Situationist International

ANTHOLOGY

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Edited and translated by Ken Knabb
The Use of Free Time

The most superficial and constantly reiterated platitude of leftist sociologists during recent years is that leisure has become a major factor in advanced capitalist society. This platitude is the basis of countless debates for or against the importance of a reformist rise in the standard of living, or of workers’ participation in the prevailing values of the society into which they are becoming increasingly integrated. What is counterrevolutionary about all this verbiage is that it equates free time with passive consumption, as if the only use of free time was the opportunity to become an increasingly full-time spectator of the prevailing absurdities. The illusions manifested in a particularly ponderous symposium of these sociologists (Arguments #12-13) were soundly refuted in two articles in Socialisme ou Barbarie #27. In the first, Canjuers wrote: “While modern capitalism constantly develops new needs in order to increase consumption, people’s dissatisfaction remains the same as ever. Their lives no longer have any meaning beyond a rush to consume, and this consumption is used to justify the increasingly radical frustration of any creative activity or genuine human initiative—to the point that people no longer even see this lack of meaning as important.” In the second article, Jean Delvaux noted that the issue of consumption has not superseded the qualitative distinction between the poor and the wealthy (four out of five wage workers are still constantly living at a level of extreme poverty). More significantly, he pointed out that there is no reason to worry about whether or not the proletariat participates in the prevailing social or cultural values, because “there no longer are any such values.” And he added the essential point that the present culture, “increasingly separated from society and from people’s lives (painters painting for other painters, novelists writing novels read only by other novelists about the impossibility of writing a novel)—this culture, insofar as it has any originality, is no longer anything but a constant self-denunciation: a denunciation of the society and a rage against culture itself.”

The emptiness of leisure stems from the emptiness of life in present-day society, and it cannot be filled within the framework of that society. This emptiness is simultaneously expressed and concealed by the entire cultural spectacle, in three basic forms.

The “classic” form of culture continues to exist, whether reproduced in its pure form or in latter-day imitations (tragic theater, for
example, or bourgeoise politeness). Secondly, there are the countless
degraded spectacular representations through which the prevailing
society presents itself to the exploited in order to mystify them
(television sports, virtually all films and novels, advertising, the auto-
mobile as status symbol). Finally, there is an avant-garde negation of
the spectacle, a negation which is often unconscious of its basis but
which is the only “original” aspect of present-day culture. The “rage
against culture” expressed within this latter form ends up arriving at
the same indifference that proletarians as a class have toward all the
forms of spectacular culture. Until the spectacle has been totally
negated, the audience watching the negation of the spectacle can no
longer be distinguished from that suspect and unhappy audience con-
sisting of isolated artists and intellectuals. When the revolutionary
proletariat manifests itself as such, it will not be as a new audience for
some new spectacle, but as people actively participating in every aspect
of their lives.

There is no revolutionary problem of leisure—of an emptiness to be
filled—but a problem of free time. As we have already said: “There can
be no freely spent time until we possess the modern tools for the
construction of everyday life. The use of such tools will mark the leap
from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art”
(Debord, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” Internationale Situationniste
#1). The supersession of leisure through the development of an activity
of free creation-consumption can only be understood in relation
with the dissolution of the traditional arts—with their transformation
into superior modes of action which do not reject or abolish art, but
fulfill it. That is how art will be superseded, conserved and surmounted
within a more complex activity. Its traditional elements may still be
partially present, but transformed, integrated and modified by the
totality.

Previous avant-garde movements presented themselves by declaring
the excellence of their methods and principles, which were to be im-
mmediately judged on the basis of their works. The SI is the first artistic
organization to base itself on the radical inadequacy of all permissible
works; and whose significance, and whose success or failure, will be
able to be judged only with the revolutionary praxis of its time.