Revolution and the critique of human geography: prospects for the right to the city after 50 years

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Revolution and the critique of human geography: prospects for the right to the city after 50 years*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a slightly revised version of the 2017 Geografiska Annaler B Lecture, which I gave at the Nordic Geography Meeting in Stockholm. It seeks to show why Guy Debord’s ([1967] 1994). The Society of the Spectacle. Translated by David Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.) is just as important now as it was when it was published 50 years ago – not just politically, but also analytically. To do so, I develop an argument Debord only made in passing: that we live in a world governed by a falling rate of use value. Through this development, I suggest some ways to think about the right to the city – and revolution – in our current moment.

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1. There is something deeply pleasurable, and sometimes insightful, about picking some year, or even some specific date, and declaring that that was when ’when the world changed’. This is a favourite tactic of popular historians. For the great Beverly Gage (2009), it was 16 June 1920, ’the Day Wall Street Exploded’, to quote the title of her book, the day when the Italian anarchist Mario Buda pulled his wagon full of dynamite up to the House of Morgan and lit the fuse. In the wake of this bomb, the largest terrorist attack in the United States until the Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma in 1995, nothing would ever be the same in America or the world. Closer to our time, many people might nominate 2001, when the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington launched the still-sputtering War on Terror and all that it has called up in response, though I think later historians will instead nominate 2008 when neoliberal capitalism began its long, slow, self-inflicted death spiral (Smith 2008). But if 2008 is nominated, then too must 1973 when the Yom Kippur war and subsequent oil embargo forced the euthanizing of Keynesianism and thus opened up room for the birth of Thatcher-Reaganism in 1979, the same year that, as Harvey (2005) remarks, coincidentally or not, the Maoist project in China was officially laid to rest and replaced by the Capitalist Roaders’ embarkation on the long march towards capitalism (with Chinese characteristics). Of course, that long march led to Tiananmen, which helped make 1989 another exceptionally fateful year. But if 1989 is nominated, then really, the year that changed everything was 1917 (Reed 1919), the course of which itself would have been much different had it not been for 1867, the year the first volume of Das Kapital was published.

2. Which is all to say: as pleasurable as it is, to nominate a moment as the moment when the world changed, whether that moment last the seconds it takes to wreak havoc on Wall Street or the bit more
than an hour it took for the Twin Towers to fall, or the year and a half it takes for an economic crisis to unfold across the globe, is something of a fool’s errand as, indeed, Beverly Gage knows quite well: for her Buda’s Blast was more a turning point in a long and still on-going history than a breaking point. But that is why it is only something of a fool’s errand: these turning points mark moments, perhaps in a large stretch of moments, that are revolutionary in some way or another: moments when the world turns.

3. Even so, it is something of a fool’s errand for a second reason: it turns attention away, perhaps, from all those moments when the world did not change, when the ruling order was not upended, when revolutionary transformations did not occur. Those moments are just as important (Mitchell 2013).

4. And they point to a third reason it is something of a fool’s errand, and that is the assumption that revolution is a particularly historical processes (it happens in and to time: cf. Thompson [1967]), which it is. But it is especially a geographical process (that must happen in and to space: cf. Harvey [2000]).

5. To see why I want to nominate another moment that should have been revolutionary – and still might be: 1967. For good reason, everyone talks about 1968 (Watts 2001), but 1967 was just as consequential. A lot happened in 1967: there was the Six-Day War that led to the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank and, soon, the establishment of settlements and all that has followed since, not only in Israel/Palestine, but in and constantly beyond the greater Middle East; Ronald Reagan became governor of California; the American Civil Rights Movement reached its violent apogee with riots in Tampa, Minneapolis, Washington, Newark, Detroit, and elsewhere, strongly encouraging Martin Luther King, Jr.’s reconsideration of the economic basis of racism, prejudice, and segregation; America escalated its war in Vietnam – and antiwar activism entered a new militant phase across campuses and cities; the Khmer Rouge launched the civil war in Cambodia; Che Guevara and his comrades were executed in Bolivia; Britain nationalized its steel industry; the Greek military staged a coup and established a dictatorship and soon tensions in Crete exploded into violence. The last Shaw of Iran, though ruling since 1941, was coronated. 1967 was the year of the Summer of Love and the Monterey Pop Festival that helped launch it (and the year Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was released) changing the sound of the world we live in and the structures of cultural affinity that shape it. The Boeing 737 took flight for the first time, as did the Concorde. And, in Sweden, drivers moved from the left side of the road to the right.

6. 1967 was also the 100th anniversary of the publication of Capital and the 50th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and to mark the occasion two books were published that help us understand how the revolution is a geographical project. One is well-known in geography and geographical thinking, well-cited, and justly inspirational: Henri Lefebvre’s The Right to the City (1996 [1967]). The other deserves more attention than it has received, because, in my view at least, it is a much better analysis of our contemporary conjuncture: the world that led to and evolved out of 1967. This is Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle ([1967]1994). Debord was, off and on, Lefebvre’s student as well as his political adversary. As Andy Merrifield (2005, 2006) and others have noted Lefebvre and Debord honed their ideas off each other and their encounters significantly sharpened Debord’s spatial analysis. This spatial analysis led Debord to argue, more clearly than Lefebvre (as least in my view) that revolution was an especially geographical project. Or, as he put it in one of his theses: ‘The proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer of just their labor, but of their total history’ (#178).

7. I think it is worthwhile to take a little time to see how he got to this argument about revolution being a critique of human geography and what it means for those of us interested, these days, in the
right to the city, and – its necessary corollary – the possibility, in the current moment, for there to be radical urban (or other) rebellion, revolt, or even revolution: the creation of a moment when everything changes, and that begins the world turning. In the course of the pages that follow, I hope to show that Society of the Spectacle is best read not as cultural critique (as it most commonly is in and beyond geography), not as a critique of images and their abstracting power (as is most common in communications studies), but as a political-economic critique – a critique of capitalism as a totality and as a totalizing force – and thus as a critique of capitalist space.

8. As anyone glancingly familiar with Society of the Spectacle knows, the book is written as a series of numbered theses: 221 of them divided into nine sections. Though I think these theses add up to a remarkably strong, coherent, sustained, and increasingly valid diagnosis of and explanation for the dynamics of global capitalism, the book is probably even stronger on startling insight and provocation. Indeed, many of Debord’s theses seem oracular: mysterious pronouncements left to be untangled and interpreted. But, to a degree far larger than many similar books (including, especially, The Right to the City) Society of the Spectacle is anything but sloppy, lazy, haphazard, or intentionally obscure. It is, rather, meticulously constructed and part of what is important about the book is how the logic of the argument unfolds over all 221 theses. Obviously, I cannot do justice here to just how that is the case, as that would require a long, collective seminar, rather than a short paper. Nor can all instances of prescience that mark the book be given their due (though here is one, given only because it is so damn prescient and relevant for the current moment: ‘In a world that really has been turned on its head truth is a moment of falsehood’ [#9]). But I do hope to give some flavour of both the depth of the analysis and the importance and fecundity of the text for developing a strong political-economic and historical-materialist analysis of urban space, current economic crises, and the relation between the two. Or, rather, I hope to make the case that the book can be reworked – interpreted, reconstructed, drawn on – to accomplish this goal.

9. Debord begins Society of the Spectacle by, fittingly, riffing on the first line of Marx’s Capital: ‘The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation’ (#1). This is a world, Debord argues, in which separation is ‘perfected’ (as the title of his first section puts it), which is to say, it is a world of total alienation. ‘The spectacle,’ he continues, ‘is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (#4) – rather than mediated by commodities as such, as it was in Marx’s analysis. The point about mediation is important for Debord, as it was for Marx, since, in Debord’s words, ‘Workers do not produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves,’ which then dominates through mediation (#31). Indeed, ‘The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation,’ according to Debord (#32).

10. But there is a bigger distinction between Marx’s take and Debord’s. Though Marx prophesied a world of great abundance (though with continuing immiseration) under capitalism, what he analysed at the outset of the Industrial Revolution was a society of great privation. Debord, by contrast and writing a 100 years later at the pinnacle of the post-the Second World War economic boom, sought to analyse a world that had by then become one of great abundance. There were two key implications for living in such a world. The first is that this abundance ‘is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. All time, all space, becomes foreign to them as their own alienated products accumulate. The spectacle is the map of this world – drawn to the scale of the territory itself’ (#31). The allusion to Borge’s dystopian vision of a map constructed at the scale of one to one is no doubt intended. ‘If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy,’ Debord continues, ‘it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception’ (#32).
11. The second, and more theoretically and politically insightful implication, is that commodity production is necessarily governed by a *falling rate of use value* (#47). Again the allusions are clear enough: to the debates of the time about the falling rate of profit and the crisis tendencies of capitalism (that David Harvey did so much to elucidate for geographers fifteen years later in *The Limits to Capital* [1982]). But remember (as Harvey has also reminded us more than once) that Marx ‘abstracted away’ from use and use value in the very first pages of *Capital* and though its importance to the overall theory of capitalism never disappeared in Marx’s analysis, it did take a decidedly secondary position to Value and exchange value and their phenomenal form, price, as drivers of capitalist development, transformation, and dynamism (Harvey 1982, 2010, 2013; Smith 1990). By indicating that *use value* is every bit as vital to capitalist dynamics as is, say, the struggle for relative surplus value (which is the beating heart of capitalist competition), Debord opens a door to returning value theory to a much more material basis than it has in much Marxist theorizing – and certainly than it has in many current geographical explications of and debates over it (cf. Henderson 2013). But particularly, by suggesting that use value is not some *thing* (as we often think of it – for example, the use value of a car is that *its* engine allows us to move not under our own steam, or *it* makes us sexy, or frugal, or whatever), but is a *rate*, we have further explanation of capitalism’s drive for abundance, which is and must be a wasteful abundance. The notion of a falling *rate* of use value suggests that each thing we get is more useless than its predecessor. Proof of the proposition is actually quite simple. Just consider the phone in your pocket – and the six you have in a drawer at home (compared to the one your grandparents had, for their whole lives); or the shirt at the back of your wardrobe that you saw last week but totally forgot you had bought; or the 14 environmentally correct reusable water bottles you have amassed, most never used; or maybe, especially in the present context, the 500 useless television stations (and infinite web platforms) you have access to. Which brings us to an important point: conceptually, a theory of the *falling rate* of use value is an advance on theories of planned obsolescence because where those theories suggest that obsolescence is a strategy, the falling rate of use value theory suggests it is a *force* – and a *necessity*.

12. To be more fully accurate, there is not really a simple, inexorable, falling rate of use value, as Debord states. What there is instead is a constant *tendency* towards a falling rate of use value, and this tendency is and must be countered in all manner of ways, ways that are often contradictory. Even more, one of the problems capitalism constantly confronts is that because the falling rate of use value is a *necessity* but also only a *tendency* (with countervailing forces), it sometimes does not fall fast enough and has to be helped along. The tendency towards the falling rate of use value must be made commensurate with the fact that capital accumulation is compound. The result is what I have elsewhere called a tendency towards compound capitalist *destruction*, which is a *necessary* part of the political economy that structures out world, our cities, our social lives, and our politics (Mitchell 2015, 2017).

13. *Because* there is a tendency towards a falling rate of use value, Debord hints, ‘The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes *image*’ (#34), which is to say, materially anyway, capital that is embodied in commodities becomes *devoid* of use value. Or to turn that around, when the phenomenal form of capital is *image* – when images are fully commodified – the use value of other kinds of commodities (buildings or cars or phones or Big Macs or Noma dinners) are their images whose own use value also continues to fall. More and more commodity-images must be produced, endlessly. The only thing that saves us from saturation – from an overaccumulation of images – is, precisely, their uselessness, a uselessness that fully defines our lives.

14. Thus, I want to suggest, the pivotal argument in *Society of the Spectacle* comes at the beginning of Thesis 42. ‘The spectacle,’ says Debord, ‘corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now *all* that there is to see: the world we see is the world of the
commodity’. Think about that. And think about it within the context of a world of massive abundance, the world we still live in no matter how much neoliberal practice has sought to assure that abundance is the sole and private property of the super-wealthy and how much neoliberal ideology has sought to convince us we live (as if this is unrelated) in a world of total austerity, a world of returned privation, a world much more like that Marx was writing in the midst of than the one Debord was, and about which nothing can be done. Think about it in relation to the fact that capitalism must necessarily be beset by a falling rate of use value (which nonetheless is always only a tendency). Think about it in relation to our work as critical or radical geographers, or indeed geographers seeking to make the world more efficient, or less polluting, or cooler, or whatever. But think about it also in relation to ongoing political struggle both in and beyond the city, struggles over the production of nature and the production of space, as we geographers like to think of them.

15. The implication that is most important is both political and theoretical: it is that there is no outside to spectacular – and increasingly, spectacularly, useless – capitalism. Remember, Debord is writing in 1967: it is pre-détente, and the Cold War is still in full flower. The Soviet Union is – thus – indeed a real alternative to western, liberal-democratic capitalism. But it is not an outsider to the society of the spectacle. Rather, Debord argues in a scathing critique that covers a good chunk of the central part of the book, the USSR represents a particularly concentrated, and highly bureaucratized, form of the spectacle, operating within the same principles as the diffuse form that dominates the West. Or, as Debord trenchantly put it, what the Bolshevik revolution proved, and what Stalinism perfected (through its ‘reign of terror within the bureaucratic class’ [#107]) was ‘that the bourgeoisie had created a power so autonomous that, as long as it endured, it could even do without a bourgeoisie’ (#104). What the bourgeoisie created was what E.P. Thompson (1978) called a ‘logic of the process’ that was enveloping, totalizing, inescapable – which is not to say that there is no alternative (in Margaret Thatcher’s immortal words), but rather that any alternative has to be found from inside that logic of the process, which is, after all, as Thompson so clearly showed, a process, a totalization, that is made, worked and reworked, and experienced under specific and given historical conditions. The world is a world workers – we – have produced, but which is a force outside of us.

16. Here is where the concept of the tendency and necessity of the falling rate of use value is so important. If workers in capitalism, whether in diffuse or concentrated bureaucratic form, are condemned to produce a world of more and more useless things, then there is a hell of a lot laying around wanting to be used – for us who have produced it to expropriate and rework. This is, of course, why capitalism’s ideologues must continually shore up private property rights as essential to the survival of the whole system including, especially, the specific form of ‘freedom’ it allows. It is why these same ideologues have to work so hard to convince us that the steady accumulation of dispossession, uselessness, and thus compound alienation, is what we most want. It is what makes our life complete and worth living (Mitchell and Rosati 2006; Rosati 2012, 2017). That is what the spectacle is all about, what commodities accumulated to the point of the image means.

17. The task of any revolutionary, transformative movement, therefore, is not to step outside and attack (precisely because it cannot) but to stay inside and take, and especially to remake, and in doing so to construct new, non-capitalist use values – to make useless things useful, to create, as the Industrial Workers of the World used to say, a new world out of the shell of the old.

18. And ‘shell’ is the right term, because first among all the increasingly useless things capitalism must produce is the geographic landscape: the built environment, the exoskeleton of everyday life, secreted, as Lefebvre (1991) once put it, by everyday life. As Harvey (1982, 2014), once again, has made clear, capitalism must always produce a landscape generally sufficient to its needs (and thus is condemned to always fight, and somehow overcome, the very obsolescence it continually
produces). The landscape it needs in a world where the accumulation of capital has advanced to the point where it has become image is, of course, a landscape that is itself, first and foremost, image: not a landscape of production and reproduction, of housing and communication, of parks to play in and schools to learn at, but a landscape whose *first* function is to be mere representation, a desirable image of work and play, shelter and conviviality. This is not a new or startling argument. Geographers for a long time now – perhaps not since 1967, but not far off it – have been singing just this tune, though sometimes in a rather different key (Relph 1976; Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 2011). What is the new city – which is no longer a place of industrial production, and for the most part no longer a place for domestic life? It is a total simulacrum: not just festival marketplaces like Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, or massive redevelopments like London’s Docklands, but rebuilt Ground Zero in New York and perhaps most especially Williamsburg and every other hyper-gentrified ersatz neighbourhood there is – a fact perhaps most frankly recognized in Oslo where a whole new district is recognized for what it is: a bar code, the apotheosis of commodity-image.9

19. Of course, images still have to be bought and sold, their exchange value and thus their Value realized. And images, being 3D (even the ones in your phone), take up, exist in, and are space: the exoskeleton that is the built environment has not and cannot melt into air. But since their use value is precisely their imageability, they do not have to be inhabited. They can, and do, perfectly well stand empty – dead, in the long-ago diagnosis of Richard Sennett ([1977] 1992) – as organizations like New York’s Picture the Homeless have shown in their inventories of empty condos, inventories that show there is more than enough housing for all the – continually expanding – homeless population of the city.10 Of course, since capital is bound to a falling rate of use value and must make a virtue of it, housing standing empty is not a social scandal but a social good. Housing crises in a world of housing abundance are not proof that the ‘the market’ (that polite term for capitalism) has failed, but that it has succeeded, that it is winning in its efforts to conquer all life. Producing an empty carapace that we can imagine is a city is the highest form of spectacular capitalism’s art. Now far more than in the Industrial Workers of the World’s time (in the USA, the IWW was suppressed in 1917, that fateful year), and far more even than when Debord was writing 50 years later, this is the shell that needs taking and occupying, and out of which a new world can be made.

20. But, rich as it is, Debord’s analysis here comes up short, for reasons that are implicit right there in his thesis about revolution – that ‘The proletarian revolution is that *critique of human geography* whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer of just their labor, but of their total history’ – and not just because we’ve all by now, 50 years later, given up on the proletariat (to say nothing of revolution). Rather, it is because his analysis is too much about alienation. When he says ‘their total history’, he is in many ways echoing young Marx’s interest in our species being. The spectacle, as separation perfected, is total mediation (by image-commodities), where total human history is impossible. This is true, as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough, because Debord tends to minimize the very explicit conditions of possibility for species being. What this older Marx discovered, of course, was that capitalism did not only produce separation and alienation, but especially, and necessarily, it produced *immiseration*, which was the very basis for that separation and alienation. That immiseration is the foundation of alienation is just as true even in the world of abundance Debord sought to explain as it was in the world of privation Marx was immersed in.

21. This immiseration, of course, has both absolute and relative components and it has an exceedingly complex geography, as divisions of labour and consumption have globalized and as core countries have found ways to offload the costs of social reproduction onto immigrant-producing lands. But, and this is important, just as there is no outside to the society of spectacular capitalism as a whole, there is no outside to immiseration. If it does not affect all of us equally (and of course
it does not) it is nonetheless everywhere, as the endless crisis of homelessness, the growing phenomenon of ‘austerity suicides’, and the global fact of universal food insecurity all makes so obvious. If this or that neighbourhood, this or that city, this or that fading welfare state has managed to minimize such immiseration that is, well, a spectacular achievement (though one often bought at the expense of some other place). And while Debord does point to how capitalism continually dispossesses us, this – the geographical unevenness of immiseration – is something Debord does not quite get.

22. Debord’s dispossession is the dispossession of lifeworlds, not of material sustenance. And thus it is worth turning to that other theoretical and political intervention of 1967, Lefebvre’s Right to the City. Lefebvre, too, was interested in how capitalism was changing, evolving through its crises into a new form: what he called not the spectacle, but the urban revolution (a topic for another time). But he was equally interested in the possibility of truly inhabiting the city. He turned first to those who did not have to inhabit the city, those who were more than happy to snap up all those empty condos and co-ops and mansions and beach house, whole stables of high-end cars, and marinas full of yachts. ‘Who can ignore that the Olympians of the new bourgeois aristocracy no longer inhabit,’ Lefebvre (1996, 158) asked back in 1967.

They go from grand hotel to grand hotel, or from castle to castle [and now from penthouse luxury flat to penthouse luxury flat], commanding a fleet of a country from a yacht [and now a private jet]. They are everywhere and nowhere. This is how they fascinate people immersed in everyday life. They transcend everyday life, possess nature and leave it up to the cops to contrive culture.

These people he dismisses, or rather indicates that the right to the city will necessarily entail their expropriation: the expropriation of the expropriators, as Marx called it. Rather, his interest was, like Debord’s, in the ‘youth, students, and intellectuals’ confronted with the poverty of life the bourgeois Olympians oversaw, but far more than Debord, in ‘armies of workers with or without white collars, people from the provinces, the colonized and semi-colonized of all sorts, all those who endure a well-organized daily life’. Yet even more he focused on

the untragic misery of the inhabitant, of the suburban dweller [in the European context] and the people who stay in residential ghettos [remember that 1967 was an extraordinarily riotous year in American ghettos], in the mouldering centres of old cities [and it pretty much pre-dated gentrification] and the proliferations lost beyond them

– all those who suffered ‘this generalized misery’ which nonetheless carried with it (echoes of his student Debord here) ‘a picture of the “satisfactions”’ that make such misery tolerable (emphasis added).

23. From these people, the right to the city arises ‘like a cry and demand’. But as with so much of Lefebvre’s writing and theorizing, this passage, suggestive as it is, is a mess. Who is crying, and who is demanding? Just about everyone, except those Olympians who do not need to. Who then should the right to the city be for? No one has answered this question better than Peter Marcuse (2009, 190–191). As he argued in a justly well-repeated and by now I hope quite familiar passage, the cry is from the alienated – Debord’s primary concern – and the demand is from the excluded. Moreover, this demand ‘is for the material necessities of life’ with an ‘aspiration for a broader right to what is necessary beyond the material to lead a satisfying life’ – beyond just a picture of the satisfactions. In the terms as I have been developing them, the right to the city is first a demand, by the excluded, for a landscape – for a material world – that is useful, where use value does not just fall and fade and elude our grasp. Marcuse argues that any struggle for the right to the city must thus necessarily be understood through a hierarchy of needs, demands, and cries. At the apex of this hierarchy – in terms of whom we should be fighting alongside, whose rights we should be fighting for – stand the directly excluded (who are nonetheless necessary to the system): the homeless and other members of the reserve army of labour, all those who have been kicked out of the system (and, e.g. warehoused in prisons, detention centres, migrant camps, and the like), and the directly dispossessed, followed by the working class
The Situations were famous for creating new spectacular situations, new world within the shell of the world, with telling names like The Space Hijackers and Take Back the Streets). The idea is to create a political exoskeleton that is, revolutionize – a system that, because it is defined by a falling rate of use value, deprives through abundance rather than privation, while creating a world ripe for appropriation, a whole geographical exoskeleton that can be put to use. This is the essential insight to draw from Debord’s analysis of the society of the spectacle. The even more essential insight that there is no outside to the system – that any appropriation will have to come from inside – also helps us see how such an upending, overturning, revolutionary, remaking of the world might be achieved.

24. The right to the city – the appropriation of our total history – must begin, in other words, by making the city (and of course the countryside to which it is attached and upon which it mutually depends) useful. It must begin from the position of the deprived and the oppressed so it may upend – that is, revolutionize – a system that, because it is defined by a falling rate of use value, deprives through abundance rather than privation, while creating a world ripe for appropriation, a whole geographical exoskeleton that can be put to use. This is the essential insight to draw from Debord’s analysis of the society of the spectacle. The even more essential insight that there is no outside to this system – that any appropriation will have to come from inside – also helps us see how such an upending, overturning, revolutionary, remaking of the world might be achieved.

25. Recall that it is a ‘proletarian revolution’ – a revolution of the excluded and working classes, of the oppressed and deprived – Debord is interested in, but that that revolution is itself a critique of human geography, not, initially, a remaking, or a destruction of current, exploitative human geography, or a building of a new human geography, though all these are surely essential. Critique, if it is to be any good, must always be immanent critique: not launched from beyond, but lodged within, and if we understand this, we can understand, and I think extend and improve, a quite curious aspect of Debord’s Society of the Spectacle and his broader political practice, especially with the Situationists. The Situations were famous for creating new spectacular situations – events – by expropriating space and making it different (which has given launch to a wide range of neo-Situationist organizations with telling names like The Space Hijackers and Take Back the Streets). The idea is to create a new world within the shell of the old – as we have seen – pretty damn useless old: to infuse the old with a new usefulness, to give it a new use value, and in the process to upend and even reverse the falling rate of use value (if only for a moment) not to save capitalism from its own contradictory tendencies, but to make the world anew. This is a form of détournement – a form of ‘reversal’, which, in The Society of the Spectacle Debord discusses, oddly, almost entirely within the context of reversing philosophy, theory, and ideology (his prime example being Marx’s reversal of the philosophy of poverty into the poverty of philosophy [#206]). He then uses his discussion of détournement to suggest the need to develop a politics of plagiarism (#207), which at first blush is a particularly bizarre climax to such a deep, trenchant critique of capitalism. Confronted with the society of the spectacle, confronted with the utter uselessness of the society we continually make, all we can do is copy? Well, no. According to Debord, there is one other thing we can do. In the midst of this world, we can learn ‘how to bide [our] time’, as he says in his penultimate thesis (#220). Together these prescriptions come across as incredibly deflating (and incredibly idealist rather than materialist), and I have long struggled to figure out why Debord ends with what seems to be such a paltry prescription for radical, revolutionary action. I am still not sure I know the answer – why he seems to advocate such a
retreat into thought – but I do know that Debord’s own prescriptions can be détourned. Think about what plagiarism is: it is not a merely copying but an illegitimate appropriating. Once space is appropriated – or expropriated – then it can be occupied. And when it is occupied, time can be remade: the falling rate of use value can be slowed or even reversed. To ‘bide’ after all is to ‘remain or stay in a certain place’. To appropriate and then to bide is the immanent critique of human geography. It is the establishment of a right to the city.

26. This, then, is why 1967 should have been a revolutionary year – and still might be. For, the abiding value of The Society of the Spectacle when it is pushed up against, and is put to work for, the struggle for the right to the city after 50 years is that it provides not just a diagnosis of contemporary capitalism (which it does brilliantly) but also a prescription for what is to be done. What is to be done is to take space, and in doing so to make the critique of human geography material, and, in the shell of the old, make spaces where we can abide – or as Lefebvre would have it, inhabit – in ways that are now use-full.

Notes

1. Mike Davis (2007) makes the compelling case that Buda’s Blast inaugurated the era of the car bomb, an era intensified by the US War on Terror, and which we are still living through.
2. To be sure, Debord’s book has not escaped geographers’ notice, and indeed, there is a decent critical literature that develops many of his spatial insights. But it is true that it has received only the fraction of the interest bestowed on The Right to the City. For excellent treatments see: Merrifield (2005), Pinder (2005), Kirsch (1997); and more recently, Rosati (2012), Gerrard and Farrugia (2015). There is also, of course, a whole cottage industry devoted to Debord’s ideas about psychogeography, but these tend not so much develop his trenchant analysis of capitalism, which is the focus of this paper.
3. I am, of course, well aware of Lefebvre’s (1976, 2003) writings on revolution, especially the presumed urban revolution, but as with so much of his work, his arguments are only coincidentally coherent. Lefebvre’s value is not as a theorist so much as a generative thinker adept at being suggestive. This is, surely, one reason he is so attractive to the rest of us all these years after his intellectual heyday: he opened up all manner of avenues for continued investigation.
4. It is conventional when citing The Society of the Spectacle to cite thesis number rather than page number. All citations are to Donald Nicholson-Smith’s translation for Zone Books (1994). Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are in the original.
5. For a critique, see Rosati (2012, 2017).
6. Of course, this total alienation from the abundance we produce was only magnified as the Keynesianism of Debord’s moment gave way a few years later to the class restoration of the neoliberal era and as that era transmogrified after the 2007–2008 economic crisis into our current era of vicious authoritarian-liberal austerity.
7. To be sure, Debord, makes little of his invocation of a falling rate of use value. It is one of those flashes of insight – common in this work – that just lays there waiting for others to pick it up. It is well worth picking up, as I hope to make clear.
8. I say Debord only hints at this for two reasons. First, as noted, he never really develops a direct argument about the falling rate of use value; he only indicates that such a process is crucial to spectacular capitalism. Second, he develops his points in a different order than I am here. To the degree the argument is there in the book, it needs to be exhumed.
9. For those unfamiliar with it, in the last decade a massive, planned, subsidized new office district has been developed near Oslo’s central train station that is not just known colloquially as ‘the Bar Code’ (because it really does look like one), but also in official public relations bumph produced by the city and its boosters.
12. In the words of the Oxford English Dictionary app on my phone, which serves perfectly well when I need to know the meaning of a word, but which, Apple reminds me incessantly will soon be eliminated because such services are no longer compatible with their upgrading operating system. Apple is, no doubt, simply doing its part to advance the falling rate of use value. After all, there is nothing useless in the words in my dictionary, so they have to be made useless to me. What better way to do this than to make everything electronic (paper books, after all, have a stubborn habit of remaining viable for decades and centuries).
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References