

THE ALIENATED SCREENS OF INDIVIDUALISM



Google images

A single image will suffice to illustrate our analysis: the hallucinatory, hypnotic vision of citizen-passengers on public transport, almost all of them focused on their smartphones, obsessed with the screen, earphones screwed into their ears, their gaze lost in a surreal ocean of solitude. The very term "public transport" is no longer appropriate, as it is a collection of separate corpuscles in a vegetative coma. The very use of books and newspapers has almost disappeared, having passed into the fold of postmodern technicality. The screen is not simply a means of "communication," which is often one-sided; it also disrupts the private sphere, making "public" what was previously the domain of the individual or the family.

These digital tools also provide an opportunity to loudly assert communal, linguistic, religious, and musical preferences, which for some, like certain items of clothing, become a form of indirect propaganda. Screens are, therefore, both tools of digital communication and, in the sense of "screening," a veil: a technological "smoke screen," an interposition whose "subordinate" function is to hide reality. These new technologies also serve to impose "family peace" by replacing parental responsibilities, leaving the educational and moderating tasks to screens. Like all machines, they are not neutral agents. Everything depends on who uses them and for what purpose.

Screens are thus a vector for the transmission of the dominant ideology in many forms, fostered by their privileged relationship with the individual monad. Furthermore, they give rise to a series of physical and psychological disorders and pathologies that reinforce the social process of atomization, isolation, and difficulties in communicating, socializing, and, therefore, living. They are both the cause and consequence of a social disadvantage that produces loneliness and isolation under the pretext of remedying them. The various types of digital screens (smartphones, tablets, computers, televisions, including their "game" functions) can tend to replace the educational sphere, especially that of learning critical thinking.

The world of screens increasingly signifies the organization of the Orwellian distortion of a reality in which any vestige of community -even fictitious- and common interests has been destroyed, in favor of competition and exacerbated individualism. The world of screens is the dream world of social democracy come true, where the "drugged" individual is convinced that

he or she acts freely by making his or her own electoral, cultural, commercial, and television decisions. It is the self-service of alienated thought, the digital factory of the passive, almost "undead" imbecile. This passivity is characteristic of the society of the spectacle. However, like any tool -the productive force of capital- if it is subsumed by capital, it is also contradictory and, therefore, possesses positive elements that could be transformed and utilized for the future, thanks to a mode of production that has gone beyond the MPC (capitalist mode of production). Properly used and regulated, screens can also be an appreciable aid to children's cognitive development and to their self-mastery of digital tools. In a similarly "contradictory" way, they can help convey critical and subversive content when used from an activist perspective.

They can even be used as tools and remedies to treat the pathologies they generate before their excessive use. But on the whole, under MPC, the use of screens and digital technology - like that of other productive forces of capital (think of nuclear power or AI...) - is likely to have more of the disadvantages and annoyances induced by the nature and immanent logic of the bourgeois system (profit, alienation, separation, etc.) that gave rise to them. The mediation/separation inherent in the use of screens leads to a skewed social relationship, typical of mature capitalism, where the human becomes an unconscious extension of the machine, unable, for some users, to master either its logic or its language. This makes the more widespread subversive use of these technologies very difficult. Global and military control (via satellite) of this type of digital technology increasingly turns it into a weapon of domination and mass submission to capital in its warlike race for survival.

Furthermore, governments are more likely to seize control of these technologies and use them for surveillance and repression than to ban them. The fact is that some very old people are forced to adapt, even if only administratively, to these new technologies, which reinforce their isolation through digital fencing.

Debord had already significantly anticipated the devastating effects of what was to become the "screen society."

"The spectator's alienation from the object contemplated (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed thus: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he accepts recognition in the dominant images of necessity, the less he understands his own existence and desire. The exteriority of the spectacle to man in action is manifested in the fact that his own actions are no longer his own but are represented to him by another. This is why the spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 30, p.19, Champ Libre, Paris, 1971.

Some of the pathological effects of intensive screen use

Obviously, these pathological elements are even more numerous and dangerous given that users are young and regularly subjected to long periods of exposure, which can amount to a veritable "digital lobotomy." The first thing that comes to mind is the onset of mental disorders following "excessive" and repeated screen use: anxiety, depression, suicidal behavior. But we must immediately add "complementary" disorders such as musculoskeletal

disorders (MSDs) linked to poor posture. In addition, nutritional imbalances are often observed, which, over time, can lead to weight loss, overweight, and/or obesity:

«According to a five-year study of 43,722 women between the ages of 35 and 74 by National Institutes of Health (NIH) researchers, those who fell asleep in front of the television gained an average of 11 pounds over five years and were 30 percent more likely to be obese. The main culprit was exposure to artificial light at night, which can disrupt various biological processes (particularly the hormonal system) and increase the risk of obesity.»¹

Headaches, vision and language learning problems, lack of physical activity, and an increase in sleep disorders are all regularly observed in what is increasingly considered a social and technological pandemic. In addition to these pathologies, there are longer-term repercussions on brain development in young people and adults (mood disorders, loss of social skills), as well as risks of disease, including cardiovascular disease. Other symptoms could be considered social byproducts of the addiction caused by the alienated use of screens. Such is the case with the theory of "Incels" -involuntary celibates- and "Femcels" (their female counterpart), defined as an online "subculture" whose members are unable to engage in romantic or sexual relationships and experience their involuntary celibacy -or inability- as an injustice. This frustrating situation produces widespread resentment, self-pity, and, above all, misogyny and misanthropy. The result for incels is a strong desire to violently attack all women. This animosity is ideologically legitimized by the adoption of virilistic curses and, above all, the doctrines of the fascist far right, with its morbid cult of Hitler and the "cultural" trappings of Nazism.

«A dozen murders, including at least six mass murders, were committed between 2014 and 2020 by men who declared themselves incels and were marked by far-right ideology»².

It was the Netflix series "Adolescence" that recently brought this phenomenon to the forefront of media spectacle, transforming it into a "masculinist" response to the onslaught of "feminist" ideology. The problem of capitalist alienation is thus modified and amplified with every technological development, isolating the individual citizen in their bubble of miserable survival.

Alienation and individualization of the citizen

Understanding the problem of alienation is one of the unequivocal signs of living Marxism.

«It is, in fact, because there is a human essence subsumed under value and capital that there is alienation of man in inhuman relations which are revealed in a particular way, as a result of exploitation, in the condition of the proletarian.» Matériaux Critiques No. 1, "The Critique of Alienation: Cornerstone of Marx's Humanism"³.

The material and intellectual dispossessions brought about by alienation dissolve class relations into simple relations between individuals. This reduction -or distortion- is greatly

¹Information campaign on the proper use of screens at: <https://lebonusagedesecrans.fr/essentiel-a-savoir/consequences-usage-excessif/>

²The Pandemic as Incels see it, Cambridge University (2020) on the site: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/34407129>

³Read on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

facilitated and amplified by the dazzling development of technologies, including digital ones. It is thanks to these technologies that workers are forced into submission, **isolated** from the machine and its repetitive rhythm. Widespread automation means the independence of the machine tool, which has become the beast-subject of progress in the production of value, while the worker-object is reduced to an almost superfluous appendage in the capitalist organization of labor. There is a "subject-object inversion" inherent to commodification, which apparently sustains the independence and autonomy of the tool, in this case the digital tool, with respect to the worker subjected to it.

It is the market system that creates the individual, both in its egoistic aspect limited to its private interest and in its negation of what it could represent as a still representative segment of a collectivity. Individualism is not the realization of the individual as an "indivisible" unit, but the paroxysm of its separation from others and from itself. Individualism, with its abstract cult of the "self," implies the deconstruction of any holistic vision of class or community belonging. The proletarian individual is a permanently moving dispossession: it sells itself to buy what it has previously been dispossessed of. All relationships are reduced to an exchange between commodities, equivalent to equivalent. The individual has become a monster of loneliness and separation, falsely perceiving itself as the realized expression of an independent totality, freed from all social determination. The Stirnerian ego is the negation of all human community and, therefore, of all that is human in man.

The process of individualization lies at the root of the bourgeois problem of "rights." Instead of being wrestled and won through struggle, legitimate demands are subtly transformed into more or less firm demands for partial reform of the all-powerful state. This de facto recognition of its "totalitarian" domination is exchanged for the granting of "rights," that is, legal adjustments, in its management of social relations. This adjustment allows for the internalization of social relations in a more peaceful and negotiated manner, without having to resort to open confrontation that could degenerate into a full-blown class struggle.

«Thus, none of the so-called human rights extend beyond the egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society, that is, an individual turned in on himself, on his private interest and his private whim, the individual separated from the community.» K. Marx, *The Jewish Question*, in *Philosophy*, p.73, Folio, Gallimard, Paris, 1994.

It is free will that underlies the "irreducible" character of the individual. Now, the free will is a theological concept forged by Saint Augustine to justify God's irresponsibility in the face of evil and, therefore, man's exclusive responsibility/guilt for original sin. This sin is punishable by forced labor. This is one of the ideological reflections of the very needs of market societies. But there is also, independently of classical liberalism, an apologia for the sovereign individual, for the "One," in non-worker and non-class anarchism, represented by the famous "Saint Max." Stirner initially opposed the humanism of Hegel and Feuerbach, before being harshly criticized in "The German Ideology."

«On the contrary, it already represents a specific mode of activity of these individuals, a specific way of manifesting their life, a specific way of life. The way individuals manifest their life reflects very exactly what they are. Therefore, what they are coincides with their production, both with

what they produce and with the way they produce it. What individuals are, therefore, depends on the material conditions of their production.» Marx - Engels, The German Ideology, p.46 social editions, Paris, 1968.

The citizen is the political representation of individualism; isolated as a member of bourgeois civil society, he is also a proactive agent in his participation in all the spectacles of state totalitarianism. He is the man who walks alone, for capital. Citizenship is its postmodern ideology; it is the apologia for the voluntary alienation that corresponds to the arsonist firefighter or the drug dealer. It is participatory self-alienation. Moreover, journalists and other "critics" are increasingly replaced by "influencers" with no qualifications other than stardom. The latter even go so far as to livestream the murder of one of their colleagues, thus demonstrating Hegel's inverted observation: "the true is a moment of the false."

This confusion between the true and the false -two notions that are supposed to be mutually exclusive- has become a typical artifact of the spectacle, or of its grotesquely amplified form, so ironically referred to as "reality TV." The organized confusion surrounding "truth and falsehood" enables the widespread use of "fake news" for both economic and war-mongering purposes and constitutes the preferred matrix for the confusionism typical of totalitarian and conspiratorial propaganda⁴. Truth is presented as a farce, while falsehood reveals the strategies employed to impose a capitalist truth. The despotic power of the spectacle thus takes the increasingly scandalous form of "media excesses." Digital tools are the preferred vehicle for this, delivering the most scandalous stories in all fields.

«Just as the logic of the commodity prevails over the diverse competitive ambitions of all merchants, or the logic of war always dominates the frequent changes of armament, the strict logic of the spectacle rules over the abundant diversity of media extravaganzas everywhere.» G. Debord, Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, p.17, Gérard Lebovici editions, Paris, 1988.

The process of individual submission constitutes the social basis for the realization of democracy as a collective of limited, free, and equal individuals. The concept of alienation allows us to describe two distinct expressions of reality: on the one hand, objective alienation as the domination of mechanical (technical) power over human beings; and on the other, subjective alienation, that is, the analysis of the consequences of capitalist exploitation in the dispossession of workers' agency. This means that it is objective alienation that allows us to understand subjective alienation.

«Exploitation theory allows us to show the subjective dimension of alienation. With the analysis of work, which allows us to conceive of subjective alienation, we can identify the relationships between the two aspects of alienation.» O. Sar, Le problème de l'aliénation, p. 140, L'Harmattan, Paris 2012.

This question is fundamental because it implies that the elimination of alienation in communist society, in both aspects, simultaneously presupposes the elimination of wage slavery and labor. The overcoming of the capitalist social relationship contains the de facto critique of the fetishism of the machine and technology. This does not in any way mean a

⁴Conspiracy theory is a theory that aims to present reality as being largely the product of a conspiracy, i.e., a plan secretly organized in advance by a few malicious individuals. This type of "theory" allows one to exempt oneself from any materialistic and comprehensive analysis.

retrograde return to the technophobic horror of certain ecologist-primitivists, but rather a conscious and coherent transformation with the project of an emancipatory society that is communist society. If Marx and Engels, particularly following in the footsteps of Fourier, spoke of "communism," even of "primitive" communism, it was to validate the communitarian, "collectivist" content of these human communities, not yet capable of consciously making their own history because they were overdetermined by the need for immediate reproduction and by the fundamental contradiction between "scarcity and abundance," but whose human nature was expressed precisely in the prevalence of the common interest. These were communities that, even if limited, produced for use value, that is, for social utility. Indeed, Marx systematically uses the words "positive overcoming" and "return"; thus, a loss of human content has indeed occurred, which must also be "rediscovered" and overcome.

The development of the productive forces, of private property, and of production for exchange will, as they develop, "respond to these natural limitations by destroying, dissolving, and "losing" this human character, to affirm the alienated and inhuman pole of class societies. The stakes of these revolutionary transformations once again underscore the importance of the "transitional period" and the need for profound political reflection on it. It is not a matter of removing a "wrapping," of blowing a lid, to liberate a ready-made, all-beautiful individual, but of setting in motion a long process of struggle to conquer ownership of social power, of the "general intellect," to overcome labor by abolishing it, and with it, social connections. We must not imagine that the essential problem in achieving collective control and abolishing the rule of men lies above all in the forms of political power (federative republic, council communism, self-management, etc.).

The key lies in the real appropriation of the conditions of production and of all social power: knowledge, material capacities and, therefore, also the techniques for being free.

Munis rightly stated in a 1973 article: *"Universal mercantilism and the corruption of the present system arise from the initial operation of purchasing labor power with a wage; this is its basic social relation. Without its suppression, no revolution will succeed in becoming communism. (...) As long as the law of value is not eliminated, no organic combination (centralism, federalism, verticalism, horizontalism, councilism, autonomism, partyocracy) and the most authentic honesty of the most capable men will succeed in averting the danger of any return to the past."* G. Munis, *Revolutionary Class, Political Organization, Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, published in French in *Alarme* no. 13, September 1981 then in *L'Esclave Salarié* no. 2, September 1995⁵.

This is what Marx had already indicated when he advocated the development/transformation of productive forces, thanks to the increase in productivity and the reduction of the intensity of exploitation: limiting forced labor to necessary labor **and**, therefore, reducing surplus labor to a "reserve and accumulation fund."

*«The trick is (on the contrary) that the labor time necessary to satisfy absolute needs leaves **free time** (which varies according to the different stages of development of the productive forces), so that we can create a surplus product by performing surplus labor. The goal is precisely to abolish this relationship, so that the surplus product itself appears to be a necessary product and so that, in the*

⁵ Republished for us on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/archives>

end, material production leaves everyone with a surplus of time for other activities.» K. Marx, Grundrisse, Vol. II, Éditions Sociales, p. 103, Paris, 1980.

The productive forces, that is, all the productive capacities of a given social formation are therefore always those developed and generated by a specific mode of production. The productive forces and their development cannot in any way be equated with the progressive and "harmonious" development of human history; rather, they correspond to the acceleration of explosive contradictions, including the primordial contradictions between the productive forces of capital and the social relations of wage labor. Therefore, the demand for the abolition of wage slavery is an invariable and permanent objective of the program of the social revolution.

«In the social production of their life, men are bound together by certain indispensable relations, independent of their will, by relations of production, which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which the legal and political superstructure is raised. (...) At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but the legal expression of this—with the property relations within which they have hitherto developed. These relations are transformed from forms of development of the productive forces into obstacles to them. Thus, an era of social revolution begins.» K. Marx, Preface to Critique of Political Economy (1859), p. 4, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1972.

The communist revolution entails the destruction/transformation of the two poles of the contradiction to generate other productive forces, including digital tools consistent with a new human, liberated, and liberating social relationship.

«In a non-ionized social environment, the various human molecules do not orient themselves in two antagonistic alignments. In these gloomy and repulsive times, no molecule can arrange itself in a single orientation. The "historical" field is zero and no one cares. It is at these moments that the cold, inert molecule, neither flowing with an imperious current nor fixed to an indestructible axis, covers itself with a kind of crust called consciousness, begins to bark that it will go wherever it wants, whenever it wants, and elevates its immeasurable nullity and stupidity to the level of the causal subject of history. But if there is ionization, then the individual man -molecule- finds himself aligned and flies along his line of force, finally forgetting this pathological idiocy that centuries of disorientation have celebrated under the name of free will.» A. Bordiga, Economic and Social Structure of Today's Russia. 1956.

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