

“Détournement in Song and Revolution”

Liner notes for *To Have Done With Work: Songs of the Revolutionary Proletariat, Vol. I*

By Jacques Le Glou, September 1974¹

The history of political and détourned songs is as old as the history of song itself. Beyond all the directly political songs devoted to propaganda or critique, of which we possess so many examples, from the Crusades to today, we can easily reveal the originally political character of a great number of songs that we want to take back from a folkloric insignificance that is intended to turn children into cretins. Thus *Auprès de ma blonde*, a marching song of the troops from Turenne, in fact expresses the profound defeatism of soldiers everywhere: “It is in Holland – The Dutch have taken it – What would you give, my beautiful one – To see your friend again? – I would give Versailles – and Paris and Saint-Denis.” And *Compère Guilleri*, who hunts for partridges (that is to say, the owl that fires on the Blues, on the soldiers of the Republic), translates the feelings of all the partisans abandoned by their “external leadership” (“Will you let me, will you let me die?”).

Détournement, for its part, is even more inseparable from song.

During the centuries when the essential aspect of music belonged to religious ceremonies, it was through the church’s melodies, then known by all, that the profane life of the people – love and political struggle – expressed itself with new words. Then these same melodies were immediately taken up, passed from one person to the other in these centers of interest, and used to express other politics that were in conflict. This tradition was particularly rich during the Fronde (1648-1652) and later on, of course, during the Revolution of 1789.

This multi-centennial practice – to transform and perform oneself – withered (1) with the advent of the modern, contemporary, spectacular passivity that is part of the alienating use of the *mass media*,² which centralizes the broadcast of songs,

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² English in original.

along with the rest of social communications, and (2) with the generalization of “copyright,” which transforms all the melodies and words in your mouth into private property.

This process was especially noticeable from the 1940s to the 1960s, and in France, probably more than everywhere else; the practice of working-class *détournement* remained quite lively in the Anglo-Saxon countries and even in Italy: we know that the song of the partisans of 1943-45, “Bella Ciao,” is the *détournement* of an old farmworker’s song.

The current return of the revolution is also the return of dialogue, naturally leading to a return of critical and political song. Those who begin to act again begin to sing. This recording shows, more particularly, how the proletarian revolution, for more than a century, has known how to express its hardships and anger in song as well as action. Several striking examples allow us to see how the most radical of its expressions have often been falsified and recuperated, following the common fate of the revolution itself over a long period of time. But the wind has turned. Those who today burn cars and de-pave the streets can no longer sing the same songs that are listened to by the voters. Doesn’t the “hooligan” *rock*³ song recently created in the wastelands of la Courneuve say so in meaningful way? “There are two ways, there are two ways / To be cheated by the elections. / Big time, with Krivine⁴ and Chaban⁵ / Or more poorly / Like all of the voters / Take up your paving stone, my dear. . .” Thus we have chosen for this first disc several of the most instructive songs of the French and international revolutionary past, as well as the first of those that have found an audience in the changed period in which we are living. Several years after 1968, it has become possible that discs like this get released. The dominant spectacle will be more and more split up by these kinds of veritable breaches until it finally collapses. Many old proletarian songs, especially from abroad, are still too-little known here, and current subversion will not cease to offer up new ones.

Morals improve. Songs participate in this process.⁶ And the revolution of our century will soon joyously hurl this formula to its many partisans: “You are singing! I am very comfortable with it. Well, now dance.”⁷

³ English in original.

⁴ Alain Krivine, a Trotskyist politician.

⁵ Jacques Chaban-Delmas, Prime Minister from 1969 to 1972.

⁶ A *détournement* of a famous passage in Lautréamont.

⁷ Cf. Jean de la Fontaine, “The Ant and the Grasshopper.”