The Ideology of Revolution in Bioshock Infinite and Hunger Games
From the Poverty of Literature to the Poverty of the Movement

The failings of these revolutionary movements accurately represent the shortcomings of the current movement of the proletariat. Blind violence of the proletarians of a racially dominated Vox Populi echoes those of immigrant proletarian youth, stuck on the periphery of the capitalist metropoles with their devastating eruptions of rebellion. The anti-Capitole Panem Rebel echoes the informed anti-capitalism of Occupy and the Indignados. This is the ideological depression of a generation of proletarians, where the enemy is only vaguely known. Capitol and the Founders are echoes of the 1% and Babylon, or the revolutionary project is vague, undefined. This is a proletariat smitten by its experience and its past. The culprit is not hard to find. The carryon of Stalinism still stinks strong enough to undermine the revolutionary movement.

The defeat of the Russian Revolution opened a wound in the revolutionary movement, a wound that is slow to heal. Stalinism dealt a severe blow not only to the political project of the proletariat, communism, associating it with gulags and famine, but also the material force that carried the experience of the proletariat, its Revolutionary Party, into association with the authoritarian state. If the current material conditions push all thinking beings to severely undermine capitalism, the lack of a material force that could link the working class to its revolutionary past, to the experience upon which it can draw, will lead us straight to barbarism.

“Fire is catching, and if we burn, you burn with us.”

The Hunger Games
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The Hunger Games: Something Altogether Different

The Hunger Games is a series of youth adventure books following the most classical genre since the early 2000s: that of a child, teenager or young adult who saves the world. The success of Harry Potter is emblematic of this narrative model. Born of the broken promise of Francis Fukuyama of the ‘end of history’ this narrative model is simply that of the generation born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The promise of free market capitalism was not achieved, “evil” persists though it is unclear how, and young people are forced to encounter it like their parents. The threat is rarely new: it’s usually an ancient evil, defeated by previous generation, who returns to the present. It is easy to understand that this is the spectre of ‘totalitarianism’. It is the USSR standing among the ashes of the Third Reich, it is Saddam Hussein rising from the ruins of the Berlin Wall.

A feature of The Hunger Games is the imposition of a certain gender gap. Indeed, in this series, evil has overwhelmed the previous generations. Evil is the Capitol, a physical place and a structure of government that governs the country of Panem. In a post-apocalyptic North America, the Capitol has established its dominance over 13 districts. Districts are areas of North America, each of which produces a type of goods for the Capitol. For example, District Twelve where Katniss comes from, is known for its coal mines. The economic dominance of the Capitol was challenged by a rebellion that was crushed 74 years before the series starts. Since the rebellion, the Capitol has organised a series of fights to the death between young people of the 12 districts in order to rein force the Capitol’s supremacy over the districts. The fighting takes place in huge high tech coliseums recreating hostile areas. The games are broadcast throughout Panem. Katniss, challenging the judges over her own participation in the games, triggers a successful revolution to overthrow the Capitol. However, when the revolution triumphs, the leaders of the revolution propose maintaining the games, but this time with the children of the Capitol. Opposing the replacement games, Katniss kills the leader of the rebellion just as she had President Snow, deposed dictator of the Capitol.

This work is interesting on several points. First of all it offers powerful criticism of a spectacle pushed to the most extreme barbarism. Then there is the international division of labour, which is admittedly simplified, but we are talking about a book for young adults. Even more impressive is the description of the independent district, District 13, which, because of its isolation and its lack of resources, has degenerated into a harsh dictatorship. It seems almost like a criticism of socialism in one country. Also, the designation of the enemy as Capitol, with an O replacing an A is clearly anti-capitalist.

But once again, the absence of a revolutionary project is striking. Apart from two vague lines towards the end of the third book about a republic, the question of what will replace the Capitol is barely touched. Theory is non-existent, and the debates that should animate the revolutionary ranks are non-existent. The rebels have no name other than that of rebels or insurgents. The conclusion is thus predictable. The needs of revolution having corrupted the rebel leaders, the fight should now be against them.

The effects of the absence of revolutionary projects on the cultural consumption of youth

A well known effect of the current crisis of the mode of production is that it involves a loss of legitimacy resulting in it being challenged by a fringe element of the exploited. Faced with this revolt, Capital has many defences. Capitalist domination has an incredible arsenal, from trade unions to its armed forces, from the ballot to tear gas, from racist divisions to nuclear weapons, over which the proletariat has never permanently triumphed. Whenever the proletariat has been defeated but has managed to deliver a severe blow to the bourgeoisie, its successes are soon transmuted and added to the arsenal of bourgeois rule. The Paris Commune gave way to the voting booths, the October Revolution produced Stalinism, anarchism has become democratic anti-fascism.

The proletarian struggle often has a cultural side. This is a movement against the insignificance of bourgeois existence and of culture, the counter-culture. It is doomed to failure if it is not based on a class movement, if it does not find the material basis to flourish. It has, until now, always been recuperated and relegated to the status of a commodity. Its subversive substance is transformed into capital, the revolt into a commodity. The absorbed counter-cultures are as much a device for conservation and control as the social democratic organisations. Revolt is profitable, especially in times of crisis, because it calls on a group of proletarians, often young, to consume. Anti-fascist skinheads and the teamsters are as much alike as Burningman and Montdragon. They channel the revolt of the exploited, reducing it to a mere cog in the capitalist machine, and creating a new outlet for the revalorisation of Capital.

For two or three years, it is not only the revolt that is exploited, but the very idea of revolution. Since the uprisings in the Arab world, the cultural representations of insurrections have multiplied on the market. From the latest Batman villains who inexplicably launched an anti-capitalist insurrection to put into operation a plan to destroy a city with home-made nuclear weapons to the gang of revolutionary youth of the horrific book Divergence. Overturning the established order seems fashionable. The success of these productions is rooted in the fact that they cater for a young generation of proletarians in the countries at the centre of capitalism. More educated than previously, as
precarious workers, they will inherit a planet devastated by overproduction and very likely an imperialist world war more total and devastating than the previous two. This generation will have no choice but to get rid of capitalism, of blasting its voice towards the future, if it does not want to end up envying the fate of those shredded at Verdun or incinerated in the Nazi camps.

One thing is striking about these new revolts in almost every case. The revolutionary project has no name. Sometimes it does not even exist. The revolution is purely negative in its essence. Although having stated that “Communism is for us not a state to be created, nor an ideal to which reality will have to adjust. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.” (The German ideology)

Marx Engel took care to define a little what a classless and stateless society would be like. ”From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” or “a free association of producers” remain clear benchmarks for the future. The spectre haunting Europe had a name and a substance, now it is anonymous and empty. We will analyse two works to see how this phenomenon occurs. First the video game “BioShock Infinite” and then the series of books adapted for the film “The Hunger Games”.

The Inexplicably Bloodthirsty BioShock Infinite

In BioShock Infinite, released in March 2013, the player is Booker DeWitt, detective, former member of the US Cavalry who participated in the massacre of Wounded Knee and is a former Pinkerton agent. You are sent in 1912 to a floating city called "Columbia" to find a woman in exchange for the redemption of these debts. The city was to be an ideal representation of American society at the beginning of the century; it is a caricature. Racial segregation, abject exploitation of the workers, hypocritical puritanism and religious bigotry stretch out before your eyes. This is America described by Vladimir Pozner and Howard Zinn, where class war rages.

The proletarians are organised by a group called ‘Vox Populi’, led by a brilliant black woman, Daizy Fitzroy. Rebel workers, dressed in red, with an aesthetic between that of the IWW and the beginning of the Russian Revolution, the association with the socialist movement is easy to make. But no ideology seems to animate the Vox. Apart from a vague populism, no political project, except for a hatred of the ‘founders’ (the name given to the big bourgeois of Columbus) and a form of jealousy motivates them. At the beginning of the game, "Vox" are rational, their intentions are noble and their methods are quite justifiable faced with the repression of the regime. But when the revolution triumphs, the masses become brutal and bloodthirsty. Although similar events may appear, the turnaround is pretty brutal. The most extreme case is that of Fitzroy, who tries to kill a bourgeois child, to ‘destroy evil at its root’ but who, as although a determined revolutionary leader, had never done anything so bloodthirsty before.

The explanation for this sudden revolutionary thirst for blood is the same one that sheds light on their lack of political project. The revolution in essence is considered a violent and negative act, despite its noble intentions. The bloodshed is considered normally associated with any attempt to change the world outside the bourgeois framework. Any qualitative change in society is associated with the liberal fear of the ”tyranny of the mob”, so dangerous for minorities (especially the exploiting minorities). The revolution itself is seen as something that can only degenerate into an act of bloody dictatorship. It is a well known process, whether in the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution. Bourgeois historiography is only capable of considering it a succession of the most horrific bloodbaths, each worse than the last.

Another analytical angle may be that this is the current vision of many white liberals to the racially rooted proletarian uprisings in countries at the centre of capitalism. Liberals will often reduce acts of rebellious rioters to simple moments of revenge by looting. We can see this vision when, having won, a member of Vox writes "your lives are ours, your houses are, your wives are ours." Although this view is true in part, the rioters often engage in acts of vandalism counter-productive to their own interests, the movements often dying out after their phases of riot through lack of political substance. The fact remains that social conflict is reduced to bestial acts of revenge by a part of the population which is just what bourgeois social organisation thinks.