

# A Short Ontology of the Spectacle

## In the Footsteps of Guy Debord

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### **The Structuring Power of Socialized Beliefs**

A fundamental reality of any society is that the relationships established among people (as individuals or as agency representatives) have ontological validity. That is, social relationships—although immaterial in essence since they are reflections in people's minds—carry structuring power over the events occurring in the socio-economic fields. When social relationships coalesce into repetitive activities, they create social institutions that ensure a certain degree of permanence to the expectations that activities conforming to the institutions will carry. For instance, as buyers go to markets with the purpose of engaging in the particular economic activity of buying, they are dependent upon seeking out structured social institutions (malls, power centres, flea markets, etc.) that promises that sellers will be present with the matching purpose of selling.

However, structures facilitating economic activities are not impartial social phenomena. They are constantly evolving from networks constituted by path dependent histories of social and economic relationships, which over time often lead to the forming of hierarchical structures that leaves room for power positions to evolve.

Structuring power can be considered animations of asymmetric positions in social spaces, which is guided by the perceptions and socialized beliefs held by the agents positioned in the given networks. Thus, actuation of roles connected to the events that fills the social spaces is at the open level framed by the structuring patterns of the involved institutions. However, the actual effects are dependent upon the perceptions, socialized beliefs and power-level positions of the engaged actors. These factors create the social medium that guarantee institutional cohesion, which in the specific case can be brought about by a

spectrum of mental triggers that even can become internalized in the reactive body. This spans from voluntariness (acceptance of institutional goals based for instance on critical analysis of a situation), meme inculcations (i.e. non-power actors who absorb beliefs that rationalize submission to the power actors' interests), and in the extreme, submission to the power actors interests engendered by threats of violence.

Whether the actions that produce observable outcomes are deemed rational or not, when the gravity of embedded power relations are at play (which can be of pure economic, or mixed socio-economic origin) they will inevitably impart the outcomes with aspects that go beyond the intentions embedded in the formal social institutions. These framing capacities of power-augmented structures exist within all typologies of economic institutions; be it markets, public distributive organs, predatory (criminal) tribalism, etc.

Therefore, the ontological reality of social structures is created not only by societal intentions embedded in formal institutions, but also by being modulated by their specific mix of individually structured actuations; as these reflect each individual's power position, economic habitus<sup>1</sup> and goal interpretations.

In the case of economic events, it is therefore not enough to analyze them within the framework of a theory based on formalized assumptions, but the analysis must also include how social relationships, socialized perceptions and power positions between involved actors are able to influence or dominate the distributive outcomes that the economic institutions channel.

Standard economics, which is based on marginalism and equilibrium concepts handed down from neoclassical economics, mainly restricts itself to deal with a set of formalized structures where socializing and political aspects largely are neglected. Therefore, it does not provide a methodology that allows for a comprehensive analysis of economic events, due to its ignorance of the specificity, which the structures connecting interactionist positions add to, or detract from, the agents' ensemble of possibilities.

This does not imply a wholesale rejection of the neoclassical concepts, many of which have independent descriptive validities. If for instance prices are misaligned by

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<sup>1</sup> On the meaning of the Bourdeausian concept of habitus, see below p.4.

monopolistic conditions, they still respond to impacts from forces of supply and demand, but the changes such forces will impart upon the events will not be equilibrium trending, but will be relative to the existing misalignments. Thus, the state of misalignment will be the focal point of the changes, and the direction of change that the given supply-demand forces impart upon the field will take its course governed by perceptions and power positions held by the involved actors.

If a social relation, which in the first place created a misalignment, has become embedded in the economy as a structuring force, under its continuing influence supply-demand impacts will therefore not produce equilibrium, or even movement towards balancing positions. Instead, the established structuring force will push the outcomes in the given field further into directions that perpetuate and enlarge the misalignment. A case in point is the power structures that have evolved within neoliberal financialized capitalism since approximately 1980. They have constantly pushed income disparities further and further apart in a process that has slowed real growth and led to near stagnation of real incomes for all but the very top of the incomes spectrum. Such a process cannot be gainfully analyzed by a theory that assumes equilibrium (and therefore denies that misalignments can exist in the first place and turn into secular structuring forces), but only by an analytical view that starts with acknowledging the social embedment of observed economic realities, and then search for the socio-economic forces that have created the misalignments.

In parallel with its view of supply-demand forces, the concept of marginality is likewise an important tool employed by the neoclassical analysis. It is mainly employed to sort out the trade-offs that occur in economic networks, in particular when related to series of repetitive economic events. Liberated from the neoclassical orthodoxy, the concept of marginality remains a valuable analytical tool. The point of departure is that there is no reason to believe that changes at the margin—be it of prices or other market conditions—only can be analyzed by theories based on the notion of rational actors driven by equilibrating supply and demand forces. Price changes, substitutions, etc., are responding to forces that originate from actors who are embedded in social networks where trades at the margin might be fair trades between responsible social actors, but just as well might

be trades that represent power structured—and therefore misaligned—conditions that push the condition for the next trade (exchange) further and further into misaligned, or non-balanced, territory.

When such trends develop, the data points they produce will nonetheless continue to be reported as price and quantity changes, and the changes can still be analyzed as marginal changes; but not seen from equilibrium positions, but from positions determined by complex forces which can pull in all sorts of direction in patterns that conflict with neoclassical equilibrium assumptions. In other words, an observed price-quantity change can just as well be a result of a fair exchange between equally positioned actors, as a result of market power and monopolistically structured competition that move the sequence of events away, not from the meaningless concept of equilibrium, but better stated as: away from fair balances between the interests of all involved parties.

### **Preference Formation in a Bourdieussian Interpretation**

A basic tenet of neoclassical economics is to consider the economic spaces, in which actors operate, as continua of endowments and utility preferences (use-values, which in the modern interpretation include present consumption accessed through debt as well as preference for future consumption accessed through savings).

The concepts of ‘doxa’ and ‘habitus’ coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu can add clarity to the question of how economic preferences form in socialized settings. Doxa is a Greek word meaning ‘public opinion’ (thus, we meet it in the endings of words such as ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’). Bourdieu expands the concept of doxa to mean the beliefs and knowledge that people have come to take for granted; in his words ‘that which goes without saying’ and therefore that which is not being subjected to the logic of argument during everyday social encounters. It is the deep-seated beliefs that tend to govern the direction and evaluation of social events and interactions (and include the meme-inculcated beliefs mentioned above). If we are faced with arguments questioning our doxa-

based beliefs during social encounters, the tendency is to dig in and stubbornly defend them rather than listen with an open mind to the counterpoints raised.

Doxa is thus the beliefs that are constructed by experiences deposited as subconscious motivators, inculcated by various deep influences such as culture and upbringing, and, subsequently, by experiences arising in an individual's micro-social environment. Oftentimes, the inculcations are mediated by class relations, and relations that are specific to social sub-groups, including political parties, workplaces, social movements, etc.

Paralleling this, habitus is a person's socialized temperament or the dispositions through which the impacts of the world are absorbed. Habitus is likewise coloured by the culture and beliefs prevalent in the family and social group (class) in which upbringing and subsequent life experiences have taken place. When habitus first has formed and solidified, it will therefore determine how general opinions or publicly shared doxa beliefs—which are prevalent in the surrounding social class or interacting sub-groups—are integrated into the individuals' life experience. In other words, habitus determines the tenor with which the elements of socialization combine into patterns of actions and decisions; whether reactive dispositions are, say aggressive, or have whatever tenor they will have. This means that there is a reflexive relationship between doxa and habitus: how one's continuing life experiences evolve will to some extent impact dispositions and slowly change them, but in a reflexive interplay with the held beliefs.

Thus, individuals who work on Wall Street, doctors volunteering for “Doctors Without Borders”, or those belonging to a biker gang, all will have, most likely, class-based habitus that have led them toward the specific character of the engagement with the world that these disparate activities bear witness to. During engagement in the chosen activities, the doxa-based beliefs that at first steered them to the specific social positions will often tend to be cumulatively reinforced, but critical experiences or catastrophic events occurring in connected social spaces can at times rock the deep-seated dispositions and beliefs and take them in new directions (for instance, when the disastrous defeat of Germany by the end of the Second World War coupled with the emerging knowledge of the holocaust rooted the Nazi doxa out of most Germans).

## **Trifecta of the Spectacle**

One of the newcomers with structuring powers, which appeared in the social spaces of industrial societies, was political ideology, bound to specific political parties or interest groups. They customarily attempt to (and in the recent case, rather successfully) hide that their origins typically spring from defences of narrow and often class-based interests that almost invariably centre around material distributive issues. This includes, in our Western cultural case, how the activities of governments should or should not be allowed to influence the distributive economic relationships of capitalist market economies.

Marketing is another newcomer in the ensemble of social institutions that has played a crucial role in forming the macro structures of industrial societies. Images and word memes manufactured by the marketing industry play important roles in structuring preferences for material consumption. In its cumulative effects, marketing creates preferences that connect over time to doxa-based perceptions, which will dominate activities in the networks of daily life. Moreover, since marketing effects often focus on triggering preferences connected to peer relations and perceptions of enhancing peer acceptance, the individual under its influence will—in order to gain social acceptance—feel compelled to follow consumption patterns prevalent in proximity social groups, such as among neighbours, work colleagues, or participants in other close social networks. Thus, preferences mediated through doxa often push a factual evaluation of utilities into the background. Such effects have become very powerful forces in shaping the prevalent consumption patterns of modern capitalist societies. And, as it is becoming increasingly clear, it has created a prevalence of patterns that in its aggregated state lead to large-scale collateral damages, such as the excessive ecological footprints that modern consumer societies leave behind.

In contrast to political ideologies and marketing, another significant element of the modern post-industrial cultural space, entertainment, is no newcomer. For instance, in feudal societies entertainment included the often quite politicized troubadours and theatre troupes performing popular culture on the market squares. On the other side of feudal society, the salons of the nobility were brimming with less politicized poetry reading

and music performances (l'art pour l'art, a forerunner of the spectacle, but cultural expressions which of course were also politicized by their omissions).

However, under the modern cultural condition in which a high level of commercialization have engulfed all components of society, popular and high-brow culture are increasingly conflated into a new medium of meta-entertainment that performs two important roles in the ontological construction of society: A) it creates life-style stereotypes that serve to reinforce and work in tandem with the memes employed by the marketing industry. B) It throws a carpet of distractions out over society, allowing economic and political power structures to solidify without much opposition, and with little attention accorded to the consequences of the socio-economic misalignments they lead to.

Particularly noteworthy is that the commercial entertainment industry—invariably bestowing high rents and factor incomes on its front-line participants—has also absorbed a large segment of the news media into its meta-sphere. One result is that the newscasters themselves are elevated into the celebrity class constructed by the entertainment culture. In this commercialized environment, the dissemination of popular culture and news merge into the so-called infotainment, a format that more often than not produces interpretations and portrayals of events that not only are shallow, but also uncritically take the current structuring of class divisions and income inequalities for an unavoidable, even admirable, fact of society.

The totality of this trifecta—political ideologies, commercial-political marketing, and meta-entertainment—combines into what the French situationist, Guy Debord, dubbed “The Society of the Spectacle”.<sup>2</sup> Debord specifies: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”

The consequence of this conflation of ideology, marketing and entertainment creates a society that alienates the individual by producing a succession of disjointed images and sound bites that dissipate the mental capacity for logical analysis, critical thinking, and in the end stifles the natural drive to creative activity. Thus, important creative aspects of a

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord: *The Society of the Spectacle*, (1967). The Situationists was a movement of artists that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. Debord's book was a main influence on the French student revolt of 1968.

living culture have increasingly being replaced by passive activities that in the recent period increasingly are migrating into the new digital environments. This development has, in what perhaps is its primary effect, reduced the attention span that individuals can mobilize for reflection on the realities of society, and for participation in critical discourses. The primary structuring effect of the spectacle is a conversion of the perception of reality into the virtual sphere, where all sorts of manipulations are easily accomplished by those in control of the structures producing the elements of the spectacle.

The alienation and the veil over reality that the spectacle cast over society have strong effects on the individuals' abilities to form positive personal aspirations. In particular, it impairs the ability to form interpersonal relationships with strong emotive content, and the ability to emphasize with disenfranchised groups. It also impairs the ability to form and communicate creative ideas.

In this situation, the space vacated in the social fields, which ought to be revolving around meaningful social relationships, has been filled by the commercial culture and its offers of compensations in the form of extortions to seek gratification through competitive consumption, a meta-meme that constantly is conveyed by the spectacle. It becomes a state where—to quote a 1968 Paris wall graffiti—the eye only sees things and their prices.<sup>3</sup>

As an outgrowth of the increasingly powerful digital communicative social networks, a new form of compensation for the lost creative impulse have arisen in form of a craving for being 'connected' 24/7 to the flow of narcissistic banalities that flourish on these networks; or the related compensation constituting of an urge to engage in 'debates', that is exchanges of typically doxa-laced, and even aggressively expressed, comments on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc., to the mostly pseudo-news that the media in the sign of infotainment presents us with.

When alienation thus is transmuted by a focus on achieving individual satisfaction through material consumption and doxa-bound communication, it will, among other things, sustain a reproduction of habituses that misrecognize individualism—from which the creative

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<sup>3</sup> Dans le décor spectaculaire, le regard ne rencontre que les choses et leur prix.



impulse has been detached—with selfish attitudes in social, cultural and economic relationships. The flip-side of the rise in habitus-anchored selfish individualism is a rejection of collective organization of social functions; a rejection that increasingly is a hallmark of economic and political trends in Western societies, despite the fact that glaring social problems and infrastructural-ecological dysfunctions are on the rise in trends that only can be turned around by efforts that include high levels of engagement, including engagements within publicly organized structures.

The cultural trait of selfish individualism and the correlative tendency to interpret social meaning as individually maximized consumption is, it goes without saying, very favourable for the business enterprises' goal of surplus maximization. Consequently, the stakeholders in the business world use their economic means to provide support for political parties and movements that reinforce this trend. On the level of enacted policies this has translated into the neoliberal agenda of a minimalist public sector, low taxes and deregulation, policies that ensure that the perpetuation of high levels of social and environmental collateral damages will continue.

## **Attention, the Scarce Commodity**

When social meaning is interpreted as access to high consumption, the social needs of belonging and esteem in the Maslowian hierarchy<sup>4</sup> are accordingly gratified by consumption of commodities—which substitute for the missing meaningful social and creative relationships—and by images of the spectacle that embody the misconceptions of reality. The society is a society of abundance, but the abundant objects in many cases possess low and falling functional utilities. It is consumption which oversizes everything in order to boost its conspicuousness: houses, meals, cars, etc. Not surprisingly, oversizing and thoughtless consumption feeds the accumulative disutilities: choked highways, suburbs consisting of sprawling and resource hogging but culture-empty subdivisions, etc. Their mirror is rundown inner cities, into which the society of commodity fetishism crowds

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<sup>4</sup> On Maslow's Hierarchy see "The End of Rational Economics", <http://attac-ontario.org/endrty.pdf>

those parts of the population that, as consequence of the economic system's traits of creating growing disparities, are the victims of the unavoidable large-scale social dumping on the downside. All of these urban cityscapes are interspersed with ubiquitous malls and clusters of mega-stores that all sell the same products, albeit in different packing, and tagged with different brand logos and prices according to their level of class directed price discrimination<sup>5</sup>.

As the inequalities rise, the shopping fields, here and there, contain expanding pockets of smaller stores that sell luxury products. In the nature of things, these products are exclusively consumed by the wealthy class; the possessors of the incomes and asset concentrations created by the economic order of the spectacle. The relative rise in the production and consumption of luxury items has become a significant economic trend, inexorably growing in step with the divergence of incomes.<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, it is noteworthy that the manufacture of modern luxury products stands in contrast to earlier periods when luxury products tended to be handicrafts and bespoke products. Today, most luxury products are, as everything else, products of low-cost, and indeed often offshore industrial processes. Thus, in reality they most likely only have small functional differences from the ordinary mass products, and are mainly differentiated by minor design tricks, different logos and higher price tags. Furthermore, whereas elites of former class societies had considerable studied cultural competence (considered important as signs of mastering the *l'art pour l'art* class distinction and therefore instilled in children from an early age), the post-industrial elites are largely devoid of studied cultural abilities and appreciation. Thus, they are, as much as everyone else, passive actors in the modern social spaces of the spectacle, where creative art and opportunities for creative experiences are crowded out by faux objects that mainly are appreciated by price

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<sup>5</sup> Price discrimination is the technical terms for selling products at different prices according buyers economic status. The classic example is how some store chains sell at higher prices in affluent neighbourhoods. In the digital economy, price discrimination can be based on search histories and other digitally obtained information about income levels and buying habits.

<sup>6</sup> About the growing economic inequalities behind the rise in luxury product markets, see: "Income-inequality Gap Widens." Wall Street Journal. By Greg Ip, October 12, 2007; Page A2. Among other things, Ip notes that the wealthiest Americans' share of national income has hit a postwar record, surpassing the highs reached in the 1990s bull market: "The wealthiest 1% of Americans earned 21.2% of all income in 2005, according to new data from IRS. ... The bottom 50% earned 12.8% of all income".

(when an original van Gogh painting becomes an object of conspicuous consumption, paid for in the millions of dollars, it also transmutes into a faux object of art, appreciated by its price only).

A prominent social phenomenon that has developed in the society of the spectacle is celebrity adulation. Added to the class distinctions of brand logos and high price tags are the vanity distinction of where and with whom (of the cover celebrities) one has been seen, which by itself is counted as an item of brand-tagged luxury life-styles. Unavoidably, as with everything else in the spectacle, it also comes in a faux version: low status celebrities, or celebrities on the path of waning stars can be 'rented' to cast celebrity glare over the birthday bashes of the wealthy.<sup>7</sup>

The upcoming social media of Twitter has given an enormous boost to the phenomenon of celebrity infatuation: any aspirer to celebrity status nowadays must have a Twitter account (those with verified celebrity status can have Twitter followers in the millions, thus it was mentioned in a recent news spot that a certain pop-singer claimed 7 million Twitter followers). As the celebrities (aspiring or real) constantly send out 'tweets' about what they are doing at the moment, what they are having for breakfast, when they go to the loo, etc., they in the process are creating an orgiastic feast of occupation with trivialities, which has the further advantage that it doesn't require any serious expense of any studied attainments but has the feature that anyone can indulge in it.

The lifestyles emerging in the society of the spectacle foster emotional entrapments since gratification of social needs by material and entertainment substitution doesn't create any permanence. The gratifications, therefore, require incessant repetitions, which become social processes of circular causation that sustain and reinforce the habituses captured by the spectacle. As the cumulative processes continue, contact with the spirituality of the creative self withers away, and the ability to act and engage in meaningful communication is obliterated. A common substitution for the loss of meaningful communication and ability to engage in critical discourses and logic include turning to excessive and uncritical devotion to religious or political ideologies.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/story/hilton-is-paid-to-party\\_1072981](http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/story/hilton-is-paid-to-party_1072981)

As the incessant, but in the necessity of things, failed attempts to gratify the basic human needs for social belonging and esteem by the substitutions of material consumption and entertainment infatuation—including equalizing cultural accomplishments with the pretence of distinction through ostentatious consumption—aggressive patterns of behaviour often develop (which is a main cause for the rising divisiveness with which the public debate increasingly are carried out). The negative outcomes of acts directed by aggressive and ill-tempered habituses are then rationalized away by new layers of deepening adherence to doxa-constructed substitutes that see perceived opponents as social monsters, in a process of vicious cycles that only further erodes the ability to engage in meaningful social participation and discourse.

As mentioned, the advent of the digital society has added new elements to the material envelope that sustains the spectacle. Digital technologies have in recent years further attacked the barriers between the private self and the spectacle, as the above mentioned phenomenon of celebrity tweets exemplify, and are turning potential exposure to the spectacle into a 24/7 condition in modern societies. The new digital media of constant wirelessly propagated communication and image dispersal, and the ability to tweet any triviality to anybody at any moment in the timespace, appears on the surface to enhance the flow on information. But this ability is turning communication into a permanent state that on the contrary risks eroding its utility as a possible carrier of critical information, which is drowned out by the constant deluge of trivialities or news that becomes unreal (even when the images they convey about some distant disasters are horrific) by their insertion as short image/sound bites in between advertisements and trivialities of celebrity-centred entertainment.

Herbert Simon, a Nobel laureate in economics who also contributed to the early development of computer programming, foresaw this consequence of the digital society as early as in 1978 when he wrote:

In a world where information is relatively scarce, and where problems for decision are few and simple, information is almost always a positive good. In a world where

attention is a major scarce resource, information may be an expensive luxury, for it may turn our attention from what is important to what is unimportant.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Irrationality of Rationalizations**

The rising levels of alienation, which the society of the spectacle and life-styles centred on material gratification of social needs lead to, require rationalizations that can mitigate the internal conflicts. Many of the rationalizations have the neoclassical narrative of relentless pursuit of economic self-interests at their core. Thus, even for people that don't follow neither political nor economic events, the rationalizations produced by the verified science of economics have migrated into the common doxa of the spectacle. Upon these rationalizations, subconscious forces engender the creation of new layers of doxa—of misrecognitions that in their aggregate as a social condition produce growing potential for destructive consequences.

Neoliberal political operatives take advantage of the expansions of the misrecognitions and lack of deeper meaning existing in the spectacle, which they exploit aided by the legitimization of an atomized, post-modern worldview in which social meaning only exists as the paradigmatic circularity that claims rationality to be self-interest maximization. Coupled with the general reduction of the attention span devoted to social and political questions, this has made it possible to subject the citizenry to the most blatant manipulations, excesses of symbolic violence that are bolstered by the knowledge that only few will take the trouble to penetrate behind the surface of the lies and nonsense. Thus, in the spectacle any lie or non-sensical postulate can be crafted into being part of the virtual reality by being relentlessly repeated by the meme creators. In other words, the lies triumph and are turned into ontologically structuring forces.

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert A. Simon: "Rationality as Process and as Product of Thought." *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2, (May, 1978), pp. 1-16.

More recently, the neoliberal narratives have become an integral element in the doxa-brewed tea that the Tea Party-goers drink in the U.S. The Tea Party has become the backstop of a political system that has democracy swaying precipitously under the weight of structures that have turned political elections into showcases of manipulations, partly accomplished by adopting techniques developed by the marketers of the commercial world. Increasingly, politicians—in their quest to keep power and backstop the special interests that feed their money troughs—readily foster upon an increasingly apathetic population lost in the spectacle whatever tricks and lies deemed necessary to keep their positions. In such an environment, the word ‘democracy’ more and more resembles just another high-sounding brand tag stitched onto a simulacrum, meant to hide a distorted reality composed of manipulative practices perfected on Madison Avenue, and oiled by money flows that has been recognized by the Supreme Court as constitutionally protected ‘free speech.’<sup>9</sup>

When first a doxic misrecognition has taken hold, the rationality that is recognized during ordinary interactions is the subconscious conviction that rationality is firmly expressed in one’s own behaviour and that other interactors in the given social space with opposing views ‘don’t get it’. In other words, the perceived rationality is an expression of rationalizing doxa. The subjective perception is not disturbed even when utilities yielded by the choices and actions—if they were to be evaluated by an outsider, say a rational Martian observer—are negative and contradictory, such as is the case when people from low-income households support a conservative political agenda that behind the crafted spin unilaterally promotes the interests of the richest class in society.<sup>10</sup>

An advantage of the neoliberal narrative, with its economic logic centred upon the fallacy of the neoclassical market equilibrium, is that it contains a denial of the structuring aspect of social forces. Thus, a cornerstone of the simulacrum is a denial that the powers of capital and hierarchical positions can be implicated in producing negative social trends

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<sup>9</sup> Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, (2010).

<sup>10</sup> In the words of author and historian Thomas Frank: “[people] vote to strike a blow against elitism and receive a social order in which wealth is more concentrated than ever before in our life times, workers have been stripped of power, and CEOs are rewarded in a manner that is beyond imagining.” “Why do people vote against their own interests?” BBC NEWS, Jan 30, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/8474611.stm>

such as the observed growing disparities in wage levels and incomes distributions. That means that for members of the upper classes that have benefited from the upwards migration of the economy's output and income shares, there is no individual responsibility—even in the indirect case—to be shared for the very notable widening of income differentials observed over the last 30 to 40 years. They are just, the rationalization claims, the results dictated by impartial market forces. In other words, the policies of, for instance Reagan and Bush, were of no consequence for the dramatic trend shift in income dispersions that took off during their presidencies, but was simply a result of the impartial logic executed by the laws of the markets.

The crux of the matter is to realize that the central question is not whether processes are driven by market forces or not; after all, wages in capitalist economics are decided in labour markets. The question is, to what extent are supply-demand relations and bargaining positions in markets structured by power positions and other divisive social forces.

Thus, by separating decisions with recognized exploitative elements from the social forces that structure them, an illusion is created that decouples people from personal complicity. The decision is turned into: "Well, my choice follows the law of the market. What can I do differently?" The implication is that decisions that exploit others in positions of lesser opportunities is not looked upon as a question of being ethical or unethical, but since it presumably just follows the law of the market it is seen as being without any ethical dimension at all. The recognized exploitation or ecological neglect become part of the unavoidable banality of everyday life.

However, below the surface, the reality of the dysfunctional aspects of the current culture always lurks. Thus, the culture must constantly produce excitements in order to prevent people from breaking the bubble. Breaking the bubble, of course, would constitute a threat to a system that at its base is elitist, a new feudalism enforced in the virtual domain. In the words of Debord:

... the logic behind the appearance, within an expanding economy of "services" and leisure activities, of the "all-inclusive" purchase of spectacular forms of housing, of collective pseudo-travel, of participation in cultural consumption and even of

sociability itself, in the form of "exciting conversations," "meetings with celebrities" and suchlike. Spectacular commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody.<sup>11</sup>

Today the "exciting conversations," the "meetings with celebrities", etc. are, as indicated, increasingly mediated by Twitter, Facebook, and what not of electronically created fixations that increasingly permeate the digitalized spectacle. The only remedy for de-alienation is to cut loose from this pseudo-life, and reconnect with critical discourse and the creative self that are the gate to the social spaces from which a relevant future can emerge. It is to disengage from the life-styles that float along with the spectacle, in constant contact with everyone, but talking to no one. The digital tools have their uses, but we have to remember Simon's admonition: The scarce commodity has become attention, not information.

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<sup>11</sup> Debord, *ibid.*