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Commons, communities and Movements : inside, outside and against capital

Three proverbs :

One for all of us : « Leave your village, but never let it leave you ! » (Afghanistan)

One for Mr. Bush and friends : « He who has no enclosures around his field, has no enemies. » (Burundi)

And one for my generation : « Experience is the comb that Nature offers us... as we grow bald. » (Belgium)

Seven points on commons and communities.

I would like to make seven points, some of which I will develop in the other sections:

1) Commons and communities are central to the « anti-globalisation » movement, in particular to its anti-capitalist wing, although the term « commons » is not very current.¹

This is evident in the South, where the struggles of indigenous and peasant communities to preserve common lands and other commons still « outside » direct command of capital, are the cornerstone of the movement. In the North too, some of our leading movements, inherited from the post 1968 struggles (ie. feminist, ecological and urban struggles, squats and the « alternative » movement in general), are also « outside » in that they are not workplace struggles directly subjected to capitalist forms of command. They have organised various sorts of commons, material, social or political.

2) But of course, capital is everywhere and being « outside » or « inside » capital is always a matter of degree. Forms of capitalist command and domination always affect and infiltrate our communities to some degree, be they traditional indigenous communities, communities of struggle or « alternatives ». Maintaining, or re-defining, real commons and real community anywhere is thus a constant struggle, including against our own « colonised » personalities and conceptions of social relations.

3) On the other hand, (as the ethnological studies of Godbout² and the MAUSS school have shown) despite two centuries of capitalist rule and the infiltration of commodification into all spheres of social life, essential areas of the « social factory » only continue to function thanks to another logic, the logic of community, free gifts and solidarity. (At first sight, the exchange of gifts and « commons » may seem different, but as we shall see later, in the extreme case of gift exchange, « mutual positive debt », the partners stop keeping accounts and thus *de facto* create a commons³.) However, this reality is largely unrecognised because, like the unpaid work of women for example, it is « invisibilised » by the ideological domination of capitalist categories.

Godbout makes us realise that we wouldn't need to create a revolutionarily « New Man » in order to function outside of the profit motive and commodity exchange. We all function outside them every day, and even go to great effort to create such spheres of activity when we are without them. In fact, the most essential social relations reside in them – outside both market and State.

4) Communities also play a vital role in the productive activity of private enterprises and public services, where communities of work and struggle constantly recreate commons despite - in the teeth of - hierarchical chains of command and the forms of work organisation that they impose. In France, the field studies of Christophe Dejours and others in the « psychodynamics of work » demonstrate that these forms of organisation from below are

¹ The term, of course refers first to the lands held in common in medieval Europe, to which all members of the community had free access and which were tended to collectively, like in African and indigenous communities today. Their « enclosure » (privatisation) by the large landowners, expelled a large part of the peasantry, creating a proletariat forced to sell its labour in the factories. By extension, one can call commons all resources, including social, cultural and political creations, which are not privatised.

² Godbout, Jacques, *Le Don, la Dette et l'Identité : Homo Donator vs Homo Oeconomicus*, La Découverte / MAUSS, Paris, 2000.

³ The example comes to mind of the women of a Genevan commune in the 70ties. They were constantly giving and borrowing each others clothes, until finally they just put them all in a common wardrobe.

actually vital even to capital, since it is in fact impossible to organise the essence of real work in a hierarchical manner, from above. Real work is *always* social and *always* implies more than just doing what you are told. In fact, only doing what you are told to do is the definition of a classic form of sabotage on the job : the slowdown.

Dejours details empirically what Marx meant about capital depending upon living labour to reproduce itself. It doesn't just depend on our obedient muscles, but on cooperation and social creativity resolving the problems of production and organisation day in and day out. People imagine that workers couldn't do without the bosses to organise them, *whereas its the contrary which is the case!* In fact, Dejours shows that the essential aspects of work must remain *hidden* from the boss !

There are evident parallels with Holloway : « Exploitation is not just the exploitation of labour but the simultaneous transformation of doing into labour, the simultaneous de-subjectification of the subject, the dehumanisation of humanity.(...)The capitalist form (labour) is the mode of existence of doing/creativity/subjectivity/humanity, *but that mode of existence is contradictory.* To say that doing exists as labour means that it exists also as anti-labour. To say that humanity exists as subordination means that it also exists as insubordination (...) Exploitation is the suppression (-and-reproduction) of insubordinate creativity. ⁴»

So if points 1) and 2) tell us something of who we are, where we come from and what we are defending against capitalist attack, 3) and 4) propose new visions of our real, unconscious, collective strength, of how to go on the offensive against the strongholds of capital. We may often be much more organised than we think ! Maybe not in a party or a union, but in the informal, horizontal, tentacular networks of collective complicity and solidarity that can become truly subversive if the quality of human relations and community are taken seriously.

5) These perspectives, that start from the communities that already and necessarily exist within capitalist society, seem particularly timely, because the new wave of capital's expansion has thrown them into crisis.

The increased pressure on society in general is evident. Communities are torn apart by unemployment, forced mobility, urban restructuring, austerity, delinquency and its repression, the intensified commodification of culture and freetime, etc., etc. The simplest and most basic things – like good parties in our neighborhoods ! – have become rare goods.

On the job, the new forms of work organisation imposed by the pressure of globalised competition has wreaked havoc communities of production world over, substituting competition, harassment, suspicion and individualistic misery for cooperation, trust and solidarity. This has precipitated a veritable epidemic of work related pathologies (officially plus 75% in Switzerland in the last ten years, for example, despite the fact that many kinds aren't recognised) that is just the tip of a huge iceberg of « normal » misery and suffering at work.

Communities, humans with their stubborn need to have halfway decent relations with one another, have more than ever their backs to the wall.

6) But both Dejours and Godbout have much more to offer than consciousness of our hidden strengths. They also offer sobering warnings. Gift exchange can develop into the finest and freest of human relations. It can also lead to domination. Marx was *also* right when he saw the market as freeing men (and even more women !) from often tyrannical community obligations. Similarly, the study of workplaces reveals that communities of workers in dangerous or frightening conditions develop anti-social practices and norms, in particular « virile collective defense mechanisms », which serve to deny suffering and danger, for example on construction sites and other jobs with security hazards.

Under the conditions of competition, precarisation and *fear* instituted by néolibéral globalisation, many workplaces have become what might better be called « anti-communities », characterised by individualism, silence, betrayal and harassment of colleagues. In these situations, the virile collective defense mechanism can take an openly cynical and cruel form, for instance that of the « job-killers » and other « collaborators »⁵ of middle level management. Below them are all those who silently accept the psychological destruction of colleagues because they accept that in « economic war » there must necessarily be « winners » and « losers ». Here, Dejours' analysis rejoins feminist critiques of the violence of patriarchy. Yes, « economic » war is very like real war, and normally decent men (and even women) can be made to condone - and commit - incredible violences, if such violence on others has been instituted as a form of virile « courage » by the group. (Dejours draws an

⁴ Holloway, John, *Change the world without taking power: the meaning of revolution today*, Pluto Press, 2002, p.148

⁵ In french, « collaborators » refers to colleagues, but also to those who sided with the nazis.

analogy with the mass rapes organised in Bosnia or the huge majority of German soldiers who accepted to slaughter the jews of Eastern Europe « because no one likes to appear a coward. »⁶

Dejours also points out that over the last twenty-five years this « defensive ideology of economic realism » has seriously blunted sensitivity to human suffering in society at large, by presenting it not as injustice but as a kind of natural fatality. In the 1970ties, even right wing governments considered an unemployment rate of 6% to be politically intolerable. Today, masses of unemployed, homeless and working poor have become part of the scenery through a gradual « banalisation of social injustice » (the subtitle of Dejours' most well known book)⁷. His analysis of how normally decent people can be transformed into accomplices of social injustice and violence owes much to Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarian mechanisms and the Eichmann case in particular. The parallel with the more subtle and gradual brutalization of our societies by neoliberal policies is as compelling as disquieting.

As Morin⁸ and Holloway have shown, its time we all grew up. There is no God or historical necessity or scientific socialism or working class virtue that can guarantee us a happy end. And communities aren't automatically wise or democratic either ! They are just the basic bricks of society and close enough to control, to be responsible for and critical of. The zapatistas, for example, also criticise their communities: they want equal rights for women - and washing machines. Communities aren't the new revolutionary panacea, but they are a basic, organic level of social organisation which activism has tended to neglect.

Perhaps most importantly for activists, both perspectives should lead us not only to a renewed criticism of capitalist organisation, but first of all to a deep questioning of the dramatically similar way WE organise our own communities of struggle. Of the amazingly little « common » space we manage to create for collective discussion of how we do our « work » of political subversion, simply because our own communities remain hierarchical and repressive for most (people are afraid to « say something silly »). Of the way we constantly neglected personal fulfillment, subjectivity, suffering and the « celebration of life » for the sake of activist productivity. Of the astonishing ease with which we avoid serious engagement in our diverse professional work situations, in favor of abstract, militant activity « outside » practically everything.

6) Commons and community offer a new way to conceive of « alternatives » to capital and State. To defend public services, for example, is not to defend the State as such. Public services are a form of commons (albeit a bureaucratised one). And indeed, hospitals or schools, for example, can only be defended and improved by the struggles of communities of nurses or teachers, preferably linked with the communities they serve. If these communities whither, services become more and more bureaucratic and unsatisfactory, because commons cannot subsist without the communities that organise and defend them. Especially today, when the upper reaches of the bureaucracy are usually actively sabotaging services in the interests of privatisers. Today public services must clearly be defended *against* the State !

More generally, communities are usually already aware of the alternatives to capitalist development that we are supposedly lacking. Not the universalist technocratic, utopian or revolutionary master plans which are not only unnecessary, but which have also proved to be tyrannical and disastrous from Stalin to IMF and WB. Just the first, most urgent, evident steps in the right direction (*preguntando caminamos*, asking we walk, as the Zapatistas say) : water or a road or a seedbank for a village ; shorter hours or less hierarchy for a community of producers ; etc., etc. There's never been a lack of ideas concerning alternatives. Communities worldover generally have clear ideas about what they need or want. Its just that for several centuries there have always been policemen or soldiers or gunboats or financial warfare to stop people from acting on their ideas !

7) Objections.

Of course one can ask, what's new about the ideas of commons and communities with respect to the good old discourse of autonomy, self-organisation, soviets, etc. ? Probably not much with respect to the best experiences, and obviously community implies struggle for autonomy, self-organisation, etc., but a community is a more organic, intuitive, lived-in concept. « Autonomy », in my experience, often refered to people (mostly men) organising in assemblies, voting on decisions after often over-polarised debates... relatively abstract kinds of organisation that still resemble traditional organisations in many ways. In contrast, communities are typically people who work or live or know each other already. Their political aspect incorporates and takes seriously shared tastes, knowledge of their environment, sensitivity to each other (women will surely one day make us

⁶ Dejours, Christophe, *Souffrance en France : la banalisation de l'injustice sociale*, Seuil, 1998, p.112.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Morin, Edgar, *Terre-Patrie*, Seuil, 1993

understand the importance of this), implicit ways of doing things, practices – like how one talks back to the boss, stealing in supermarkets or sharing without counting.

There is also a problem to communities as alternatives. Communities are typically defined as small and local, so how for instance could the railways be in the hands of a community ? Good question. One could decide that communities can be bigger, translocal, on Internet, etc., but to avoid pulling the concept completely out of shape, it might be better to speak of federations or *networks* of communities discussing, negotiating and coordinating.

Well, those were my seven basic points ! Now I would like just to develop some of them for those who aren't convinced or who are interested enough to want some details. At the risk of appearing trivial, I will try to talk as much as possible from my own personal experience of various sorts of communities, since rooting one's political activity in community means precisely starting more from one's personal social experience rather than from general political discourses. Or at least having much more interplay between the two.

Commons and communities as central to the movement.

Who have been the initiators and strongest forces in the counterattack against globalising capital ? In the South, indigenous and peasant communities. In the North, the radicalised youth of the alternative movement whose central figure is often the squatter, reclaiming free, common space in cities. Or more generally, people who have tried to organise new communities and physical, social or political spaces (commons) outside commodity and wage relations.

The media only noticed us in Seattle, but the birth of this movement was undoubtedly the meeting between the Zapatista rebels of Chiapas and the alternative youth from across Europe who all met each other at the first two Intergalactic Encuentros (Chiapas 96 and Spain 97) and who created a new activist international, the first on Internet. Then, the idea of Peoples' Global Action (PGA), an international network of organisations proposing to scrap WTO, global governance and « free » trade, was launched at the second Encuentro. Here, the Gandhian farmers' movements of India brought a new, essential element to the movement. Direct action and civil disobedience to physically block summits, destroy GMO's, etc., said to the world : this is a vital matter and we are determined. PGA's immediate objective was to delegitimise global governance summits by simultaneous, decentralised action worldwide and, whenever possible, by physically blocking the summits themselves. In May 1998, the first International Day of Action (against the 2nd summit of the WTO in Geneva) already involved some 65 demos all around the world. In many cities they were organised by squatters and people of Zapatista support groups, and the groups who would later organise the events of June 18th (1999) in London, Seattle, Melbourne, Davos, Quebec, Prague, etc. were already « reclaiming their streets » in May '98.

In the South, the communal nature of the movement is evident. It was the revoking of Article 26, guaranteeing the Mexican commons (ejidos) that provoked the Zapatista rebellion. In the PGA network, other indigenous movements for whom the commons are the cornerstone of organisation, culture and identity have been leading figures : the Kuna of Panama, Maori of « New Zealand », the Quechua and Aymara communities organised by the cocaleros, the CONAIE and the CONFUNASSC of Ecuador, the network of afro-american communities, etc. In India, apart from the obviously communal *adhivasi*, peasant movements such as the KRRS, although holding lands in extended families, have extremely strong community links and the Gandhian ideal of the « village republic ».

As early as 1990 our friends of Midnight Notes had accurately characterised this whole period as one of struggle against the « New Enclosures »⁹, by which hundreds of millions of peasants were to be driven off their lands on all the continents by WB and IMF policies. The Plan Puebla Panama is perhaps the most explicit of these « development » Plans, since it specifically foresees driving all but 3% of the people of Central America off the land (compared to 75 % on it now !)¹⁰. Ending communal land and resource ownership and evicting forest dwellers is also a central goal of the WB in Africa, Asia, New Guinea, and many other places. The second colonisation is even more thorough than the first.

Many other struggles of the anti-globalisation movement are against other types of « New Enclosures » : of water, forests, seeds, traditional knowledge, oil or DNA. Although some believe that these should be defended by

⁹ « New Enclosures », *Midnight Notes* No. 10, fall 1990

¹⁰ See <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiatiiv/agp/free/colombia/puebla/index.htm>, or Barreda, Andres et al, Mesoamérica : Los rios profundos, alternativa plebeyas al Plan Puebla-Panama, Mexico, 2001

evoking « Global commons », this is a slightly suspect claim, for it avoids recognising that these commons actually belong to myriads of particular communities : Uwa or Afro-americans of Colombia, Mayas of Guatemala, Totzil of Chiapas, « tribal » adhviasi of India, etc., etc.

And then of course there are all the struggles against privatisation of the « public service » forms of commons all over the world : communication, transport, health, education, etc.

In the North, commons as land or physical space is less present, apart from squatted social centers or lodgings and rural commune movements. However, since the sixties the strongest and most innovative movements (with the notable exception of Italy) have organised « outside » the capitalist workplace and wage relation, creating social, cultural or political commons.

These more « abstract » commons have actually often involved struggles for physical spaces which symbolise (perhaps sometimes fetishise) the real commons and community that we seek to build. I remember the first struggle in Geneva for a « Centre Autonome » (1970). We fought the police for a whole season, seizing buildings in which to develop our « alternative culture ». When we finally got one, we mostly had totally boring political arguments. There was actually almost no counter culture to put in it, at the time ! Still today, the first thing squatters do when they occupy a building is to turn the basement into a common room and concert hall – but now they have more things to do there ! And when Reclaim the Streets started reclaiming common social spaces in British cities it was *fun* – and people world-over wanted in.

Other significant details have changed over the years. In the first Genevan communes, people wasted hours calculating how much each of us had advanced for food, etc. That was gradually just forgotten. Today, the squats have a custom by which, one day a week, different squats take turns organising a common dinner for all the others. Normally there is a pot somewhere for financial contributions, but the last time I went to one (which was actually on a public square, and thus open to anyone), they had decided that they didn't want to mar the thing by having a money pot... As for concerts, the ones that make the most money are those that leave the entry fee up to the client. And in one of the old squats there is a bio food shop that has operated without paid staff for a dozen years.

Gratuity isn't the only value that seems to have seaped back up into this milieu. There is also an instinctive disregard for « cost accounting » logic. For example, in the first squats, we would generally wait to be sure of being able to stay before working a lot on the place. Some time in the late '80ties I remember being astounded to see a brand new squat in my quarter where they were lavishing hours of work to recreate a « zinc » (the traditional, metal-covered Genevan bar). Their logic was different. They wanted a place like that. And even if they were evicted before it was finished, they would have worked toward their real goal (not towards a « realistic » one) and in the way they wanted. Finally, the place carried such conviction that it is still there. Squatters regularly surprise « reasonable » people with enterprises that make little or no « economic » sense, because the monetary aspect is secondary to them. Its the activity that is important. Of course, in a sense they are « exploiting » or even « over-exploiting » themselves, if you calculate their hourly wage. But if, subjectively, this work is actually free activity, or even play, then getting paid – in fact being allowed to spend one's life like that at all – is pretty amazing ! (Quite logically, the people who operate the « zinc » in question closed the bar a couple of times when it started to become too fashionable. Serving too many yuppies was too much like alienated work.) There may be more than wisdom there. It might be a new, deeply anti-capitalist society trying to resurface.

It was also in the same quarter that I first noticed the increasing fascination of young squatters for the indigenous (mostly North American peoples at the time). They visited with the Hopi, Apache or Dakota, and quoted shamans or Chief Seattle. They also housed delegations of indigenous at the UN who couldn't afford Genevan hotels. Although I shared their interest, I must confess that at the time (long before the Zapatistas) it didn't seem to me « politically important ». The squatters didn't bother with that question, since their criterion for involvement was « le feeling ».

Of course, such an instinctive criterion can also be sloppy and self-serving, but it does knock the bottom out of a lot of the traditional, moralistic, boring and finally quite unrevolutionary forms of activism. If it, or its « leaders », are boring, these people just desert. They have become « unorganisable » in stable, traditional organisations. But they constitute an organic network of individuals, communities that are capable of amazing feats when they « feel » that a proposition is sound (like organising a large part of the first PGA conference – board and lodging for 300 delegates – for practically nothing, or occupying WTO headquarters before Seattle, or driving the World Economic Forum out of Davos.)

The « alternative » community has been putting down roots (and being generally scoffed at by its more « political » cousins) since '68. Maybe its time to take it seriously – politically.

The feminist movement has also been trying to bring us new insights and practices for many years, although we have generally managed to ignore them. One of their uncomfortable insights was of course the fact that we were not only living under capitalism but also in communities - grossly patriarchal ones ! Communities in which one of the « commons » shared by men is their control over women, the fact that only men are free to wander anywhere at night, etc. They also brought to light the huge mass of unpaid labour done by women which sustains communities. However, they didn't only denounce the negative side of communities politically, they organised them differently : self-help, women's clinics, sharing childcare or housework so that everyone could participate in politics or exercise a profession. And more traditionally « political » struggles connected seamlessly to this community organising : like struggling for reproductive rights or « commons » of child care. Since leftist organisations were incapable of hearing their demands or changing their rather brutal style, they organised separately, in new, more horizontal ways, for instance using small groups that could better listen to all. And they were probably the first to organise worldwide in horizontal networks.

In today's movement, feminist organisations are less noticeable than feminist women (although some of the younger ones might not think of themselves as such) who struggle again to make mixed organisations listen. The southern part of PGA, for instance, regularly organises mixed gender seminars. The peasant, indigenous and other organisations generally recognise the need for change and the contribution that the gender perspective can offer. It remains to be seen too what extent the men, North and South, can really learn to listen. What seems sure is that since women are generally responsible for maintaining social relations in communities, we won't get far – or learn much about how to organise communities better – if we don't.

As for the ecological movement, of course, huge parts of it are specifically about defending commons : forests, land, natural resources, water, air, fish, world temperature, biodiversity, DNA, etc., which capital would like to seize, destroy, pollute and squander without thought for the perenity of human communities locally or globally. More fundamental is the rediscovery (the indigenous never forgot this) that our natural « communities » include the other forms of life around us and that natural commons must necessarily also be for them - or be destroyed.

The ecological movement has typically organised local communities against industries seeking to seize or destroy commons. Some threats are much larger than communities, like those of the nuclear industry, global warming or the pollution of life forms by GMOs. They certainly necessitate global struggle and organisation. However, so far the most effective resistance to them has been by networks of local struggles, fighting local nuclear threats, burning GMOs, etc. Whereas the attempts to administer « global commons » globally have generally been sinister farces (see for example the way the International Atomic Energy Association and WHO whitewash Tchernobyl, « market solutions » to global warming or WWF's rather infamous role as accomplice to the World Bank in seizing indigenous peoples' commons and habitat with so-called « debt for nature swaps »). And things aren't getting better with Bush and Neskofi Annan.

The traditional marxist analysis saw the triumph of capital and the destruction of all older social forms, including commons, as a preparation for communism. In that linear logic, hardline marxist-leninists consider zapatistas as woolly headed romantics. The FARC of Colombia, and other « revolutionary organisations », continue to see themselves as the sole sources of (national, ie Statist) revolutionary projects. Consequently, they oppose (including by violence) autonomous indigenous, afro-american or other peasant communities' political perspectives and practices. As George Caffentzis points out, most revolutions and movements of national liberation of the 20th century were made by alliances of peasants and workers, the « sickle and the hammer », guided by revolutionary parties. However, invariably the interests of the « sickle » were finally sacrificed to those of the hammer (heavy industry, « national » priorities, etc.) that for the most part mimicked capitalist development.¹¹

In the North too, communist trade unionists considered anti-nuclear activists reactionary and even leftists first considered feminism or the black liberation movement as « dividing the working class ». Starting from networks of existing communities, on whatever basis they constitute themselves (one person of course usually belonging to several different kinds), is a good insurance against being made to march in step towards new disasters with the next revolutionary subject or party.

¹¹ Caffentzis, George, et al., « The sickle and the hammer », *Auroras of the Zapatistas*, Autonomedia, 2001.

An ethnological perspective on our society: Godbout and modern gift exchange¹²

Traditional marxism oversimplified things. Since history happened one stage at a time (and with one «revolutionary subject») the «primitive communism» of the indigenous was just a sympathetic anachronism. And capitalist society worked by capitalist rules. Period.

As an empirical antidote, and as an inspiration for political imagination, the work of Jacques Godbout and the MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste des Sciences Sociales) is extraordinary, and complements Dejours and Holloway. The three lines of inquiry all recognise the contradictory complexity of society. Nothing is ever definitively black or white. Rather there is a permanent array of battles and skirmishes between opposing principles going on in any particular social arena.

The MAUSS school runs back to the founder of french ethnology, Marcel Mauss, who discovered the central role played by gift exchange and its rules in traditional indigenous societies. Later, Godbout and other researchers of the MAUSS started exploring the important role and specific forms that gift exchange also has in modern societies. Traditional societies being small, everyone was in some way related or knew each other. Modern societies conserve traditional forms of gift exchange with family and friends, but have also developed the new practice of «gifts to strangers», which – together with the development of the State and the market – is a form of social relations which seems to have developed as societies got larger and more anonymous (buddhist compassion or christian charity being examples of its earlier forms). The gift to strangers includes all kinds of associations and social activities belonging neither to the State nor to the market: volunteer work, charities, giving blood, self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, certainly many forms of political activism and solidarity work (although Godbout has apparently not studied them) and - as a particularly enlightening extreme case – the gift of body organs. The monetary value of all kinds of unpaid work in Canada (offered within family relations or as gifts to strangers) was evaluated as 34% of GNP in 1998, and has been rising since the eighties. In moments of crisis, (Godbout studied a disastrous winter «blackout» in Quebec) the practices and principles of the gift to strangers can actually become much more effective and important than – and even partially suspend the rules of – market or State.

In fact, Godbout's empirical studies gradually led him to the conclusion that the essential social ties are exterior to market and State, despite the huge place they take in our lives. This is of course quite obvious in a sense, since people do usually derive all sense of their social value from their relations with family and friends, the sphere of society still governed by the rules of gift exchange. (Even the most hardened capitalist will typically become an alcoholic or kill himself when he realises that the sacrosanct «profit motive» has taken over his relations with his children or his fifth wife.) And when people invest heavily beyond the family it is in good works, activism, to «give» their life for their country, etc. (unless of course they prefer power over others to reciprocal relations).

For Godbout, social links are *essentially* elsewhere, since both market and State are institutions which avoid, short-circuit, the creation of person-to-person social relations. The objective of gift exchange, on the contrary, is precisely to create and maintain them. The right to benefits from the State short-circuits the necessity of a social tie with the lady behind the counter. In the market, individuals meet in order to simultaneously, exchange objects of equal value, which allows them to immediately «exit» the relation. The rules of traditional gift exchange are exactly the reverse. People extend the free exchange of gifts of *unequal* value over the *longest* possible time in order to maintain and strengthen the social *relation*.

Personally, I first experienced this kind of exchange with peasants of Haute Savoie, just outside super-capitalist Geneva. We would bring old bread for the rabbits. After a certain time they gave us... a rabbit! A bit later, that motivated a gift of chocolates, which in turn provoked an invitation to a gargantuan dinner, etc., etc. The remarkable thing about systematically giving more than you have received is that it assures social exchange just as efficiently as equivalence, *plus* you have the pleasure of receiving, of giving, the growth of friendship and confidence in its strength.¹³

¹² I try to resume some of the basic insights of Godbout and of Dejours because they represent two very important schools of thought that are not well known outside the french speaking world. However, I am neither an ergonomist nor an ethnologist. Just take my presentations as the ideas that they inspire in an activist!

¹³ A (non-dogmatic) marxist friend objects that market relations are fetishised and reified, yes, but that they *are* social relations after all. So it would not be so much that the market avoids social relations. Rather, in the market we are disempowered from being constructive agents of these relations. We are not active producers of

For Godbout, Market and State are based on a *rupture* between producers and consumers¹⁴. Both involve the constitution of an apparatus (be it a public service or a private enterprise) which administers a separate body of public (or clients). Social networks (communities), on the contrary, don't have publics. They only have members, and they administer themselves by autoregulation. These networks are characterised by « jumbled hierarchies, vague frontiers and a great redundancy of elements »¹⁵, a definition in which the anti-globalisation networks, for example, will certainly recognise themselves. Whereas of course, a traditional political party or a union definitely have a distinct « apparatus » which administers their particular public.

Thus, the Market functions according to the principle of equivalence, the State according to the principle of rights and equality, and social networks according to the principles of gift and indebtedness.

Of course – and that is the great political interest of this perspective for me – things are not so simple. All three principles are present in any sphere, even if they are not its organisational principle. People defend rights and equality in private enterprises that in principle only recognise individual market relations. They also develop gift governed social relations among employees. In the State sphere, a school teacher or a nurse who has a solely bureaucratic, administrative relationship with her « public » – who has nothing personal to « give » - is generally a rather unhappy and unsuccessful one.

We are inherently social animals, always subverting State and market by creating real social ties. At the theater, the actor exchanges his performance against the price of the ticket according to the law of the Market. But for the performance to be worthwhile he must « give » something more. If he does, the public doesn't just pay for the ticket, it applauds. And the actor in return offers a curtain call that isn't in the contract. And of course all these exchanges can degenerate into empty, commodified rituals !

Our social networks and activities are constantly in danger of being corrupted by market type motivations and practices or coopted by the State. Professionalisation, for example, can transform a social movement into a new area for profitable careers and individualistic competition – or it can be incorporated into a state bureaucracy as new rights and benefits. Of course these are good to have, but as social strength and cohesion they are already half dead. Perhaps that is why the different forms of paternalistic, statist socialism (from the USSR to the Mitterand years) have so generally left societies so unarmed and individualistic. The muscles of community naturally wither if they aren't used.

Similarly, on an individual level, gifts can be offered not for the relation, but to provoke a counter-gift, to dominate, etc.

So, it is not pushing Godbout too much to conclude that we are *not* living under a solely capitalist regime. We live also – and even essentially – by creating social relations, that is to say outside the spheres of capital and State, according to the deep rules of civilisation shared with all the savages of the planet. And there is a constant, molecular struggle going on throughout society. People are constantly deciding which kind of principle they are going to respect. Better and stranger yet, the specific invention of modern, large societies, the gift to strangers, is the most absolute and most disinterested form of gift, since it does not normally allow for a gift in return, thus approaching a situation of commons, or at least a communist attitude. In this case, the giving, the identification of the donor with the unknown receiver, is its own reward.

Godbout goes very deep. Understanding the heart of the gift relationship, brings him to analyse both its dark side and its huge emancipatory potential.

A first, almost trivial, problem is the fact that accepting a gift means creating a relation. So, if the relation is unwanted or dangerous, gifts must be either refused or immediately reciprocated, which thus de facto transforms the exchange into an instantaneous, market-like one, leaving both sides « quit », literally ready to quit each other.

Another obvious problem can arise from the necessity of each time giving more. Unregulated, this can lead to the ruin or to the humiliation of one of the parties. This is one of the forms of domination that can arise from gift exchange. Nothing is more demeaning, in a family or for the unemployed, for example, than being the object of « charity » to which one cannot reciprocate. Similarly, on a global scale, the South not only gives hugely more

them, we are disempowered from the freedom to construct our relations from each-other ! In the example of the bread-rabbit-chocolate-dinner sequence, it is clear that precisely the lack of equivalence of the gift exchange implies the freedom of the participants to define their next move/gift. They seize the initiative, reciprocate, in a reciprocal dance that builds the relation. On the other hand, market relations reproduce their same-sameness. Hayek was actually celebrating this « abstract » quality of market relations, and saw them as the only kind compatible with his definition of individual freedom (choice from a given menu).

¹⁴ This rupture subsists despite – or is even magnified by – structures of « participation ». In fact, it was the study of « participation » and its limits that led Godbout to interest himself in communities and gift exchange.

¹⁵ Godbout, op cit. p. 11

than it receives, but is also made to appear as the constant recipient of « Aid » and as having a huge « Debt » ! Here, capital's falsified accounting manages to manipulate reality and to use our sensitivity to gift relations against us.

Deeper still, Godbout analyses what is essentially dangerous about accepting gifts. Accepting a gift endangers identity because one thereby accepts part of the donor's identity, of his creation and being. For this reason, for example, even within families children can prefer to refuse too much help from their parents. To feel that they exist, they must « make it on their own », prove their autonomous identity. The paradigmatic study for Godbout concerns the gift of organs, in which the gift poses materially, bodily, the question of who is finally who. This is such a problem that the identity of the donor is generally hidden. Medical personnel minimise the problem, talking of organs as simple pieces of hardware (hearts are « pumps », livers are « filters », etc.), but interviews with the recipients reveal that the gift creates a strong and sometimes troubling relation with the donor (even though he is usually both dead and anonymous).

Finally, Godbout examines the most positive possible development of the gift relationship : a mutual and positive sense of indebtedness, but a debt which neither side feels obliged or wants to extinguish. « The two (or more) partners are constantly both givers and receivers (...) In this situation, which escapes linear temporality and the usual gift logic of « always more », it is no longer a matter of giving more, but of giving *as much as possible*, it being understood that in any case, the situation of indebtedness is impossible to overcome and that this is not a problem for either partner.

On the contrary : this situation is considered desirable and privileged.»¹⁶ Anyone who has had the good fortune of such friendships knows how much ! « In that situation, both partners no longer *return* the gifts, they *give*. It is a state of mutual confidence which authorises an indebtedness without guilt, disquiet or anxiety. This situation is characterised by the fact that the debt becomes free, and even without obligation : indebted *and* free.

This state of mutual indebtedness between two persons can be extended to a much larger network which, taken to an extreme, includes the cosmos or God. « It gets lost in the universe » says a woman in an interview. I can never give as much as I have received, but I give in turn so as to be part of this universe. (...) Its a confidence in the universe which is the opposite of the fear of « being had », the fear of giving more than one has received.¹⁷ »

Giving is « literally a fundamental social experience in that by giving we experience the foundations of society, that which links us to it beyond institutionalised, crystalised rules such as the norm of justice. We feel it pass through us, and this creates a particular psychic state.¹⁸ » No doubt the feeling of small babies that are so delighted to give and take back the very same object again and again. This seems silly to silly adults, but the baby has already understood that what is important in exchanges is creating relations, not the object exchanged. At the same time they are demonstrating to themselves that they have come into a benevolent social world where you don't have to hang on to things, because things given come back again. « Why do we give ? If what precedes is admitted, the answer is simple : to connect oneself, to link oneself to life, to make things circulate in a living system, to break solitude, to be again part of the chain, to transmit, feel that one is not alone and that one is part of something vaster – and in particular of humanity – each time that one gives to an unknown person, a stranger living on the other side of the planet, who one will never meet. »¹⁹ This is a much more interesting, positive analysis of charitable giving than thinking that it is « just » a way of giving oneself a good conscience. Well of course it can be, but *why* does it make people feel better ? Leftists probably look down on charity giving because it is uncomfortably similar to their own practice.

Godbout concludes that giving is the experience of a non-individualistic identity. Against the dominant utilitarian, neoliberal paradigm of an « economic man » motivated by self interest, the urge to take and accumulate, he goes so far as to say that, fundamentally, people are more interested in giving than receiving. Note that this is not because they are moralistically self-sacrificing, but on the contrary because giving (ie, identifying with others) is finally a better way of « having life more abundantly » than receiving. In fact, as we have seen, giving can even become threatening, a form of domination or possession of the person who receives.²⁰

¹⁶ Godbout, p. 56

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *Op cit.* p.126

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* p. 127

²⁰ That said, my marxist friend proposes a formulation that may be more balanced. He maintains that human beings are both self-interested/receiver motivated and altruistic and giver/motivated - and necessarily so, given the social nature of our existence. The point is not whether we are or not self-interested (every time I eat something it is an actualisation of a « me, me, me »). The point is that this self-interest, this realisation of *my*

Commons and communities in workplaces

The post '68 movements of the North organised mostly outside of work simply because they were incapable of seriously challenging the control of social democracy in the workplace. Radicality found niches for itself in aspects of society less tightly controlled and which were more in crisis : housing and urban struggles, the situation of women, counter-culture, anti-psychiatry, ecology and of course solidarity (sometimes to the point of projection) with the vibrant anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles elsewhere... even further « outside ». ²¹

But today, thank God, the social democratic « deal », the trade-off between alienation and consumption, is off. There is perhaps an historic opportunity to go back « inside » to.... To do what ? To take up the working class struggle in the same perspective as before ? Perhaps not ! Perhaps from where we are coming from we can see workplace struggles a bit differently.... as also struggles of communities, trying to establish commons of different sorts, trying to live communist values here and now - struggles for « dignity » and dignified social relations just as much as the zapatistas', even if they are disguised as humble, « realistic », wage struggles !

Although the people involved in these struggles may think that they are just defending jobs or wages, they will typically say, off the record, that the most important thing gained through their struggle was better relationships in their community (dignity, comradeship, recognition of the social value of their work), some minimal common space of liberty or autonomy. Isn't that what people involved in almost any big strike or struggle usually say after winning or losing the specific battle ? Isn't that what makes us all continue, generally losing year after year, but always *much* happier doing that than accepting society as it is ?

I would like to even maintain that, tendentially, commons can be – and are - established anywhere (also inside a public service or a private enterprise), as soon as a community (of struggle) forms within or outside them to oblige them to provide real (or better) goods or services to the larger community and/or to allow the community of people working there to have more acceptable (ie horizontal) relations between themselves. This can include hospital workers organising for better work conditions and treatment of patients, bus drivers striking for decent work conditions or inhabitants of a quarter organising to oppose the shutdown of a post office, as much as squatters sharing unoccupied housing (all current examples from Geneva, a well known hotbed of class struggle!).

To defend public services as they are is to start half beaten, because there are enough things badly wrong about them (bureaucratisation, hierarchical centralisation, destruction of peoples' liberty and autonomy, etc.) that the privatisers can make a half convincing case of scrapping them. But if we view public services as a slightly degenerated form of commons (administered by the State, with all the shortcomings of that, rather than as much as possible controlled by communities), we have the correct perspective in which to defend and improve them. Like a union in Geneva that actually had the courage to launch an enquiry with patients and families of old peoples' homes on the subject of their mistreatment at the hands of the personnel (obviously over-stressed by neo-liberal management). Of course, in this perspective it would not be a case of mobilising once for some kind of reform of management, but of exercising power permanently as a patient-personnel community.

Whereas public services can no doubt be easily accepted as forms of commons, it is paradoxical to argue that commons can exist within private enterprise, since commons are by definition social wealth available to all. However, perhaps even there we can find traces of them. For one thing, there are the spaces, goods or time won

needs can only be actualised *through* others. Our political project embedded in the question of « community » is precisely the definition of the *how* (and what for) of these relations to others. We do not want to negate self-interest, this would ultimately mean to capitulate to moralism. However, we want to negate the self-interest of the monad, *the self-interest of the isolated individual* which is the real fundamental construction of the « economic man ».

²¹ Inglehart (The Silent Revolution, Princeton University Press, 1976) and others have theorised that the new social movements born in the affluent sixties, were « post-materialist », neglecting wage and job struggles for wider and more qualitative demands, concerning life styles, ecology, etc. This is certainly true. Young people today cannot imagine the sense of social security that a large part of northern society enjoyed. For many it was more a case of avoiding jobs than finding them! We felt free to attack the essential problem : not earning a living but « changing life ». Already, as Inglehart and others noted, meaning, autonomy, horizontal relations, etc. were the essential demands. However, there were also many leftist groups who tried to establish themselves in industries, and there were vital battles to be fought concerning the quality of life at work. Unfortunately, although it was easy to get a job, it was in most countries impossible to shake the social democratic deal struck by unions and management.

(or stolen) from the boss and shared by the employees – generally negligible quantitatively (though absenteeism reached 18% at FIAT in the '70ties), but important socially. At another level, one could maintain that work that subjectively is really done as a service to the community – and not just as a way to make one's living – is done as a contribution to the common wealth, even if people have to pay to profit from it and the person who does it can't find another framework in which to do it than a commodified relation. After all, people pay at least something to access the commons of culture that are entrusted to libraries or schools, and librarians and authors are paid to offer them. Similarly, all kinds of workers, tradespeople, etc., strive to « do the job right », according to the standards of the profession, despite the corrupting influence of their submission to capitalist logic. Isn't the saleswoman who takes time to give really good advice (including maybe that the cheaper model is actually better) placing herself in a logic of community and – in a way - of commons ? I have in mind two cheese shops. The owner of one seems to be the personification of penny-pinching petite bourgeoisie. The man in the other obviously has a kind of sacred mission to defend that glorious diversity of local cultures that is french cheese. But I never had the obvious reaction of talking to him about WTO !

Workplace communities vs capitalist command structures : insights from Christophe Dejours' Psychodynamics of Work

Reading Dejours makes one acutely aware of the paradoxical nature of the « refusal of work » which was a reference for many of us after '68, of the enchanting slogan « La vie est ailleurs ! ». Not only did most of the movement abandon workplaces, but struggles that did take place on the job tended to concentrate on refusing and disorganising work, seen exclusively under its negative aspect. Magnificent communities were organised in workplaces, but they were (at least according to a certain ideology) more about organising absenteeism and sabotage than more human ways of working. Dejours' vision is less one-sided, illuminating at once the positive and negative aspects of work.

Work at once by definition involves suffering and is a factor of health and fulfillment. Work, even under capitalist command, is essentially social, cooperative and creative.

Work is inseparable from suffering because « work inevitably means experiencing failure – in terms of one's know-how, technique and control of the work process. ²²», but this suffering can lead to destruction and illness or, surmounted, be at the origin of intelligence, ingeniousness and self-fulfillment.

Work always calls for ingeniousness because it is impossible to plan and prescribe everything. There is *always* something unforeseen that forces workers to improvise and to disobey prescriptions. This of course is to be hidden from the hierarchy and shared (if there is mutual trust) with colleagues. The hidden organisation of real work is constructed by the community of workers and implies solidarity, mutual recognition and cooperation.²³ It involves collective debate in which workers justify and finally coordinate the various deviations from prescribed procedures. The debate isn't only technical, it inevitably also involves intuition, feelings, ethics. It constitutes what Dejours calls an « internal public space » (internal because inside a « private » enterprise), but which one might well also call a « commons ». Dejours stresses that « this public space does not take the form of a forum or a « quality circle ». It takes more the form of ordinary convivial spaces, such as the dining room, cafeteria, cocktail or lounge area. » Thus, the most important (but also the most autonomous, the most potentially subversive) part of work takes place during the breaks !

To me, these observations from factories obviously call up my experience of scientific conferences and debates. There too, everyone knows that the important thing is the discussion in the corridors outside, where

²² Dejours, « Subjectivity, work and action », p. 1 , www.lecollectif-tsm.org

²³ For a stunning vision of what work communities can be *without* management on their backs, see the documentary film « Les dockers de Gênes » by Alain Tanner. (The dockers of Genoa are one of the largest and oldest –since 1945 - experiences of self-organisation.) For instance, the complex and potentially dangerous work of these teams unloading ships necessitates that someone coordinate the group. But how are these leaders chosen ? A docker answers that its difficult to say. It just gradually appears evident who it is. And what is the criterion ? That all depends. Sometimes it's because he does everything best. Or because he doesn't really do anything well. He may be the strongest, or the weakest. Or the nicest... or the most disagreeable ! What is very clear is that these people live in a different kind of society. Someone who first sees a crowd of them near the waterfront asks himself, who are those people ? They certainly aren't bosses, but they don't look like normal workers either...

people who have confidence in each other exchange information of how they really work ... and « cheat » with the rigid norms of academia.

More disquieting is the comparison with activism. There too, the serious discussions rarely happen in the public debates or meetings. In fact there is not much discussion even in the regular reunions of activist groups. Most people are afraid to voice their questions about the « official », « consensual » way of doing things in such settings. The real discussions usually happen before or after, between close friends (and that doesn't necessarily mean the whole group) over a drink or a joint. As though our activist « work » was also organised by some sort of « management » that we can't question directly. Ridiculous idea. The biggest problem is probably that we are afraid of saying something « politically incorrect », that shows our ignorance, or simply something silly. Dejours quotes Arendt to say that « the right to be wrong » is essential for the functioning of a real « public space ». Perhaps our first struggle in activist circles should be « For a commons of naive remarks ! »

To return to workplace communities, their negative potential can surface in the « collective defense mechanisms » against the psychic pain inevitably involved in work. From this point of view, the question is no longer how can work lead to pathology, but how do most working people manage to stay more or less normal ? As we have seen, collective defense mechanisms are not necessarily progressive or positive – such as when workers prefer to not use helmets or other safety gear that remind them of risks. Such « macho » mechanisms and attitudes have to become second nature, maintained on and off the job, thus also damaging their private relationships.

Unfortunately, management enormously increases suffering at work in its efforts to maintain control. To maintain its domination, capital has constantly reorganised production, expropriating the knowledge of the workers by automation, fragmenting tasks (and thereby making them boring and meaningless), dictating and controlling production from above, breaking up workplace communities that become too strong, organising competition in place of cooperation.

« Work is not simply an individual experience. We always work for someone. Working always means encountering others in social relations, or in other words, relations of domination and servitude. Under what conditions do men and women who work agree to cooperate with each other ? What conditions allow us to ward off the violence threatening to emerge from the social relations of work ? ... work offers what is perhaps the most ordinary opportunity to learn about living together (in Aristotle's sense) and democracy. But it can also give rise to the worst – the instrumentalisation of human beings and barbarity. ²⁴»

For example, Dejours studied the disastrous degeneration of a work community in a nuclear power plant, after an attempt by management to enforce more strictly the prescribed modes of operation²⁵. The pressure of the hierarchy silenced all discussion of the necessary distortions that workers introduced. The ingenious ways of « cheating » with the rules were no longer recognised and appreciated by colleagues. « Cheating », which had been the essential source of interest, pleasure and recognition in their work, became « a pretext for warnings and sanctions. What had been the noble part of the work and what had implied a real technical and human responsibility for workers » was transformed into an occasion for conflicts, de-structuring cooperative relationships and triggering generalized secrecy and suspicion. The diverse expressions of pleasure at work were the first things to disappear, since the pleasure of the use of a cunning solution could no longer be shared. Cooperation and solidarity withered, followed by conviviality in common relationships, celebrations and beer bashes. People stopped eating together or even greeting each other. The situation continued to degenerate with growing frictions and even hatreds, culminating in vengeance and sabotage... Management reacted by not by questioning its organisational methods, but by attributing the problems to the immaturity or irresponsibility of the workers.

Today, both in public services and private sector jobs, suffering at work has been enormously increased by the new forms of work organisation that globalisation has managed to impose worldwide. A double turn of the screw that has caused a véritable epidemic of work related illness all across Europe. This includes suicides and violence at work, pathologies of stress and overwork and a massive increase in psychic harassment of all kinds. A growing number of men and women are being destroyed, pensioned off as invalids permanently unable to work.

The new conditions combine on the one hand a new round of speed-ups : the hunt for « lost » time, control by computers, by zero stock, client pressure and other such super-Taylorist torture techniques. On the other hand,

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Dejours, « Contributions of the psychodynamic analysis of work situations to the study of organisational crises », *Industrial and environmental Crisis Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No 2, 1993

the demands for autonomy and more interesting work voiced after '68 have been turned against workers by the new notion of « competence ». This requires workers to show initiative and intelligence to accomplish their job (and with a beguiling smile for the client to boot !), without necessarily giving them the means to do it in normal conditions or real recognition for their efforts. Finally, workers have all the disadvantages of being independent combined with all those of being dependent on a boss. The ideal form of this is when work is « outsourced » to nominally independent workers, in fact even more at the mercy of the boss than when they were salaried and unionised.

One of the essential aspects of these new work forms is individualisation and the organisation of « all-out competition between individuals, teams, between departments. Goals contracts, the individualised evaluation of performances, competition between agents and the growing lack of job security are leading to the spread of underhanded conduct between peers and the destruction of solidarities »²⁶ For instance, bosses have always harassed certain employees, what is different is that now fewer mates show solidarity. Sometimes they may even be relieved to see that it is someone else who will be sacked next... The kind of defense mechanisms that people tend to put in place in these circumstances, tend to make them withdraw, isolate themselves and thus further weaken themselves, individually and collectively.

Dejours had always considered that the mobilisation of workers intelligence and zeal, real work, was fundamentally based on their free will and sociability. However in recent years his field studies forced him to admit that there is another possible motivation : fear.

The fear of unemployment first of all²⁷. Fear of getting sacked provokes a general *precarisation* of the workforce with multiple effects : First an intensification of labor and suffering at work. People no longer miss work, even when they are sick. And when they get too sick, they are sacked. The ill health provoked is thus « exteriorised » from the firm. Second, collective resistance to suffering, domination and alienation is muted. Third, a defensive strategy of silence and insensibility sets in. Not only there is « nothing to be done » about the suffering of colleagues, but thinking about it makes it more difficult to « hold out » oneself. Fourth, individualism grows. It's every man for himself.²⁸

Other fears and sufferings undermine employees : the fear of becoming incompetent with respect to the constant restructurations, computerisation, etc. ; the fear of not being able to hold out ; the frustration of being constrained to work badly (with respect to traditional standards) or unethically (with respect to colleagues or clients), of one's work no longer being recognised and appreciated.

In these ever harsher conditions, unions (and leftists) have remained strangely resistant to taking suffering and subjectivity (a « petty bourgeois » preoccupation) seriously, thus encouraging « virile defense mechanisms » and leaving the initiative to managers, who have constantly refined the professional techniques of manipulation. Dejours imputes part of the drastic fall in union membership to the fact that unions haven't addressed these most urgent needs of their membership.²⁹

²⁶ Dejours, « Subjectivity, work and action » page 8

²⁷ A recent study in Switzerland revealed that 30% of all employees are fear losing their job to a « moderate » or « high » degree and that this strongly effects their health and well being : 80% of them suffering from stress, 90% from insomnia. 15% regularly use tranquillisers (twice the rate of those who declare little apprehension of unemployment). They also suffer much more from back aches and consume much more alcohol and tobacco. At the time of the study unemployment in Switzerland was only 5,1% ! (Source, Domenighetti, D'Avanzo and Bisig, « Effects of professional insecurity on health of Swiss employees », *International Journal of Health Services*, Vol. 30, no. 3, 2000.

²⁸ Dejours cites two studies conducted at 20 years interval (1974 -1994) in the same automobile factory. The work itself, qualitatively, had changed very little, but there were much fewer workers and less cadre and surveillance. The proportion of work time spent directly on production had gone up, at the expense of time spent moving around, stocking up, in pauses and « lost » time. Workers are totally concentrated on endurance, on not being « sunk » by the unbearable rythm of production, which goes so fast that often their hands bleed. But nobody even talks about it any more ! It's commonplace. And for each person who breaks down (or is sacked) there are 50 to 100 young people ready to take their place. (Dejours, *Souffrance en France...*, p. 60)

²⁹ Putting together the two aspects of work communities studied by Dejours - the positive (subversive, creative, eminently social) and the negative (the acceptance of injustice and the abject shows of virile « courage », that fear inspires), again reminds one of Holloway : « To think of opposition to capitalism simply in terms of overt militancy is to see only the smoke rising from the volcano. Dignity (anti-power) exists wherever humans live. Oppression implies the opposite, the struggle to live as humans. In all that we live every day, illness, the educational system, sex, children, friendship, poverty, whatever, there is a struggle to do things with dignity, to do things right. Of course our ideas of what is right are permeated by power, but the permeation is contradictory ; of course we are damaged subjectivities, but not destroyed. The struggle to do right , to

Faced with an offensive of this nature, people must rebel or be crushed. And many seem quite ready to rebel – even in the Swiss haven of « work-peace »³⁰. Our small collective (Collectif Travail Santé Mondialisation - CTSM³¹ started working on this theme in Geneva in the last months and drew an impressive response. Not entirely coincidentally, two successful struggles concerning work conditions were organised at this time by hospital workers and bus drivers.

Although many collectives react to pressure by developing inadequate or destructive defense strategies, others on the contrary strengthen their solidarity to fight back. « The present evolution of the organisation of work is not inevitable. It depends (as always !) on the will – and the zeal – of the men and women who make it function. If work can give rise to the worst in the human world, as it does today, it can also give rise to the best. » « If the goal of political action is in fact to honor life and not to bid for power, or better, if the struggle against domination has as its ultimate objective the celebration of life and not the enjoyment of power or the promotion of consumeristic individualism, then the action and the struggle should be aimed at making the organisation of work a priority in political debate. »³²

A first step could perhaps be to reflect seriously on the strange alienation of activists (such as myself) with respect to our own workplaces. All of us activists finally work somewhere, sometime, be it as professionals, students, in alternative schemes or for Manpower. Why do these so rarely seem to be the right place or right time to get involved, politically speaking ? (Personally, I work with school teachers, a very clear case of workers who suffer from the absence of an « internal public space » of debate and cooperation concerning their work!)

And even granted that we have good reasons to continue our engagement with activist groups « outside »... if the goal of political action is to celebrate life... how does that reflect on our activist communities ? How often do they ignore the suffering or the fulfillment of their members for the sake of activist « productivity » ?

On the idea that alternatives are already there, being formulated in the struggles.

Certainly the alternatives can come from nowhere else. We don't want technocrats (of right or left) to planify any more generalised disasters. After the irrationality of planified socialism, we are now measuring the irrationality of planified capitalism. The world scale deliriums of the IMF/WB or of the US government's oil policy of course, but also of the supposedly rational, « competitive » behavior of markets. After years of supposedly record profits, suddenly huge parts of industry are on the verge of bankruptcy ! Technocrats are incapable of planifying rational, social alternatives even at the level of a single enterprise. Take the pre-privatised Swiss postal service, for example. Management just announced that all letters would be sorted in 3 places instead of 18 and affirms that this will « save » 200 million euros a year. Of course this is total bluff. No one can really measure what it will cost society to fire a several thousand people, make others travel for hours to their delocalised and even more stressful jobs (with all the social and ecological consequences), abandon the sorting centers built just a few years ago and build new ones (with hi-tech solutions produced by quasi-slave labor in Asia). All this to make letters take longer to get there, which is fine because faxes and email are the future anyway ! It is more and more apparent that the only real long term plan for capital is constant destruction and reconstruction. By war if necessary, if not by « progress ». Whereas, if one started from ordinary people's needs and common sense, the alternatives might be to stop subsidising junk mail, have separate boxes for local and distance mail and to leave the actually very efficient present system as it is.

That said, it is would be a little too simple to say that all popular demands represent alternatives ! We must learn to distinguish between adaptations to the present situation and system and demands that really are tendentially alternatives. An increase in wage is more an adaptation, especially if it only corresponds to a new round of futile consumption. An increase which decreases differences in wages is already more of an alternative,

live morally, is one that preoccupies most people much of the time. Of course it is a privatised, immoral morality (...) which defines itself as 'do right to those who are close to me and leave the rest of the world to sort itself out' (...) And yet : in the daily struggle to 'do right' there is a struggle to recognise and be recognised... an anger against that which dehumanises (...) it is part of the substratum of negativity which, though generally invisible, can flare up in moments of acute social tension. This substratum of negativity is the stuff that social volcanos are made of. » (Holloway, op cit. p. 159)

³⁰ Swiss unions – with only rare and recent exceptions – stopped striking before World War II !

³¹ www.lecollectif-tsm.org

³² Dejours, « Subjectivity, work and action », p. 8

as is changing hierarchical social relations at work. Reducing work time always seems good, but it does depend a little on what people do with the time that has been freed, doesn't it? Investing the essential of one's energy outside of the wage relation (squats, counter-culture) may seem even more directly alternative, but if it's finally just a sort of alternative consumption one might conclude that it's really only an adaptation.

If we are ready to abandon the idea that some enlightened revolutionaries can define « an » Alternative (as opposed to myriads of communities groping their way towards diverse alternatives), then we must think more about how we can discuss, within and between communities, what kind of steps go in the right direction. Maybe we could learn to refer to basic characteristics of healthier social (ie non-capitalist) relations : for instance, does the demand or practice involve more or less inherent use (rather than extrinsic exchange) value? Community control? Competition, hierarchy, social or environmental costs, violence of some kind?

Communities and local control are basic because nothing more favors the irresponsibility and impotence of the majority and the power of the few than larger, globalising processes. After all, it was (at least according to Braudel) long distance trade that first let the capitalist cat out of the bag. Local exchanges long remained under the control of the community. People will care more about creating toxic wastes when they stay nearby. They will be more sticklish about how their food is produced if they see it happen. They will be more responsible if they can see the results of their action (or inaction) on others.

Of course, some demands of particular communities (like defending jobs in arms production or the nuclear industry, or defending a neighborhood in danger of being chosen for a refugee center) are not acceptable at all. But community control doesn't mean necessarily deciding only locally or in favor of local interests. It is also about communities learning to think for themselves globally. A modern phenomenon such as the gift to strangers or the worldwide networks of resistance and solidarity of which we are a part seem to indicate that such a development is possible. The survival of humans seems more and more to depend on the bet that they are capable of extending the kind of social relations that are usually restricted to « communities » in networks beyond the horizon and around the world. That is what political solidarity was already about when people joined the international brigades in Spain. The anti-globalisation movement is certainly a brilliant new example of this. Not only « teamsters and tortoises » in Seattle, but indigenous and peasants and punks and sweat shop workers (and even more « organised » workers !) are starting to realise that they have the same enemies and many diverse but in some way similar dreams. Hopefully, we are also realising that our divisions (men/women, north/south, ethnic, etc.) and other reactionary aspects of our lives and communities - that may have seemed quite all right 'till now - are just too useful to the enemy and harmful to ourselves to tolerate any longer. Personally, I don't think there is a conflict between community and larger solidarity. The day we will have straitened out our local communities, we will have the strength to move mountains, and no problem dealing with wider relations.