

On Failure and its Possible Remedies

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2009

Published by the Annals of Significant Error

<http://significantfailure.blogspot.com/>

April 2009

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In June 2007, when my text *On Lice and Fleas* first appeared, one of the members of the partnership that writes under the pseudonym Monsieur Dupont asked me what I would do in the event of defeat. It would seem too soon to talk of defeat, but perhaps it is time to acknowledge and confront some measure of failure.

My writing (which includes the texts *Gasping from out the Shallows: Reflections on Revolution in the Early Twenty-first Century*, *On Lice and Fleas: Observations Starting from the Conflict Between Iran and the USA* and *Their Passed-away Builders: The "Credit Crunch"*) is directed at two different audiences: those who already regard themselves as revolutionaries and those who do not. In both cases, my objective is the same. Stated in broad terms, it is to contribute to the reader's understanding of the alienated world in which we live and thereby to the development of the individual's practical refusal of that world. Reaching a judgement as to whether this objective has in any way been realized is, of course, a hazardous exercise, for the available data is sparse and the implications that can properly be drawn from readers' silence is a matter of some conjecture. However, it seems reasonable to take the nature and extent of both private messages and public commentary as an indicator of the impact of what I have said. If so, I have to admit that my writings have had almost no effect whatsoever. In the main, they have been ignored, rejected or misunderstood. At best, they have been offered a rather generalized and unwanted praise and then simply put aside.

The reasons for this failure doubtless include the literary deficiencies of the texts. To my regret, what I write is too often ponderous and littered with accidental typing mistakes and careless grammatical errors that have been left uncorrected. But this can hardly be a complete explanation. A person who has a real, practical interest in confronting the alienation in which he or she participates will surely put up with a little ugliness when searching for material that may be useful to this end. Moreover, I think it is fair to say that my texts vary in the extent to which they are unreadable, yet there is no variation in their reception. More generally, I suspect one would struggle to find any correlation between the abstract literary merit possessed by items of revolutionary theory and the extent of their influence.

In the alternative, it might be suggested that my factual and theoretical statements contain many mistakes. I do not doubt that my writings abound with errors. Much of what I have published is of the nature of preliminary hypotheses. I had hoped that I would be able to refine these provisional conceptions through discussions with comrades with relevant information and experience. But this has happened rarely, and not just because many of the comments I have received have been vapid or unilluminating. Even in milieus or forums prone to ill-

tempered denunciation and prolix discussions of the most arcane nuances of revolutionary theory, silence has generally reigned.

A third reason for failure that might be advanced is that the appearance of my texts has been accompanied by too little *practical* violence directed at the reigning order. Simple publication, it might be said, is not enough. It attracts no notice and fatally encourages the texts to be perceived as expressions of abstract thought. It is too timid to serve as a vehicle for theory that repudiates the dominant organization of life and discourse and exists only to be practised. There is some force in this line of critique. Yet it is necessary to avoid the opposite error of creating superficial, spurious or incomprehensible breaches of decorum simply in order to have something overtly practical to put alongside a text. Abstraction comes in many guises; the transient disruption of isolated and more or less arbitrarily selected fragments of everyday social life with a view to publicising a text is one of them.

I think one must look elsewhere for the roots of the prevailing lack of interest in my writings. When I began to write, what I had failed properly to appreciate is the extent to which self-styled revolutionaries have abandoned the critique of the *modernised* conditions of *affluent* alienation to be found in the advanced capitalist countries. The flight from reality into self-serving fantasy has been almost total, it seems. Capitalism continues to provide its miserable abundance of commodities to the vast majority of the inhabitants of Western Europe and North America, and even secures the physical survival of those for whom it can find no use in its offices, factories and armies. Everywhere one looks, however, Marxists, anarchists and other revolutionaries absurdly proclaim that for several decades wages have catastrophically fallen, precariousness has catastrophically risen, and social security provisions have been decimated. This picture of general desolation is doubtless useful. Notably, it helps to convince its adherents that their campaigns for better wages, conditions of employment and social welfare are not, as one might otherwise suspect, merely proposals for pseudo-oppositional reforms that would help to maintain the preconditions of an advanced, consumer capitalism, but rather are urgently necessary and radical refusals of the logic of the system. But this is not all. One other consequence of the leftist myth, one that is more pertinent to this discussion, is that it renders incomprehensible and seemingly irrelevant any revolutionary critique, such as mine, that seeks to stay close to the actual lives led by the far-from-poor and far-from-insecure majority of the western countries. At the same time, however, this denial of reality makes *itself* incomprehensible and irrelevant *to that very majority*. Ordinary people will accept the practical, reformist assistance that leftists here and there offer when it seems calculated to make their life more comfortable within the society of alienation; but they easily recognize the revolutionary ideology that is bolted on to it as messianic, delusional, unconnected with their

daily lives, and superfluous. Even the long-prayed-for profound economic crisis, that terrible external compulsion that leftists hoped would force the workers and themselves to take the road of revolution, has not changed this state of affairs. 2009 is not 1848 or 1929. A crisis in an advanced economy turns out not to have the same practical consequences for the majority of workers as it does in less developed economic conditions. It has left the majority largely untouched. It has provided no impetus to revolution whatsoever.

If an attachment to the past explains the lack of interest that revolutionaries show to modern revolutionary theory, it is to an attachment to the present that we must turn when considering the indifference of the mass of the proletariat. The spectacle's unrelenting torrent of images and ideas continues to shape our inner selves and our outer world in its likeness. For all of our pretensions to autonomy and choice, what we think, feel, desire and do has its origins largely outside of us, in the array of desires, understandings, expectations and behaviours moulded to the reign of the commodity and the state that the spectacle presents to us. This colonization is not definitive or even very strong, but it is broad and its essence goes largely unchallenged. We are lost in an insubstantial but ubiquitous fog. And if we do not rebel against our narrow lives, this is more than anything else because we have been seduced by the dominant society's ideas of happiness.

If revolutionary theory is to be made pertinent and dangerous to the ordinary lives of ordinary people, it must renew its critique of the dominant ideas of happiness, a critique that has been progressively abandoned over the past 30 years. Amongst other things, this would perhaps involve a nuanced critique of:

- 1) *The mainstream spectacle*, the worlds of high street shops, shopping malls, suburban homes, family life, family cars, sport, gardening, gossip, and holidays spent by the sea or in cities seen through the eyes of guide books; of newspapers, women's magazines, popular television programmes, gymnasiums, guides to better sex on DVD, and trashy books and films despised by the critics; of run-of-the-mill jobs tolerated because they pay quite well or provide opportunities to meet the public, socialize with colleagues or exercise a little power or creativity within the narrow limits dictated by one's employer. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of people who regard themselves and others like them as just "ordinary".
- 2) *The sophisticated spectacle*, the world of design, elegance, the supposedly exclusive, and gentrification; of prize-winning books, broadsheet newspapers, self-help techniques, world music, the theatre, and arthouse films; of spiritual retreats, holidays off the beaten track, second homes, haut cuisine, artisanal goods, and slow food; of concern for the third

- world or eulogies to self-reliance and the rewards of enterprise; of straining one's finances in order to have a large home in a good area and children capable of passing examinations; of careers, work in research centres, arts administration, the creative industries, therapies, or the tattered remnants of the professions. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who regard themselves as just a little above the vulgar.
- 3) *The hedonistic spectacle*, the world of sex, drugs and rock and roll; of the fast, the frenzied and the dangerous; of drunkenness, madcap escapades, exhibitionism, carnival, and choruses of collective laughter; of raves or nightlife in the regenerated cities. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who regard themselves as experiencing life to the full, if only during the evenings and weekends.
 - 4) *The youth culture spectacle*, the world of the ever-changing tribes of the young and the gadgets, clothes, body shapes, haircuts, makeup, music, films, celebrities, slang, attitudes and poses that define them. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who may be subordinated by school, dependency on parents, and the menial jobs now left to the young but who nonetheless regard themselves as superior to the old, the uncool, and the passé.
 - 5) *The criminal spectacle*, the world of drug-dealing, burglary and street crime; of respect, revenge, guns, knives, flash cars, hip talk, branded training shoes and sportswear; of hard men, bitches and the rap music about them; of dreams of movie gangsters, the hope of one day living like a rap star or a millionaire sportsman; of predatory hierarchies amongst prisoners. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who regard themselves as better than the sad losers who play the game.
 - 6) *The spectacle of decomposition*, the world of resigned cynicism and contemptuous scoffing; of endless news of real and invented corruption, ineptitude, disaster, crime and conspiracy; of images of suffering, humiliation, disability and decay circulated for entertainment; of hooliganism, vandalism, bad manners, defiant stupidity, proud illiteracy, animal mutilation and other inversions of bourgeois sensibilities. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who hold the world in contempt yet find some measure of contentment in either acting out the decay themselves or watching others doing so.
 - 7) *The avant-garde spectacle*, the world of conceptual art, artistic manifestoes, small galleries in fashionable parts of fashionable cities, corporate-sponsored major retrospectives of artists declared to be radical or

innovative, the music covered by *The Wire* magazine, street photography, limited edition books and CDs produced by the artists themselves, state-subsidised electro-acoustic experimentation, psychogeographical walks, 'visual culture', experimental film, critical studies in the university, post-graduate exhibitions, a horror of any 'foreclosure' except that which accepts the basic economic and social forms of the commodity society as immutable, and the hip clothing, hip bars and hip milieus in which the buyers and sellers of the avant-garde are often to be found. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who consider that the separate world of art is a domain in which daring, insight, subversion, innovation or new forms of life can still be practised.

- 8) *The alternative spectacle*, the world of trade unionism, ecological activism, community campaigns, culture jamming, the open source movement, exhibitions of radical texts in state museums and university galleries, fair trade, alternative medicine, guerrilla gardening, anarcho-punk, protests in solidarity with the third world, protests in general, children's rights, the New Age Movement and other claims of the paranormal, the World Social Forum, feminism, reduced consumption and other remedies for 'affluenza', welfare rights advocacy, the anti-war movement, 'dumpster diving', anti-globalization, campaigns against corporate abuses, and the short-term suspension of ordinary life found in rioting. In short, the whole of the lives and lies of those who believe that substantive and desirable improvements to everyday life can be brought about, or revolution approached, by changing one or more aspects of the dominant society and leaving the appropriation of labour and life by the commodity unchanged; of those satisfied with the display or repetition of an inadequate revolt.

The purpose of such an analysis of contemporary notions of happiness is not to produce an accurate *description* of the ways in which we live or a *moralistic* condemnation of them. Rather, it is to speak to, and deepen, the real currents of dissatisfaction with the dominant society. This dissatisfaction is not to be found in the struggles over jobs, wages and conditions so beloved by leftism. The conditions of real material deprivation that made such struggles imperative in the nineteenth and early twenty centuries were eliminated many decades ago for both the employed and the unemployed in the advanced western countries. What has followed is a continuous fabrication of needs and falsification of desires that serves only to sustain the huge and expanding demand for commodity consumption on which the survival of advanced capitalism depends. The economic struggles extolled by leftists and trade unionists have aided and abetted this process by resisting attempts by desperate or backward factions of capitalism to radically worsen the conditions of workers and by assisting in the global process that seeks to translate worker's aspirations and dissatisfactions

into terms that the system of capitalism can process. In effect, they are an ordinary part of the processes through which capitalism is adjusted so as to accommodate the workers and the workers are adjusted so as to accommodate capitalism. In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, these struggles are not an expression of the *resistance* of the workers but of their *defeat*. They renegotiate the terms of a capitulation to capitalism that has not been retracted; and, no matter angry they may be, what they ultimately express is our desire for sleep. The same can be said for many of the 'struggles' outside the workplace that leftists cheer on, organize or take over.

In search of profound disaffection with the reigning society, for the beginnings of a dissatisfaction that goes to the heart of the alienation of the commodity society, we must now look elsewhere. It is to the moments when we, the proletarians of the modern age, look at our work, our families, our surroundings, our hobbies, our possessions, our friendships, our aspirations and our dreams – when we look at the whole panoply of lies we live by and the kingdom of falsehood they support – and see, with a sense of desolation and despair, the utter hollowness of all that we are and all that we could become in this society, it is to *these* moments, and the steps leading up to them, that we must cleave. We must keep this *authentic experience of the real nature of modern alienation* from being dissipated by simulated happiness, suicide, the stupefaction of drink, drugs or psychotherapy, or any of the other means by which our thoughts and feelings are falsified and subdued. We must encourage the disaffected to think for themselves and act by themselves, and to pursue a practical programme of negation directed at the social roots of their alienation.

The development and diffusion of such a programme of critique clearly requires the efforts of more than one person. As one step, I would suggest the development of a journal to be published both in paper and internet form. The journal would seek to provide a concentrated critique of the alienated everyday life to be found in the advanced economies of the twenty-first century and to address such currents of radical dissatisfaction with the fundamental principles of that life as can be seen on or below the surface of social life. Its production would bring together a sufficient number of people who share certain basic theoretical positions and are capable of contributing as equals to a project to be conducted without hierarchy or passive followers. This collaboration would have as its sole purpose the production of the journal.

To serve as the basic shared theoretical principles of the project's participants, I would tentatively suggest the following:

- 1) The affluent alienation of modern conditions of production and consumption can no longer be endured and is the foundation of our

discontent. Self-managed, social revolution is the only solution capable of practically dissolving the alienation of human activity inherent in all work and all consumption the dominant society produces.

- 2) All notions of revolution derived from Bolshevism are false.
- 3) All notions of struggle and progress associated with trade unionism are false.
- 4) All reforms are false.
- 5) All separate artistic creation is paltry and false.
- 6) All academic ideas about social life are false. All social relations within academia are alienated. All aspects of the academy serve to support and perpetuate the dominant system.

Of course, Frère Dupont might respond that it remains possible, even probable, that either my specific project of a journal or the wider goal of social revolution may not come to pass. This is true. The absence of a journal specifically directed to developing an up-to-date critique of the affluent alienation of the Western economies and a practical communication with the tendencies towards radical negation within those economies may well have a good deal more to do with the lack of potentially interested and capable parties than any mere failure to propose the notion of a journal publicly. We shall see. It also has to be admitted that the efforts of revolutionaries are neither necessary nor sufficient to create social revolution. They are not necessary because the mass of the proletariat is capable of deriving its revolutionary theory and practice from its own practical experience of commodity alienation without reference to what has been said and done by revolutionaries; they are not sufficient because history provides no guarantee that the rest of the proletariat will at any given time agree that revolution is necessary and desirable. So be it. We do what we can. We continue to seek out ways of waiting without despair or contentment. We remain consoled by the fact that there is nothing remarkable about us, from which it follows that anything we have felt, done and thought can be felt, done and thought by many others. We are kept just ahead of pessimism by the palpable inadequacy of the lives available to us and the decomposition and ineptitude that continually afflicts the dominant's society's massive efforts to convince us of the contrary.