other post-war treatments of the concept, adapted for an era much more skeptical about the usefulness of authorities, intellectual, cultural, or otherwise. Take, for example, the influential theories of the 'writerly' text developed by Roland Barthes, in which the goal of the writer is no longer the conveyance of 'authoritative' meanings but instead the provision of a polysemic field out of which readers produce their own meanings. 'The goal of literary work (of literature as work)', Barthes claims, in the manifesto-like opening pages of *S/Z*, 'is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes, 1975: 4). His immediate referent here was the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet and others, but the influence of such conceptions on post-war literary production as well as post-war literary theory was immense. Cognate developments emerge in the visual arts, whether by emphasizing the phenomenology of encounter between viewer and artwork, as in minimalism, or by actively involving audiences, as in the 'do-it-yourself' art of Fluxus and the participatory enactments of Happenings. In many of these examples, the participatory form of the artwork is itself its content, and the political values that were, in Brecht, attached to particular contents are formalized. Participation is in and of itself a good.

The formalistic character of post-war experiments in participatory art made them radically portable. Indifferent to context and stripped of the didactic contents of the Brechtian construction, participatory structures could be and were adapted to numerous civic, corporate, or cultural institutions from the 1960s onward. As argued in my book, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, the hostility that the political movements of the period expressed toward hierarchical and

authoritarian structures derives, in some part, from the vocabularies and grammars of participation developed within the arts and reproduced by a fascinated mass media (Bernes, 2017: 10–19). The resistance that workers offered management in the 1960s – at least as far as the advanced capitalist countries are concerned – often centered on qualitative rather than quantitative demands. These usually consisted of calls for a greater participation in decision-making, for a democratization of the workplace, for more varied and creative work, for greater autonomy, and even for workers' self-management. Models from the arts had a particular purchase in part because of the very forms of autonomy that, as Adorno describes above, accrue to art in modernity. Art became the other of labor, and art work a form of labor that was non-labor – free, self-directed, creative. Participatory models were useful to corporations – and civic institutions, as is clear from things like community policing initiatives – not only because they warded off potential unrest but because they allowed firms to shed unprofitable managerial layers. As an end in itself, artistic labor is also something one does without regard to its material rewards, and despite the initial demands from which they emerged, these models were used as ways to get people to work harder and longer for less money.

Adorno may seem to get the last word here, given the sad fate of these participatory constructions (which contemporary arts still display somewhat naively and often with little awareness of the uses to which these models have been put). Surprisingly, however, Brecht's commitment and direct, referential politics – which Adorno thought were capitulations, in form if not in content, to social heteronomy – seem now, in retrospect, to inoculate his works from the sort of uses to which the participatory constructions of the post-war period were put. Participatory formalization itself is what allows for the uptake of these models, and Brecht's communist didacticism may have warded off, if only for a short time, the recuperation to come.

Today, participatory models of action are ubiquitous. This is especially visible in the case of contemporary information and communication technology, which emphasizes 'interactivity' and allows for all manner of customization and personalization by users. Notably, the pioneers of this technology were, in many instances, influenced by the participatory aesthetic experiments of the 1960s (Turner, 2006: 41–68). Unlike broadcast media, which depend upon unidirectional signals, the new media involve a dialectical interplay between transmission and user action, undoing clear divisions between producers and consumers. This is especially true in the case of so-called Web 2.0, in which media firms provide 'platforms' (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) for user expression, communication, and elaboration. In this case, the erstwhile viewers of television and radio become producers of content and therefore participants. From the beginning, these new technologies were attended by significant claims for their emancipatory potential, inasmuch as they could overcome the monopolization of media by powerful conglomerates and vested interests, allowing for new forms of volunteer and amateur production, whether in the areas of journalism or art. Many were quick to point out, however, the various ways in which such amateur energies were being exploited by the companies that controlled these platforms or acted as the distributors of the products and services generated therein and therefrom (Terranova, 2000).

By the 2010s, as a new 'sharing economy' emerged in which 'disintermediating' companies profited from the profusion of new participatory forms of labor, both paid and unpaid, such critiques were widely accepted. The generalization of these critiques occurred alongside a continued valorization of the participatory within political movements and the arts. Many of the movements that emerged in the wake of the economic crisis of the later 2000s and early 2010s were distinguished by their eschewal of traditional organizational

structures – unions and parties – and models of leadership, and their reliance on informal, horizontal structures involving mass participation and mass decision-making. From the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, to the 'movement of the squares' and the Occupy movement in Europe and the United States, direct democracy and participatory organization was the order of the day, often formalized as 'consensus' decision-making, whereby nearly complete accord between all participants was the (admittedly impossible) goal. Organized outside of traditional political structures and relying, in many cases, on the facilities of new digital media, such movements did, on occasion, give way to more formal structures such as political parties (SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain). They also precipitated strong critiques of the formalistic character of participatory democracy, which was felt to bracket political content, neutralize important political dissent, and create a situation felt by many to be as oppressive and anti-minoritarian as more conventional authoritarian structures, such that the individual or small group was effectively forced to reconcile with the larger collective. Movements organized on this basis were unable to settle on a course of action or unifying objective, and in some cases turned inward, losing any sense of direction. For some, this meant the necessity of a return to traditional structures such as party or union, and the need for strong leaders (Dean, 2012: 1–23). For others, however, the impasses of the current conjuncture result from the collapse of the workers' movement and workers' identity, which was the basis for the programmatic unification of earlier political movements (*Endnotes*, 2013). Therefore, attempts to overcome this impasse by reverting to prior modes of organization will fail. One must find a way through disorganization by way of disorganization.

As far as evaluation of participatory form is concerned, all of these critiques return us to the question of content or, perhaps, function. Participation in what? Participation with whom? To what end? In Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', he distinguishes between those mimetic works of art, such as paintings, which require concentration on the part of an individualized viewer, and the works which, conversely, viewers themselves absorb and which are received in 'a state of distraction and through the collective' (Benjamin, 2008: 40). Architecture, he writes, is the 'prototype' of the latter, inasmuch as buildings can be interacted with in numerous ways. And yet, paradoxically, we might imagine architecture as the most inflexible and indeed authoritarian of forms, given its association with political or economic power and rigid materials. Flexibility of use depends, it seems, on an inflexible production. In 'The Author as Producer', the distinction Benjamin introduces is between 'the mere supplying of a productive apparatus and its transformation'. Without a doubt, Benjamin imagined that the arts could be made more like architecture, in order that they align with the emancipatory, mass-oriented politics of his day. Artistic solidarity with the workers' movement demanded more than the contribution of an emancipatory content to a non-participatory and non-emancipatory apparatus. But attention to the side of production allows us to see how architecture resists transformation and directs the free actions of users despite their ability to select from a range of uses. The truly participatory architecture would, like the barricades of nineteenth-century uprisings, be built and rebuilt according to the energies and imaginings of its user-builders.

THE DIVISION OF LABOR

We might sum up the conclusions of the preceding sections as follows: the participation of viewers and audiences in the work of art almost always depends upon relatively immutable frameworks and infrastructures in which viewers and audiences have no say; to

the extent that participatory works naturalize or occlude these frameworks they may be thought of as the buttresses and bulwarks of a veritable aesthetic ideology, one that obstructs any reckoning with domination as it actually functions. In his critique of the emancipatory pretensions of contemporary digital technology, Alexander Galloway argues that the rhizomatic, horizontal, participatory interactions of the World Wide Web depend upon highly centralized and codified infrastructures run by a small number of institutional players (Galloway, 2004). In the case of digital technology, the participatory character of the object or service is a function of its use by the consumer, rather than its production. There is a division of labor, in other words, between producers and consumers that occludes the site of production and the inflexibilities engendered there. This occlusion occurs because the participatory *use* but not manufacture of an object leads users to believe they have overcome the division between producers and consumers altogether, as in the case of 'Web 2.0', where users are simultaneously content-providers. As should be clear from the discussion above, what Galloway says of the ideology of participation in digital technology is true of aesthetic participation as well.

The problematic of participation is therefore bound up with that of the division of labor, and particularly the 'reification' that Lukács attributed to the capitalist division of labor. For Lukács, capitalism fragments the organic labor processes of precapitalist societies, replacing integrated production of finished objects with various kinds of intermediate detail work (Lukács, 1972: 88–9). The consequences of such rationalization are extreme, since 'the fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject'. As the specific qualities demanded by the labor process are abstracted from 'the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker' the result is that 'his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative'. It becomes, to translate into the terms of the above, less participatory. This is what Lukács terms reification, the objectification of formerly free-flowing, open-ended human capacities under the reign of the commodity form. Reification affects all classes within capitalism but for the bourgeoisie the process is especially deleterious, as reification in such a case concerns not just specific labor powers but cognition itself. The reified cognition of the bourgeoisie thus produces a series of philosophical antinomies (between subject and object, freedom and necessity, individual and society, form and content) that more or less encapsulate the history of modern philosophy. Proletarians experience these antinomies as well, but are given a way to transcend them and transcend false immediacy through their practical engagement with the object-world. While the bourgeoisie cannot know itself as objectified, because it is the bourgeois mind itself that is objectified, the physical domination of workers leaves their mind free 'to perceive the split in [their] being'. The 'consciousness of the proletariat' is therefore the consciousness of an object that sees itself as object, consciousness of the rift between subject and object but also, in turn, the rifts of the division of labor. De-reification, in this sense, requires not only an overcoming of the passive, objectified forms of action which capitalism engenders but also an overcoming of the fragmentation of the labor process. In his insistence on the insoluble link between capitalist fragmentation of the labor process, on the one hand, and the passive, objectified character of human action, on the other, Lukács makes possible a critique of those participatory enactments that still depend upon a division of labor.

Lukács was an enormous influence on the thinking of Guy Debord and his conspirators in the Situationist International (SI hereafter), a thinker and a group notable for building a communist aesthetic and political practice around an explicit critique of the social and artistic division of labor. Their project was an overarching 'critique of separation', detailing

the many ways that proletarians are separated from each other and rendered passive, in the workplace and elsewhere, so that they may be integrated by the active constructions of capital and what Guy Debord described as 'spectacle'. Against this society of generalized non-intervention and separation, the SI proposed interventions into everyday life that they called 'situations'.

> The situationist goal is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life, through the variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged … Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor). (Situationist International, 2004: 61)

The accent of this critique falls not just on the world of wage labor and artistic practice, but political milieus themselves: 'A revolutionary association of a new type will also break with the old world by permitting and demanding of its members an authentic and creative participation …' (Situationist International, 2006: 112). They therefore inveigh against pedagogical art or politics based upon the 'unilateral transmission of a revolutionary teaching', instead basing their sense of revolutionary possibilities on a spontaneous tendency toward revolt already present within the youth of the age (112). Importantly, the SI targets not just the division of social labor but the division between art making and social labor: 'The next form of society will not be based on industrial production. It will be a society of *realized art*.' The integration of art and social production will overcome the industrial division of labor as well as the division between free and compelled activity. The theorization of participation that we find in the SI does not imagine a reform of the existing mode of production, such that workers are allowed to participate in corporate decision making, much less a participatory transformation of the art system; rather, they envision the liberation of aesthetic energies, broadly distributed among proletarians, that might be the basis of a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist mode of production. What emerges from the rubble will be based upon the activation of those creative energies and oriented toward the participation of all, but that is something different than the recruitment of worker participation (or reader or viewer participation) in an already constituted system.

From 1960 until the events of May 1968, in which many members were involved and which more or less spelled the dissolution of the group, the SI turned away from engagements with artists and interventions in the art world and dedicated itself entirely to political theory and activity, while still retaining a broadly aesthetic theory of revolution, where revolution would be put 'in the service of poetry', in the service of aesthetic experience and creative freedom, rather than the other way around. Through an interrogation of anarchist and Marxist theory, and through their interaction with Socialism ou Barbarie, a post-Trotskyist group that had turned toward council communism, they developed a 'councilist' perspective on the revolution, in which workers' and students' councils would direct the revolution. Workers would seize control of the means of production directly and dispose of its products as they saw fit. However, the SI never really reckoned with the possible contradictions between a worker-directed system and the society of *realized art* they imagined. In the views of Gilles Dauvé and the group Theorie Communiste, who emerge after the SI, as part of a general revival of ultraleft ideas, the SI managed to expose the flaws within council communism without overcoming them (Dauvé, 1979; Simon, 2015). Whereas council communism views revolution as the emancipation and affirmation of labor through the seizure and eventual self-management of the means of production, the SI counters this affirmed labor by examining it in the unfavorable light of creative activity. The goal for the SI is not to liberate the

toil but to abolish it altogether. And yet, for Theorie Communiste, the SI never moves beyond a critique of labor and toward a critique of capital as such, instead imagining, in various incomplete theorizations, that the overcoming of the division of labor and art can be had either by the cultivation of a particular subjectivity (an attitude toward labor) or by a simple extension of the development of the productive forces (Simon, 2015: 382) They therefore avoid thinking about whether or not the division of labor is baked into the very industrial machinery they would make the basis of their society of realized art. In truth, as their critics note, the overcoming of labor as passive, compelled activity would require a total reorganization of the means of production at a technical level. As Marx notes in *Capital*, the large-scale machinery of the factory implies 'the separation of intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labor, and the transformation of those faculties into powers exercised by capital over labor' (Marx, 1990: 548). A change in ownership would not rectify such dehumanization, which is part of the technical arrangement of the factory. Abolition of labor would require placing social production on another footing altogether. Posing the problem of non-participation in aesthetic terms, as the SI does, occludes an understanding of the real basis of domination, and forces an engagement with the problem on a superficial level. This is perhaps clearest in the visions of the Situationist city produced during their artistic period. In Constant's Situationist city, titled *New Babylon*, the city's industrial infrastructure is secreted underneath the street level, which is therefore transformed into an open plane for free-floating encounter. This does not overcome the need for industrial infrastructure, however, but merely renders it and whatever labors it involves invisible. Literalizing the opposition between base and superstructure, productive forces and social relations, Constant's utopia preserves the division between spaces of freedom and unfreedom.

THE CRITIQUE OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

The SI was part of, and to a certain degree responsible for, a general revival of the thought and practice of the historical ultraleft – council communism in particular. The critiques of the SI summarized above find their roots in the years after 1968, when important communist theorists such as Jacques Camatte, Gilles Dauvé, and others confronted the perspective of the historical ultraleft – emblematized in the work of Anton Pannekoek and Paul Mattick – with the left communist thought of Amadeo Bordiga. Part of a broader left opposition within the Communist International during the 1920s, Bordiga conceived of the communist party as a class party that was not, at the same time, a mass party; in his view, the legitimacy of the party was not gained by the participation of proletarians, by its numerical incorporation of the proletarian masses, but by its doctrinal commitment to communist revolution (Bordiga, 2003a, 2003b). The party was an offensive and ultimately administrative instrument and therefore attempts by socialists and communists to opportunistically reposition the party such that it enabled mass participation, by for instance weakening its programmatic commitments, were wrong-headed. At the time, revolutionary developments in Germany and Italy were proceeding according to the council form, as proletarians spontaneously took over their workplaces and formed councils to determine what to do next. This was the great headwaters of council communism. In Bordiga's essay, 'Seize the Factory or Seize Power?', written in 1920 while this council movement was raging in the north of Italy, he commended the militancy of the workers and their turn from the defensive tactic of the strike but suggested the workplace takeovers would not accomplish anything if the occupiers did not gather together their force for an assault 'aimed directly at the heart of the enemy bourgeoisie' (Bordiga, 2003c).

Later, Bordiga would develop a more robust critique of all forms of proletarian self-management, indicating that it was the enterprise-form itself and not the management of the enterprise by capitalists that made it into an instrument of exploitation:

> The independent, local enterprise is the smallest social unit which we can think of, being limited both by the nature of its particular trade and the local area. Even if we concede, as we did earlier, that it was somehow possible to eliminate privilege and exploitation from within such an enterprise by distributing to its workers that elusive 'total value of the labour', still, outside its own four walls, the tentacles of the market and exchange would continue to exist. And they would continue to exist in their worst form at that, with the plague of capitalistic economic anarchy infecting everything in its path. But this party-less and State-less system of councils prompts the question – who, before the elimination of classes is accomplished, is going to manage the functions which are not strictly concerned with the technical side of production? And, to consider only one point, who is going to take care of those who are not enrolled in one of these enterprises – what about the unemployed? In such a system, and much more so than in any other cell-based commune or trade union system, it would be possible for the cycle of accumulation to start all over again (supposing it had ever been stopped) in the form of accumulation of money or of huge stocks of raw materials or finished products. Within this hypothetical system, conditions are particularly fertile for shrewdly accumulated savings to grow into dominating capital.
>
> The real danger lies in the individual enterprise itself, not in the fact it has a boss. How are you going to calculate economic equivalents between one enterprise and another, especially when the bigger ones will be stifling the smaller, when some will have more productive equipment than others, when some will be using 'conventional' instruments of production and others nuclear powered ones? This system, whose starting point is a fetishism about equality and justice amongst individuals, as well as a comical dread of privilege, exploitation and oppression, would be an even worse breeding ground for all these horrors than the present society. (Bordiga, 1976)

Many of the ultraleft groups and writers that followed the SI utilized the Bordigist critique to purge council communism of its emphasis on self-management while still retaining its commitments to spontaneity, self-organization, and the self-activity of the proletariat (almost entirely absent in Bordiga's dogmatic, party-oriented, and idealist presentation). Thinkers such as Gilles Dauvé and journals such as *Troploin, Négation* and others put forward the idea of revolution as communization, which would involve not the affirmation of the proletariat through self-management but its self-abolition, unmaking the productive resources of capitalism and replacing them with new means and new relations through which people would meet their needs directly, without the need of money, the wage, the state, or centralized administration.

Through a double-sided critique of council communism and Bordigism, these groups effectively resolve the antinomy – between proletarian self-management, on the one hand, and refusal of labor, on the other – which the SI posed but could not resolve. The revolution will involve the self-organizing action of proletarians from below, but these proletarians will not hypostasize the productive forces and their place in it through an affirmation of labor; instead they will engage in a total transformation of both the relations and forces of production of capitalist society. In one sense, revolution as communization cannot be thought by way of the logic of participation, since none of the institutions upon which one might make participatory demands would remain after such a revolution. In another sense, however, such a state of affairs would be more participatory than any imaginable, inasmuch as the members of such a society would have freedom of access and opportunity, allowing engagement in every aspect and activity imaginable. The desire for meaningful creative activity and social empowerment that underlies participatory demands remains, implicitly or explicitly, as proletarian motive, at the same time as these groups imagine a new route for its unfolding, avoiding the trap of self-management.

CONCLUSION

Abandoning self-management, the communization perspective allows for a critique of political formalism and a new emphasis on political content while still retaining an underlying vision of proletarian self-organization. Participatory relations may be desirable, but one must ask: participation in what? To what purpose? With what overall function? In the light of this critique, Adorno's view of participation as heteronomy becomes thinkable in a newly radical manner: it is fully possible for people to actively participate in their own domination, for people to self-manage their suffering and exploitation, and in fact capitalism may find it desirable to reorganize social relations in this manner. In judging political movements and revolutions, one must consider form and content both. We live in a society in which information technologies and the social arrangements they permit, allow people to participate in all manner of activities that might have been closed to them 30 years ago. And yet, the character of this participation is anything but free, predicated on deep-seated logics of social control and surveillance maintained by corporate conglomerates and the repressive apparatus of the national security state. One participates, but one also generates, at every turn, information about one's habits that is used to channel that participation in directions the media owners and their clients will find profitable. In social movements, informality gives way to the 'tyranny of structurelessness', in which individuals and pre-existing social formations can opportunistically exploit the fluid character of social relations; the formalistic participatory models that might control this opportunism end up being as constricting and anti-minoritarian as the centralist political formations they are designed to replace. In art, too, participatory models have become a technics of redevelopment, recruitment, and surveillance that interface directly with non-profit organizations, states, and corporate sponsors.

The participatory persists as a flavor and tone within contemporary capitalism, but dissatisfaction with it is by now general. Calls for a return to traditional models of authority or leadership seem, however, to fall on deaf ears, and the social movements of the twenty-first century continue to unfold by and large without centralized organization and without the leaders and structures one would expect in an earlier era. Likewise, arguments to reorganize art around older values – such as absorption, intentionality, or mastery – in opposition to the participatory seem unlikely to produce a general trend within visual art or literature. While Adorno's critique remains pertinent, it is unclear how it could be made into the basis for contemporary aesthetic activity. Indeed, it is Brecht's didactic and committed participatory aesthetic that remains the most incompatible with the formalistic experiments of contemporary exponents of the participatory. Both authors, therefore, were correct in their way but neither is capable of offering a way forward. The desire for meaningful action and creative expression mobilized by the participatory forms of the past century cannot be made to go away. At the same time, it appears that, within capitalism, no social form can absorb this desire without at the same time betraying it. We can add this to the long list of reasons to be done with capitalism once and for all.

Note

1 See e.g. the following usage of the term from *Aesthetic Theory*: 'That artworks are offered for sale at the market – just as pots and statuettes once were – is not their misuse but rather the simple consequence of their participation in the relations of production' (Adorno, 1997: 236).

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