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From Mass Rebellion in October 1988
to Workers' Social Protest

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Introduction*

In discussions and meetings, analyses and mass media, the October 1988 rebellion is currently rapidly being instrumentalized. References to the tragic events are familiar, and an almost general consensus has emerged concerning the interpretation. It consists of seeing "October" as the outcome of an economic and social crisis, along with unemployment, housing problems. It has also been fashionable to associate "October" with the ensuing democratic opening. These two links—the first to the input, the second to the output—have rapidly been accepted in political and ideological discussions. Repeated often enough, these assertions will be regarded as common grounds and even used as evidence.

Precisely this established consensus about "October" should make us uneasy and doubtful. We should have doubts, since evoking unemployment and housing as explanations of the October rebellion is really to say all and nothing, to confuse causes and effects and, above all, to reduce the complexity of social relationships. It means we are intentionally abandoning the central problem area of Algeria today: the field of marginality. The social groups drawn into the field of marginality are, as Sami Nair indicates, characterized by "the tendency to have a partial and marginal access to the resources of the production system, to be radically excluded from the advantages and benefits linked to socio-political institutionalization, and a way or living based on what could be defined as a culture of survival."¹

The consensus about "October" should also make us uneasy since it does not seem altogether likely that the "social periphery", taking the towns by onslaught, would have the capacity to impose the problem of democracy. Effectively, to maintain that the popular movement has triggered off the dynamics of democracy, means saying that the mass movement produced the dynamics all by itself, and that is to make believe that democratic morality can be born out of decades of social misery, bureaucratic domination and political despotism as "a flower out of the manure". Here, we will not analyse the machinations of the ruling class, today gallantly offering a multi-party system in order to escape the crisis, forgetting that it yesterday imposed silence on all social classes, repression of all social contradictions, killing and blind torture of the people with the help of the single party. The purpose here is rather to scrutinize the emerging power relations and to see how they might be translated into new forms of social control and political domination, in the shadow of "transition to democracy" from above. In the course of the study, we will emphasise the dyed city/factory in trying to delineate the state of social relations and the dynamics of "social movements" before and after October 1988.

* This text will be published also in a forthcoming anthology entitled *When does democracy make sense? Political economy and political rights in the third world*, by AKUT, Uppsala University (translated into English from the French original by Anu-Mai Köll).

The October 1988 rebellion

Unemployment is certainly the first element to be considered. In only three years' time, the number of unemployed has doubled (658,000 in 1985, 1,200,000 in 1987), and if this does not change in the next few years, the rate will be 31.7 per cent of the population by 2000.² Which means that thousands and thousands of individuals are waiting to be marginalized: to live in the cities but not be admitted into society.

They are city people, the large majority of them has nothing in common with the "lumpenproletariat" created in the period of industrialization and rural exodus in the 1960's and 1970's. Then, the youngest and most qualified rural dwellers went to the cities attracted by employment in the industries, but this is no longer the case. The mobility of the labour force has in fact changed radically in the last years. It is mostly intra-urban migration, but there has also been a reversal of rural out-migration: Rural dwellers do not want to go to the cities any more, they want the city to come to them.³ And cities are, from 1984 on, no longer relieved by industrialization, as a consequence of decisions from above to reduce the rate of productive investment, dismantle large-scale public enterprises and reduce demand for labour.

The consequence is that the country is gradually deprived of economic activities, while urban agglomerations persist. It will sink into crisis and misery through decreasing employment and massive dismissals, keeping whole layers of active population in "social quarantine". In this way, 20, 30, 40, even 60 per cent of the population will be left outside history as they arrive on the labour market, without a possibility to join the productive sphere.⁴ However, we should not think that de-industrialization is the only cause of the crisis. The decrease of employment is reinforced by increasingly selective education. The schools no longer promote social integration, giving "children of the people" an opportunity to climb. On the contrary, they have become instruments of social selection, producing failures rather than successes. Of 100 children attending the first year, only four reach university level, and each year the official statistics record 300,000 to 350,000 children excluded from the educational system.

The young who are not included in orderly socialization in schools and productive work, certainly experience unemployment in a direct, brutal and destructive way. They perceive society, not only as preventing them from becoming social and collective actors, but as a system in which everything coincides to make them feel excluded and rejected into the field of marginality. This feeling of exclusion is increased by rage, when old ways of regulating social control fall apart, and transform into interstices where misery is mixed with existential anxiety, injustice, domination and lack of socialization.

The field of marginality

The field of marginality is social but also essentially urban. It is linked to the considerable extension of urban agglomerations and the various inherent forms of exclusion. It is significant that, while population has dou-

bled in 20 years (1966–1987), urban population has tripled in the same time. Another important aspect is that the highest rates of urbanization have occurred, not in the large cities, but in their peripheries and in the middle-sized towns. Which means that the urban explosion of the last decades has consisted of “suburbans”.⁵

The problems of social reproduction have become dramatic in these urban peripheries, creating focal points of instability and social turbulence. Whole segments of the lower classes have, through mechanisms of exclusion, been pushed back into the most destitute parts of the cities, where enormous urban concentrations have been pressed into dormitories. The appearance of these lower class suburbs is well known: the almost total lack of collective facilities, the shattered environment, the wrecked green spots, the despicable streets. The flats are in a deplorable condition, and too small, inhabitants have to pile up inside or use the rooms in shifts—those who can sleep during day-time, the young unemployed, leave room for their brothers and sisters who have to sleep at night.

However, the turbulence is not sufficiently explained by the urban problem. More important is the fact that suburbans live in a fragmented and parcelled urban environment, with no room for exchanges and sociability. Life in the field of marginality is characterized by the rout of traditional symbols. Up to the end of the 1970's, the cities were extensions of the countryside. This is no longer true, instead they have in a few years become arenas for consumption and easy gained money, where speculation and grey markets proliferate. Even the countryside gains from frantic urbanization, and there too, traditional ways of living are haunted by consumption.⁶ The city is the world of suburbans and consumption is their universe, exacerbated by the universalization of Western consumption patterns .

The major consequence of this is that old solidarities and regulations of the past have completely broken down. Consequently the individuals feel lost, they dismiss old securities, old certitudes. This is particularly obvious among the young living in the margins of employment and schools. The young reject past values and do not want to live like their parents. They are completely taken in by mass consumption, and their social imagination is directed towards Paris, Naples or Copenhagen, fascinating them more than Algiers or Cairo. Moreover, their consciousness is set against work, since they all agree that society is founded on other things than work. The experience of their parents proves to their minds that success on one hand, and work in a factory or in the services on the other are quite opposite things.

Yesterday, the young refused to work on the land, today, the young refuse to become construction or factory workers. And if these young people are suffering from unemployment, it is not really the value system of productive labour which could support their self-conscience or incite them to act collectively. The young are capable of rejecting the old forms of regulation rather than constructing new ones. Theirs is a “floating world”, if we keep in mind that this world is not created by a tension between tradition and modernity, but by a society which is decadent and in full disintegration.

This disintegration is reflected in the breakdown of the space. With accelerating urbanisation, this breakdown spreads in the cities and their peripheries. Everywhere, the dormitories, dominated by concrete and chaos, mushroom; individuals are in ever larger numbers trapped in townships where ghettos are brutally replacing the more or less well functioning suburbs. Whereas in the latter, common values and socialization systems were organized around the factory, in the former, these have been replaced by isolated and indifferent units and microcosms, signalling the end of the city and the society.

When urbanization is spreading in these conditions, waste, mechanisms of exclusion, disequilibrium and lack of socialization, shattered spaces and norms alien to urban life follows, and the street or the block forms the framework of life. There, "conformist" behaviour and norms made for survival in the marginality imposed by the dominating system, are produced by a combination of daily destitution, monotony and despotism. The marginals engage in the informal sector of the economy, where fiddling and professional delinquency are the rule. They act according to codes of honour, they assert themselves through masculine expressions and gestures, and they test themselves in acts of courage and physical aggression.... But the marginals have other outlets as well: the experiences of frequent beatings by the police, the conscience of living in a rotten system, and that of living as a crowd, not as a collective, all nourish sentiments of rebellion, protest and refusal. But then, they lack a space for expressing their protest....

From the weakness of social movements to the popular explosion

When the October rebellion broke out, the whole country fainted away in the crisis. Society lost its compass, social relationships disintegrated, professional speeches by politicians and administrators lost their meaning and the arena of social movements stood empty. It all happened as if the ruling class had been living off the exclusion and weakening of precisely the social forces able to bring about historical change. This situation was not due to a lack of economic or social differentiation, but to the fact that the ruling class had forbidden autonomous expressions of contradictory claims, refused institutionalization of social conflicts and repressed all social movements that possibly could act in organized and strategic ways.

In other words, the crisis was not only the result of "economic deregulation" or world-wide capitalist relationships. These paradigms were present, but not only are they insufficient to explain the whole social system, they also risk, in concealing the essential issues, to become alibies of all kinds of contradictory political strategies. In fact, the structural cause of the crisis is the dead end for the traditional and established social order of the country. It is still possible to perceive outlines of a permanence, of what is lasting, immobile, in the archaic, ever reproduced forms of political domination and social control.

This domination and control prevails since independence. All social classes were integrated into Boumedienne's Algeria, and economic "modernisation", in three different ways. They were linked to the pro-

ductive system, they got part of the remunerations from oil incomes, and finally they were politically excluded from open confrontations. In the last few years, in contrast, integration has been achieved through an increasing marginalization of the productive classes and social groups.

In the 1970's, the claims of these classes were met, more or less, with a "princely" management of enterprises. As a goal, social peace outruled all others, even economic goals. The managing staffs had wide ranges of freedom to manage the labour force, in order to stifle class struggle and avoid the working class forming into a social force. To "pacify" industrial relations, means like premiums, indemnities, over-qualifications, incomes without corresponding labour productivity, mass recruitment and concessions in social matters were used. But from the 1980's on, this picture changed totally: the central power "requisitioned" all the instruments of management.⁷ The consequences are well-known today: progressing devaluation of the labour force and systematic marginalization of the young and unqualified in the productive classes.⁸

This economic and social marginalization runs parallel with repression of workers' struggles and resistance, which the ruling class regards as a disorder to be suppressed. The means of neutralizing industrial conflicts in this respect as well are "requisitioned", managerial staff is told to unhesitatingly call in the police to repress every attempt among the workers to resist. And so groups of workers, one after the other, have experienced institutional violence: the workers of the logistic base of Sonatrach in Béni-Mered and their colleagues in Khémis-Miliana, those of the Sonitex, of Sonade in Oran, the ex-Sonama unit in Algiers, the textiles plant in Ben-Khedda, Cimotra in Constantine, the Emballages Métalliques unit of Kouba, the DNC unit in Sidi-Moussa, CVI in Rouiba and more recently the workers of Ecomet in Saida, of Enterprise des Travaux Routiers in Jijel, the miners of Ouenza, the workers of the ENEL unit in El Achour... and once more those of CVI in Rouiba.... In almost all cases, political power unleashed violence, and so doing proved its gradual transformation into a political machinery giving priority to the forces of order and repression.⁹

From this new situation, two major consequences follow. Firstly, the devaluation of productive labour and marginalization of young and unqualified workers combine with the effects of de-industrialization and dismantling of enterprises in fraying the image of the large factory. Industrial relations are no more the life-blood of society, and there is a great distance between the factory and daily life today. It must be said that this change is not directly due to economic crisis. Rather, it is the result of a program of political measures, introduced by the social forces in power, which are reorganized to include a dominant, unproductive and parasitic fraction. The problem has been to make a new model of management, new forms of social control and new instruments of economic regulation work, where the factory is not in the center of the economy and society.

However, it is a fact that the world of labour already had started to disintegrate when this new institutional configuration emerged. The positive image of productive labour has been increasingly undermined in the factories, and the social domination of the managerial staff corresponds less and less to technical work relations. The conditions of existence and

reproduction of the work force have neither been able to create stable systems of identification nor to ascertain that new recruits are integrated into work. In such circumstances the values of labour lose their meaning. Young people in the first place start to run away from the factory to a very different and more heterogeneous society, far from work. Absences, turnover black market work then become the ways to escape factory work.¹⁰

A second form of consequences are linked to the workers' struggles. These had been rapidly declining in the 1980's: 922 strikes were reported in 1980, falling to 809 in 1985 and 648 in 1987. On the eve of October 1988, strikes had paralysed the industrial zone between Rouiba and Réghaia as well as the Post and Telegraph (PTT) centers, but the monthly average of strikes was still below that of preceding years. It seemed as if factories and other productive areas in the last few years had ceased to be the driving force of social struggle. Activity of the productive classes decreased in the 1970's: the young refused to become workers, they deserted the unions, which after elimination of the leadership had become pure formalities. While refusal and revolt were omnipresent, the working-class young faced a society gradually separating itself from the forms of protest and action of the factory. The most important consequence is, that there are no social movements capable of directing social protest towards a clearly defined adversary and goals which could be transformed into a positive project.

On the level of ideas and discussions, the scene is just as empty. The existing stocks of preconceived opinions are not capable of discerning the ways and means through which the masses manage and negotiate their relationship to society and politics, still less of understanding their ways of constructing reality and the meaning of their refusal. The predictable speeches of political professionals and those responsible of social order sound increasingly hollow. This crisis of ideas and discussions increases the danger of a catastrophic collapse, since the social world is deprived of a cultural framework and a moral and intellectual infrastructure. And in addition the masses are totally disinterested in official history, which has become an instrument of suppressing social memory, and in institutionalized religion, changing in evasion of the arbitrary in everyday life and turning into an instrument of social control and court "culture", since it is less interested in spreading knowledge than dependence. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the marginals and the marginalized, rejected into the social periphery, neither can appeal to the universe of the productive classes, nor to a social movement directing their actions, not even to a vision of society, and instead choose to adopt what B. Badie has named a "culture of riot".¹¹ This signifies informal conduct, practices of evasion in front of the forces of law and order, a norm system of "dangerous classes", spectacular demonstrations, underground actions of dissidence and finally a religious discourse as forms of protest.

Islam has become the vector of protests and that is why "the mosques open up to the sidewalks of the streets."¹² But religion has not always had this social function. In fact, in the period of rapid industrialization and rural exodus, it rather had a compensatory function. From this point of view, Algeria is far from being a special case. The industrial countries as well are

familiar with a situation when religion is giving roots to the individual. This compensatory function works from the moment when industrialization provokes the breakdown of the traditional systems of appurtenance of the rural migrants. Religion then seems to be a necessary palliative of the socio-economic system, filling up the social and cultural gaps of the system. The migrants are cut off from old refuges, lack a grip over the collective future, and are reduced to simple carriers of labour force in a system which disconcerts them. They turn to religion for stable landmarks, an anchorage for their anxiety and their hopes, and a place for communication.¹³

What has been said about Islam, with due consideration to proportions, also goes for the charisma of Boumedienne. Feverish industrialization, dislodging of traditional behaviour, upheavals of the universes of collectives of individuals, due to progress and social mobility, massive exodus of migrants were combined with police despotism and so integrated all social activities within a state framework. As a result the whole society is weakened and atomized, each individual is isolated in front of an anonymous and omnipresent power. Large segments of the population, facing the confusion of this moving and shattered reality, the contradictory feelings of fear of the arbitrary and hopes of egalitarianism, are looking for a universal meaning and a unifying symbol.¹⁴ It is Boumedienne who will personalize this meaning and this symbol, uniting mobilization and obedience, enthusiasm and silence, exterior nationalism and interior national repression, participation and exclusion, "radiant future" and miserable present. The loss of this meaning and this symbol is at the root of the explosion of feelings among the masses after the funeral of the state leader. In sum, it is more the security aspect than the nature of the regime which makes the masses cry. Since then, the situation has changed because the whole social system, entering the crisis, has produced new mechanisms of domination and oppression. The marginal young have today urban roots but the city, devoid of a cultural sense, produces ghettos. The public sphere is secularized but daily life does not give any room for exchanges and relaxation. The official symbols are disintegrating but the lower classes cannot challenge the established order with the authorization of utopian social transformations, they have no contact with universal ideals. The population is preoccupied with important welfare demands but is confronted with a situation where the standard of living for a small minority is soaring high, and where the lot of everybody else is the anxiety for tomorrow. This is when "time is running out for the Gods" in the eyes of whole peripheries.¹⁵ Then it is easy for fundamentalist leaders to make the domination suffered understandable, and to organize the revolt of the young who do not consider this domination legitimate and have no social relationship to it... Islam incarnates the good as opposed to the bad, the truth as opposed to lies, justice as opposed to the arbitrary, morals as opposed to corruption. All the faults of the regime are included in these accusations which are, although expressed under cover of religion, more linked to the people's living conditions than to a life beyond this, and more to ideological than metaphysical problems.

The potentials of protest and ruptures of marginal people are manifold

and in any case extend beyond the mosque. The stadiums have become a rallying-point, where the young can show their explosive strength. They have practically nowhere else to gather for collective manifestations, so thousands of them go to these places to express their protests. This can appear as real subversive actions : the young develop a biting irony, express their mockery in practical jokes and make fun of absurdities and political personalities in satires. The official symbols are thus cut into pieces and a kind of cynicism mixes with dissidence and mockery, all the more piercing as it compensates for the rage from being unable to act. But as the situation gradually deteriorates and people lack even essentials—consumption goods, water, housing—the young will increasingly become carriers of radicalism: the stadiums will, just as the mosques, open up to the streets and simultaneously to the city.

The revolt embraced the cities and series of popular rebellions shook large parts of the country ridden by general economic and social crisis. The first grand shock came in the Casbah, a lower class area of Algiers in 1985. Constantine and Sétif exploded in November 1986. The retaliation of the authorities did not take long in coming: concealing the protests, rebellions and revolts and trying to reduce their significance to "acts of delinquency", they employed the forces of repression. The revolt did not stop, in September 1987 it reached Ain-Abid, where thousands of people occupied the buildings of communal authorities to demand water and electricity. The inhabitants of Azazga did the same thing in 1988; and Oued-Oussara was to witness mass demonstrations: the inhabitants damaged the F.L.N. headquarters and the municipal government but were forced back by anti-riot brigades and security forces starting arrests. The same year, the cities Saida and Mostaganem saw popular explosions and in both cases repression did not take a long in coming. Everywhere, the accumulation and accentuation of urban and social contradictions induced mass rebellions. Next, Ouenza, Miliana, Bordj-Bou-Argeridj, Batna and many other towns experienced a spiral of demonstrations and repression. In all these events, there seemed to be two constant factors. Firstly, everywhere, the periphery seems to stand up against the center, the people of regional peripheries against the capital where economic and social decisions are taken. Secondly the problems are not political in the first place, they concern the modern need for welfare; that is why only local questions count instead of national political questions. It is as if the lower classes feel that they belong to a locally based social system, personalized by state servants (the party representative, the mayor or the province governor), more than to a national system of social classes. There it is possible to recognize the logic of action of marginalized classes and groups.

However, between the problems directing state action and those nourishing the people's revolts, there is a gulf; and the state fails in what seemed to be its strong point, its supposed capacity to impose its norms, commands and lies. Came 5 October: mass rebellion over the whole city of Algiers and in other cities. This time, it was not the riot police who intervened, but armoured cars, and horror was followed by terror...

The significations of the rebellion seem to be more revealing for our purposes than the chronology of these tragic events. Essentially, there are

two of them. Firstly, while E Hobsbawm has noted that “primitive” social movements, characterizing the emergence of modern Europe, never were directed against the state and political power, only against the rich and powerful, the October uprising is quite the opposite. It was directed against the local councils, party sections, district authorities, police headquarters, ministries.... in short the anger of the young has been directed against the representatives of political power. The symbols of dominance—not of wealth—are exposed to acts of rebellion. In fact, the young in the streets have pointed out the real targets.¹⁶

But on the other hand, if the young and marginalized have pointed out the targets, they are unable to take the lead. Their rebellion is only defined against something, it does not draw up any projects for the future. They will certainly be insurgent against an intolerable situation but their motivation is the anger to belong to the marginal field, not utopias of social change. They represent explosive powers but their actions do not contain an emancipatory theme. The young are too marginalized, too dominated to be able to grasp all the elements defining the sense of their domination, too dependent to be directed by precise references, too indifferent to political slogans to accept the regulated models of mobilisation. They neither have the capacity to formulate their problems, nor to give a glimpse of the society they wish for as opposed to the one they reject.

From this point on, we will examine the proper way to approach the problematic of the October rebellion. The rebellion is the result of a social model, characterized by the refusal to institutionalize demands, and a power system, inclined to concentrate its efforts on repressive acts, and thus favour the conversion of these demands into revolt. The October rebellion is dedicated to the failure of a power system, depriving politics of openings and regulations, prohibiting the expression of opposing demands, suffocating all emancipatory initiatives of critical knowledge and submerging the society in deep moral and intellectual poverty. It is the result of a number of factors such as: “disillusion created by repeated failures, propagation of a subculture, the absence of classes or social groups capable of initiating historical projects, severe control of all critical thought... ideological constructions of a single party.”¹⁷ All these factors generate the crisis of legitimacy and the deteriorating relationship between the government and the governed. They lead towards the closing of the social system in which the state and the society, deprived of all political, intellectual and moral arms, confront each other in violence.

What about the essentially liberal political reforms following the events of “October”? Which are the roots of democracy, suddenly opening up the political system and instituting a multiparty system? Now the answer seems obvious: however important the October rebellion, it was not the principal cause behind institutional change. Behind it was political power itself, trying to get out of its profound crisis of legitimacy after the blood-bath. Economic and social policy has been a failure, the “pacification” of society through distribution of the rent incomes has become impossible, work has lost its meaning in society and for the individuals, and dangerous actions from the field of marginality weigh heavily on the power-holders. Simultaneously, society is experiencing great upheavals, it is fed

up with the hammering sound of the same speeches and the same old themes, imposing images of a "united people" and "every citizen is lost in the crowd" upon them. To this rather dark picture must be added the dream of capitalism among the bourgeois and aspiring fractions of society, no longer a secret for anyone.

In this situation, political reform has indisputably come from above, the "democratic opening" has not been born out of the movement on the streets. The initiative is back with the prince at a moment when the power-holders have failed in their claims to develop the country, and have very small reserves of confidence in society and the social periphery, so they seek the favours of a new social base. Also the power-holders have no other option as the political reforms can serve as a skilful counter-attack, giving the political elite a means to disqualify the revolt of the cities and to substitute the polls for the anger of marginal people.

On one hand, these political reforms are certain to breed new forms of domination, on the other, they will create institutional openings, loosening nuts and bolts, making room for society to learn how to defend itself—if only "for the sake of the children shot down in "October", who will forever have the credit of making fear retreat."¹⁸ "October 88" has, moreover, made the intellectuals to some extent get out of their social sleep-walking and the productive classes launch an unprecedented wave of strikes.

Workers' social protests

Sunday 25 September 1988: the 9,000 workers of CVI go on strike. The next day, a general assembly, consisting of political and administrative authorities and union leaders met, without success. The strike continued to 27 September. On this day, all the workers of the industrial zone of Rouiba and Réghaia joined the movement. They broke through the riot forces and occupied the streets together with the CVI. The inhabitants of Rouiba then showed their solidarity, and reinforced by this support the striking workers received the province governor, the Mohaffed and the general secretary of the central union, who had come to discuss their problems, with boeing. The same day, some twenty workers were arrested to be released the next day.

Wednesday 28 September: A confrontation between the riot forces and the workers; the latter went back to work, chose delegates from the work units to discuss their demands with the authorities, and decided to go back to work on 1 October. The protest movement the same day reached the postal services where the same scenario took place. Certain units in Algiers went on strike, there were interventions and intimidations by the authorities, election of delegates of striking workers and return to work in four days.

Workers on strike

These struggles which had repercussions on the national level, in a way served as detonators. Between January and September 1988 the number of

strikes was about 500. Between October and December the same year, they reached the unprecedented level of 1,433. Whereas the number of strikes was relatively stable and low during the five preceding years (an annual average of 779) the curve of strikes took off in 1988 (a total of 1,933). The peak of the movement was reached in November: 824 strikes as against a monthly average of 68 strikes in 1985, 58 in 1986 and 54 in 1987. From that month onwards, the country seemed to be on fire, almost everywhere the workers transformed their silent grievances into explicit acts. The strike movement reached all categories of workers, from construction workers on public sites to the industry, including the services and public administrations. All the provinces except Tindouf were part of the general protest movement.¹⁹

The striking aspect of this movement is that the workers seem to have engaged in really collective struggles and not only simultaneous ones as was the case in the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's. In fact, the strikes were launched at the same moment and with the same demands. Between 12 and 13 November more than 20 strikes were launched in the industrial zone of Annaba. Several units joined in between 15 and 19 in the same city. In the province of Boumerdes, it was on 12 November that the workers' agitation became open in several places (CVI, SNTR, EMAC). The same goes for Ain-Defla where more than 20 units stopped work on 19 November. It is thus not so much a process of eruption of strikes as a collective and organized movement which seems to control the generalized protests of workers. Moreover, the determination of strikers is shown by the average duration of conflicts. They are relatively long and certain strikes, like that of Building in Rouiba or that of the heavy mechanical unit (Annaba) lasted for one week and over ten days respectively.

The first months of 1989 also showed the amplitude of the workers' refusal. There were almost as many strikes in the first half year as there were during the whole year of 1988 (1,905 strikes). The massive or unanimous character of strikes distinguishes the nine months from October 1988 to June 1989: there were more strikes during these nine months than during the preceding four years. Just like last year, the strike movement concerns all branches of the economy. The same goes for all provinces, including the less industrialized ones like Blida, Tizi-Ouzou, Bedjaia, Biskra, Médéa... It is also significant that the strikes do not only involve construction and industrial workers but just as much other social groups in general education and training, health care, banking. In short, all stoppages extending like waves give the impression that the whole country is on strike.

This impression is strengthened as the strikes this time concern the nervous system of the society and have a national range. A two day strike by the Naftal petrol distribution workers paralysed Algiers. A new paralysis followed upon the strikes of transport workers of the TVC and the workers of the post and telegraph. The latter in fact pursued their actions of October and December 1988, except that this time the 38,000 postmen were on a national strike(19-23 March).

Another outstanding feature is that of a certain radicalism of workers, which the duration of strikes show. The strike at the complex of Ait-Idir went on for 23 days. The strike of 2,400 workers at Cotitex in Batna went

on for over a month, their colleagues of Draa-Ben-Khedda were on strike for 33 days, at ENGC in Boudouaou it lasted over 6 months. In most places, it seems as if the workers cannot find a counterpart to face them. The state, deeply divided into different interest groups and used to manage society on the basis of archaic power relations, is incapable of engaging in negotiations with this strong movement of strikes and protests.

One of the main reasons for this powerful strike movement is the dissatisfaction among all the workers and other employees with the whole social system. This system is based on a class structure which is from now on quite visible. Facing proletarians and marginal social groups who lack even the essential things—employment, housing, health, knowledge—there are the “gold bellies”, enriching themselves and conspicuously displaying their wealth. This social system is not linked to a particularly competitive or efficient economic system, nor is the class structure “justified” by an adequate productive system. On the contrary, the ruling class has “given the unproductive and self-seeking bourgeoisie the upper hand over the intellectual and manual workers.”²⁰ The state is from now on reduced to a predatory apparatus involved in relationships of patronage, parasitism, corruption... with different parts of its social base. Advancing the necessity of playing down the role of the state, the power-holders have directed a blow at all the things constituting the prerequisites of the proletarians’ and marginalized masses right to existence. Simultaneously they tip the balance in favour of big business, the black market, speculation.... The state has drawn back from economy and let the market forces loose, but it is not the law of value—and consequently capital and labour—who organize society but the informal sector and illicit trade.²¹ The result is that it has only taken a few years for the social scene to become occupied by two societies, two worlds living side by side but having incompatible interests: the world of proletarians and the large majority of the employed middle classes, whose work is not appreciated, and the world of predators on whose fortunes the social hierarchy is based.

In this situation, political expressions rapidly become obsolete and outdated. And since the conditions of the “populist” period no longer exist, the new situation provokes questions and criticism. The single party, the united people, the absence of the right to strike and freedom of unions... can no longer work as alibi or institutional instruments to dominate a society in which everything else changes....

The dissatisfaction is not the only factor to explain the rise of social protests among workers. It also arises from forced stabilization of the world of labour. Unemployment, lay-offs, cut-downs of the labour force and drastic reductions of employment have provoked a change of the internal power relations in the world of labour. Turn-over has decreased between 1984 and 1987, the workers’ collective is, consequently, a little older and more stable. This stabilization of a labour force in addition, has made the workers more aware of what is happening at their workplace. A new race of workers—the young workers—assured of their social and civil rights, is now ready to assert itself, dissatisfied to be in a situation of half-way solutions and differentiated promises....

The political situation is certainly the element to complete this set of

facts. After the October uprising, the middle classes have been able to regain the use of words, and doctors, lawyers, journalists and academics act in solidarity with the victims of repression and torture. At the same time they demand the political freedom they lost at the eve of independence, and their assemblies, their petitions and acts are directed towards the watchwords freedom of expression, of association, of union and the right to strike. The context of middle classes rushing to take advantage of all openings, explains the strong pressure of workers' strikes in November 1988. The administration, the establishment and the factories were at the time seething with ideas about how to organize the Algerian society, tongues were loosened, the fear of repression disappeared and the appeals for strikes were echoed in the workers' collectives. They expressed their demands with an unprecedented intensity, and broke through almost all enclosures of the union structures, imprisoned by the single party, and entered the center of debates with their strikes.

The October rebellion and the social protests following opened up for an amendment of the system and for a new constitution in February 1989. Political "associations" were recognized, but otherwise the constitution was essentially "liberal" and characterized by a "strong presidential power."²² It is in fact meant for the middle class, wishing a political career. For the rest of society (working class, marginal groups) the nature of political power does not change, as has been emphasized by M. Harbi. "Yesterday it provided some bread but took freedom away; today it takes away the bread but distributes some crumbs of freedom."²³ But the working class is not entirely cheated by these changes of the political system. They are suspicious of a multiparty system made for the upper classes, and continue to voice their protest in several hundreds of strikes in March and April 1989 (895 strikes). This almost permanent working class movement culminated on May day the same year. That day, the workers seemed to have forgotten that May day has become "government day" and that they were supposed to prove their "mobilization in favour of the political line". Supervision from above over the world of labour was blown up, and the workers went out on the streets in masses with quite different watchwords, giving "democracy" a social content.

The demands of workers

The demands of workers are organized around a number of themes, of which the most important concern payments (1,209 strikes in 1988), protests against the management (474 strikes), work organization (315 strikes), general working conditions (304 strikes) and living conditions (transports and housing: 223 strikes).

The payments, wages and other remunerations remain the pivotal point of workers' struggle, because the buying power of wage-earners and particularly the poorest of them, the workers and petty officials, has decreased steeply. All evidence is pointing towards the fact that the increase of inflation rates finally has irritated the workers, who, since there are no procedures to revise wages, have to fall back on strike actions to make wages catch up with the continuously rising prices. But if wages have

been on top of workers' demands, like in previous years, their demands have new features from October 1988 on. They go out on strike on issues like buying power and overall conditions of reproduction of the work force. In other words, it is the standard of living and not only the level of wages which constitutes the background for their demands. The workers do not only care about premiums or other payments, they care about the cost of living, the shortages, the black market, the conditions of life.... These features indicate a qualitative change in their demands. The workers no longer accept the argument that the enterprise is unable to satisfy their demands and direct their social revendications towards the broader framework of the social system, immediately sending them back to the political system.

The other qualitative change inherent in workers' demands concerns protests against the management. These protests are almost systematic in the enterprises and conflicts with managerial staff are serious and sharp. The latter are reproached of bad management, embezzlement, hardness, severity, scornful and brutal behaviour, and these reproaches are all the more serious as the workers often think they are incompetent. The conflict almost everywhere leads to demands for the dismissal of the director and his close collaborators, showing the opposition, or rather the hate of the workers towards managerial staff.

There are two major explanations of this kind of protests. *In the first place*, price determination, the forms of recruitment and training, the ways of calculating wages and payments, and the regulation of relationships at work have some time ago been transferred to the central administration and imposed upon the work units. This means that social negotiations concerning work organization and regulation of conflict have to be pursued at state level. Consequently, the managerial staff has lost its means of ruling and appears "incompetent" to the workers. Moreover, the workers' collective is requested to produce a surplus and the managerial staff to put an end to workers' demands and protests.²⁴ The results of this new "factory dictatorship" are well-known. The social ambitions of factories have been suppressed, the work force has been diminished and work organization has become more authoritarian.²⁵ This authoritarian strategy has the support of Party and union leaders. It is most obviously expressed in the menace of unemployment, used to defuse the workers' struggles. They have also been laid off in large numbers, as managerial staff has used reprisals against the most active workers. It is not uncommon that the security forces lend a hand to managements in such "purges". *In the second place*, this openly anti-worker repressive strategy will not be forgotten among the workers after October....

The most audacious new workers' demand is doubtless that they should manage their own unions. The autumn 1988 and the following months have in fact demonstrated the capacity of workers to create committees of union representatives freely and everywhere, the demand for freedom of unions has animated struggles and strikes, and almost everywhere, the protests against the official union have been the igniting spark. This is not new. In the second half of the 1970's the workers protested against the UGTA leadership, but mostly their actions consisted of strug-

gles without support from the union or even against it. They turned away from UGTA because the unions were under orders and protection, like an army, and the candidates for union elections were picked out in advance only undergoing formal voting. Their attitudes were extremely reserved or even hostile towards the union apparatus because it was totally bureaucratic and transforming into authoritarian structures, just as the administration.

What is totally new, on the other hand, is the emergence of autonomous committees. From November 1988 on, some twenty units of the province of Tizi-Ouzou elected "committees for union coordination", in the absence of official union leaders. Simultaneously, a "provisional committee for union coordination" was created in Annaba. In February, it was the turn of the industrial zone Es-Sénia in Oran to gather delegates of 17 different sectors to create a "provisional inter-union coordination". In the province of Bedjaia the same thing occurred: a coordination of all delegates elected at strikes. Next, some fifteen enterprises of greater Algiers set up a "provisional inter-union coordination". Almost everywhere, committees based on open suffrage and union autonomy appear, and almost everywhere these committees overrule UGTA, since long become a transport company.

Meanwhile, the central leadership of UGTA hangs on to the past. In a leaflet distributed in February 1989, they protest against the proposed constitution because it "introduces class struggle" while they on their part "always have worked for social peace" (*sic*). Some time later, they rose against union pluralism with the pretext of safeguarding "workers' unity". They do not conceal their reservations to the autonomous committees. While monopoly remains their secret dream, union leaders reject union democracy, condemn "parallel unions", refuse them access to their rooms for meetings and occasionally even violently attack delegates chosen by workers on strike. They forget that divisions between workers have been evident for a long time, at one-candidate elections, rigged elections, rigged congresses and many forms of repression against active workers. Now the union leaders wave the flags of unity in order to hold on to their privileged positions and to lock workers up in a non-competitive room at the mercy of a single union. Nonetheless, the central leaders of UGTA today have to confront the storm of strikes and the contesting mood of workers who seem to want to attack the "fortress" and sweep away union monopoly.

The workers are sensitive to social and political circumstances and have started new social struggles, reinforced their strike actions and increased the level of demands. But even their most daring moves should conceal neither the limitations nor the relative impotence of their struggle as regards the whole social system.

The workers still lack independent unions and well-known and generally accepted leaders, and they do not have a clear view of how to develop their struggle. Most of the autonomous committees more or less express the rejection of the world of labour, but their perspectives to reform union activities remain closely linked to UGTA, as if its existence only would suffice to unite the workers and make their protest movement strong. The

committees do not accept union pluralism, the only guarantee of freedom and representativity within the unions, and with this ideological hat-trick they run the risk of confounding workers' interests with the interests of union elites. In that case, workers' struggles risk to become fuel for the actions of political clans or simply for people with an eye to political power.

Workers' struggles respond to class domination at the level of labour relations. This level is well demarcated and does not constitute the center of the social system properly speaking. The conflicts enacted at this level are not derived from the production sphere, since the latter is peripheral in relation to the sphere of predation, growth is idling, work is overridden by extra-economic norms and the state remains a "non-state" overrun by relationships of loyalty and patronage. In all these cases, the workers—just as their adversaries, by the way—seem to keep out of "industrial culture" and to be uninterested in production relations.

Workers are perfectly present at the level of social struggles but their movement does not yet constitute a central part of the political and cultural problems society is facing. Their movement does not seem to seek positively defined goals, nor to articulate a major protest movement which could combine the sphere of labour with the civil sphere, and fight the domination which is extending to social life as a whole, in information, education, culture, communal and everyday life.

Instead of a conclusion: the city, the factory and the state

The city and the factory are rising against the state but they are both directed by different logics and practices. The city continues as a non-arena of public life, it is filling up with marginal people, deprived of communication and identity, of culture and essential freedom, who care little for politics and for "the spirit of the law"²⁶. Here, marginality is close to and breeds violence, whether it is popular or institutional. The factory remains a place where struggles are socialised, but today it is at the cross-roads. One way is for the workers to impose their version of industrial values centered on new industrial relations and their own capacity to act, and in that case, they will climb to the level of a strong social movement with the modes of regulation typical for modern society. The other way is that their capacity to act remains weak and in that case they will witness the appearance of new proletarians with an increasingly precarious status. In the first case, their mass and class actions can lead them to a system of regulating conflict through negotiations. In the second case, they will be exposed to a much more serious weakening of the labour force.²⁷ In any case, no real alternative to the whole social system is possible without bridging over the gap between the city and the factory and the gulf between the marginals and the workers.

This important point reaches back to the relationships existing between them on one hand, the state and the political system on the other. Liberalism has not been permitted as a means of realizing the project of radical compradorization and opposing the political elites to the anger of the city crowds. Voices are already raised all over the place to call for "order and discipline", important values from now on, as the multi-party

system will give everybody a possibility to express himself within a legal framework, or so it is said. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the gulf between politics and social issues, between "integrated" and "non-integrated" people is growing.²⁸ If not, the state will remain prisoner of its own archaism. It still functions through censorship and professional interdictions and still appeals to its repressive apparatus both in the city and the factory.²⁹ It is still hostile towards the institutionalisation of labour conflicts as is shown by the restrictions brought into the plans for the right to go on strike.³⁰ It edicts the laws and appeals to its security forces, but since it does not have any vision of a society, it continuously breeds extremely conformist behaviour in sects and antisocial movements, leaving open the way to barbarism. Certainly there would be other ways, allowing producers and citizens to introduce self-determination to an increasing extent in society, orienting it towards social democracy and modernity.

September 1989

Notes

1. Nair, S, *Tiers-Monde et système diadique*.
2. Cf. "Eléments d'une politique à court terme de promotion de l'emploi", *MTAS*, Sept 1988.
3. For this change of migratory movements see M. Côte, *L'Algérie ou l'espace retourné*, Flammarion 1988.
4. In the last census, 570 communes have an unemployment rate exceeding 25 per cent, 75 communes exceed 40 per cent.
5. See *Armature urbaine—1987*. Statistiques No 4—ONS.
6. M. Côte, *op. cit.*
7. A more precise account is given in A.El Kenz, *Le complexe sidérurgique d'El-Hadjar une expérience industrielle en Algérie*. CNRS 1987, and our thesis *Question ouvrière et rapports sociaux en Algérie*, Paris VII, 1986.
8. One of the principal factors of this marginalization is for the moment to generalize precarious employments: while permanent employment only increased by 2.8 per cent between 1987 and 1988, employment increased by 33.2 per cent in the same period. Cf. data published by ONAMO.
9. Cf. our study "Les ouvriers face au travail", *Cahiers du CREAD* No 9, 1987.
10. See note 9.
11. Badie, B, *Les deux Etats. Pouvoir et société en Occident et en terre d'Islam*, Fayard 1986.
12. A. el Kenz, *Au fil de la crise. 4 études sur l'Algérie et le monde arabe*, Bouchéne, Alger 1989.
13. D. Guérid has stated about Algerian workers: "Brutally forced into a new world, without any landmarks or ties, the workers refuse to 'float'. They invent, or more exactly, they recreate conditions which make their life worth living. They turn to religion which then plays a considerable role. Isolation at work and in the factory, the cleavage between workers produced by modern work organization, create a wish to come together, a wish to communicate which is fulfilled in religious communion." *Industrie et Société*, SNS Algiers 1982.
14. An expression of B Baczko whose work has inspired us at this point. Cf. his *Les imaginaires sociaux. Mémoires et espoirs collectifs*, Payot 1984.
15. Expression from the beautiful book of P. Pons, *D & Edo à Tokio. Mémoires et modernités*, Gallimard 1988.
16. Harbi, M., "Lettre aux citoyens et citoyennes", *Revue Sou'al* No 9/10, July 1990.
17. Arkoun, M., *L'Islam, morale et politique*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1986.
18. See note 16.
19. The facts are from bulletins of the Ministry of Labour.
20. Marzouki, M, "Arabes, si vous parliez", *Lieu commun*, Series Islamie.

21. See the contributions of A. El Kenz and D. Liabès in *L'Algérie face à la modernité*, Codesria 1989.
22. Details on the new constitution, see Chalabi, El H. "Métamorphose d'une constitution. De la constitution-programme à la constitution-loi", *Revue Sou'al*, No 9/10, *op.cit.*
23. Harbi, M, *op. cit.*
24. See our thesis *op. cit.* and Lellou, A , *Conflits de travail et autonomie de l'entreprise publique*, Algérie-Actualité 20-26April 1989.
25. Between 1985 and 1986, over 104,000 jobs have been abolished. Only in 1987, no less than 32,000 jobs disappeared. As a consequence, a national committee of job surveillance and protection was created in 1988.
26. See the important contributions in "Villes tourmentées", *Peuples Méditerranéens* No 37, Oct-Dec 1986, particularly the articles by P.Vieille and B.Ghalioun.
27. The government has recently decided that labour legislation should be harmonized between public and private sector. It goes without saying that such a decision is very menacing for the workers.
28. Once more we refer to the analysis of S. Nair, *op. cit.*, of the subdivision in two structural axis of social systems in the Third world, the first an integrated sub-system, the second called the field of marginality.
29. A journalist of the FLN party has been dismissed for having written an article in *Revolution Africaine* where he exposed the archaic character of the party. For repression in the city, the cases of Bou Saada, Souk-Ahras, Bordj Ménael, Ain Bénian, Corso, can be cited. Among factories: workers and union members of Sorecal in El Achoun have experienced, in the month of August 1989, a terrible repression.
30. See the indications of M.Abdelaziz in *Algérie-Actualité*, 1-7 June, 1989.



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