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Surrealism, Communism, and the Pursuit of Revolution

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In January of 1927, five surrealist artists applied for membership to the French Communist Party (PCF) in a move that seemed contrary to their mission as surrealists.¹ Since the art movement's founding manifesto in 1924, surrealism had pursued the visceral purity of fantasy and dreams under the leadership of André Breton. The political agenda of the PCF, on the other hand, sought social revolution informed by a Marxist political theory grounded in material reality. Although contemporary scholarship has explored this contradiction, I contend that surrealism and communism actually stem from the same source: both are reactions to the misery of the human condition, and both seek to uplift mankind from its adversity through social revolution. Thus, what follows is an investigation of both ideologies in an effort to demonstrate their fundamental consistencies, as well as discuss the possible role—if any—of surrealism within a communist revolution.

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Ontological Consistency
Communism: A Brief Synopsis

With the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels present a summation and condemnation of life under capitalism that ultimately calls for social and economic revolution.² Marx attests that history is defined by class struggle, an eternal Hegelian dialectic of oppressor and oppressed in constant conflict with one another.³ Capitalism and capitalist modes of production are the root of this repressive scheme, in which the

¹ Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-1936," in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 24.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto, with an Introduction by A.J.P. Taylor*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Book Inc., 1967), p. 57.

³ Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," 159.

bourgeoisie exert power over the proletariat; that is, the exploitative owners and controllers of the means of production take advantage of wage-labor workers for personal gain.⁴

Because of this, the life of the common man—the proletariat—within capitalist society is dire; he inevitably becomes an “appendage of the machine” and a slave of the bourgeois class.⁵ Under such conditions, all of life’s charm is lost, and man can never be truly free.⁶ Marx’s *Manifesto* responds to such misery under the bourgeois elite by providing a solution: the proletariat can dismantle the social and economic conditions that enable their own subjugation by means of a communist revolution that forcibly topples existing power structures and provides total freedom to all men. After a successful communist revolution, society will be fundamentally rid of oppression and antagonism, and in this, “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.”⁷

Surrealism: A Communistic Approach

Despite Surrealism’s reputation for illogic and whimsy, the artistic philosophy derives its motivation from an incredibly Marxist analysis of the human condition that prioritizes the pursuit of liberation. Indeed, Breton attests in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* that “the mere word ‘freedom’ is the only one that still excites me ... it doubtless satisfies my only legitimate aspiration.”⁸ Contrary to Marxist concerns of economic freedom, however, surrealism aims at liberating the mind and imagination—both of which are suppressed by capitalist society under the guise of civilization and progress.⁹ This oppression of the mind is apparent in that “an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to

⁴ *Ibid.*, 158

⁵ *Ibid.*, 165

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186

⁸ Andre Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 4.

⁹ Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 10.

waking events than to those occurring dreams.”¹⁰ Thus, much like Marx’s proletariat, the imagination is in a state of slavery,¹¹ perpetually subjugated by the tangible world.

Also mirroring Marx’s diagnosis of life under capitalist rule, Breton understands that man’s ultimate moral and intellectual capacity cannot be reached as long as artistic omnipotence remains with the material world. As a result, surrealism aims to raise man above his despairing existence on earth by means of a complete liberation of the mind;¹² it seeks to resolve the diametric oppositions of “sleeping and waking, dream and action, reason and madness, the conscious and the unconscious ... the subjective and the objective.”¹³ Perfectly analogous to the proletariat mission, albeit in more metaphysical terms, surrealism exists so that the imagination will break its slavish bonds, reclaim its rightful existence from the primacy of the material world, and enable mankind to attain its fullest potential.

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The Surrealist Object ***A Reconciling Role***

The ontological consistency between surrealist metaphysics and Marxist material reality translates to artistic practice through the creation of surrealist objects; that is, physical representations of imaginary things.¹⁴ Referred to as *les objets oniriques* – or “dreamlike objects”—surrealist objects mediate contradictory extremes (i.e. dreams and reality) by embodying both. As objects, they are fundamentally concrete and material; as surrealist art, they

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Louis Aragon et al., "Declaration of the Bureau de Recherches Surrealistes," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell, 1992), 439.

¹³ Franklin Rosemont, *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 1.

¹⁴ Anna Balakian, "The Surrealist Object," in *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Ltd., 1959), 174.

are representations of one's inner hallucinations.¹⁵ This dual role begets their ability to resolve an eternal rivalry. Indeed:

The whole purpose behind surrealism's treatment of physical reality is to surmount the debilitating sense of the arbitrary and to project, in its place, a refreshing feeling of unity, in which the inner existence of consciousness and outer reality are no longer in conflict.¹⁶

As a part of two conflicting worlds, the surrealist object is a bridge between them, "diminish[ing] the sense of alienation that so often separates [the mind] from [its] material environment."¹⁷

Alberto Giacometti's *The Suspended Ball* (1931) [fig 1] is one such surrealist object, a creation that Salvador Dali and Breton declared as the origin of *all* subsequent surrealist objects.¹⁸ *Suspended Ball* inhabits the material world as an iron and plaster sculpture comprising a cage, hanging ball, crescent, and central platform. Of the imaginary world, the work records "the profound truth of what the mind says when it does not speak,"¹⁹ a transient meaning susceptible to many interpretations. Although Giacometti was not ultimately known for surrealist works, the piece caused a surrealist sensation on account of its "introduction of an actual movement into sculpture."²⁰ The sculpture's ball and crescent do not explicitly touch, nor are they inherently mobile; however, their construction infers that they should, or might at any moment. As a result, *The Suspended Ball* is still considered among the best examples of surrealist objects.²¹

Materialism and Change

¹⁵ Balakian, "The Surrealist Object," 173.

¹⁶ J. H. Matthews, *The Imagery of Surrealism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 184.

¹⁷ Matthews, "Object Lessons," 190.

¹⁸ Sylvia Metz, "Alberto Giacometti," in *Surreal Objects: Three-Dimensional Works from Dali to Man Ray*, eds. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 238.

¹⁹ Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, "The Surrealist Period (1930-1935)," in *Alberto Giacometti* (New York: Tabard Press, 1984), 49.

²⁰ Lamarche-Vadel, "The Surrealist Period," 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The preceding introduction to surrealist objects (with *Suspended Ball* as prime example) seems to suggest that the imaginary world can only compete with material reality by becoming a part of it—a “reduction of man to the level of things”²² that seems antithetical to surrealism. In Marxist terms, this quandary is comparable to the oppressed proletariat improving their situation solely by joining the ranks of bourgeois oppressors. The surrealist object’s precise relationship with materialism, however, evades such contradiction. While surrealist objects certainly participate in material reality, they do not operate by it. Their creation remains entrenched in dreams and fantasy, allowing surrealist objects to “accept the objective reality of matter”²³ without claiming it as inspiration.

This unique participation in material reality makes surrealist objects especially capable of affecting change; in fact, their surrealist success depends on it. Paul Nougé, a spearhead for the development of surrealism in Belgium, insisted that “it is not enough to create an object, it is not enough for it to be. We must show that it can, by some artifice, arouse in the spectator, the desire, the need to see.”²⁴ This “need to see” sparks an understanding of reality that desires its alteration. As such, surrealist objects are “the medium by which the enlargement of our conception of reality is to be achieved”²⁵—the ultimate tool for attuning mankind to the facts of his existence while awakening his potential to change them.

The ability of the surrealist object to arbitrate oppositional forces and affect change also proves consistent with communist concerns in a way that further resolves apparent contradictions. The essential quandary between surrealism and communism has been the nature of their respective realities; surrealism champions whimsical fantasy, while communism operates

²² Balakian, “The Surrealist Object,” 177.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁵ Malt, “The Surrealist Object in Theory,” 87.

by historical materialism. The surrealist object, however, represents a “fortuitous meeting of [these] distant realities”²⁶ by existing in a state that is ontologically acceptable by both. Thus, the surrealist object artistically reconciles surrealism and communism in the same way that it mediates the power struggle between dreams and reality. Even more, its ability to catalyze novel understandings is applicable to a communist cause, in which awareness of reality’s true nature is as critical as revolution.

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The Revolutionary Cause
Surrealist Revolution

Even with the help of surrealist objects, surrealism cannot attain liberation of the mind without a revolt against existing conditions—just as the proletariat cannot overthrow bourgeois oppression without a social revolution. Indeed, in the *Declaration of the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes*, Louis Aragon and others affirmed that surrealists are “determined to make a Revolution,” as they are “specialists in Revolt.”²⁷ Initially, though, this surrealist conception was too abstract to support a communist revolution. As a document from 1925 stated, “the immediate sense and purpose of the Surrealist revolution is not so much to change anything in the physical and manifest order of things as to create an agitation in men’s minds.”²⁸ Thus, the early surrealist rebellion was an esoteric struggle against uninspired reality and the domination of the waking world over dreams—an intangible aim impractical to the material groundings of communism.

Despite the initial surrealist project’s metaphysical nature, surrealism evolved by the end of the decade to accept and adopt a communist revolution as the most effective way to achieve

²⁶ Balakian, “The Surrealist Object,” 177.

²⁷ Aragon et al., “Declaration of the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes,” 439.

²⁸ Short, “The Politics of Surrealism,” 20.

its goals. Franklin Rosemont, an American poet and co-founder of the Chicago Surrealist Group, declared in an introduction to a volume of Breton's writing, "there is no solution to the decisive problems of human existence outside proletarian revolution," a fact that is "for surrealism, a first principle that is beyond argument."²⁹ This fact reinforces Marx's own thesis, for the oppressive power structures of the bourgeois elite infiltrate and affect the entire superstructure of society—art, literature, the mind, and imagination included. Thus, a truly free and creative spirit is only possible in a post-communist civilization where, "in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, [there will be] an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."³⁰

As a result, a communist revolution as ascribed by Marx is conducive to surrealist aims on account of its dramatic alteration of the social conditions that reduce human existence to market values and "universal boredom and misery."³¹ With this acknowledgement, however, comes the concession that the ultimate goal of surrealism *requires* a communist revolution – true liberation and freedom of the mind cannot be fully realized unless the systemically exploitative reign of capitalism is totally abolished, and this can only be done by a social revolution in which the proletariat overthrow the bourgeoisie. Once accomplished, though, the surrealists will be capable of achieving their mission to raise man's material, intellectual, moral, and artistic status to the height of his dreams.³²

Surrealism and communism have thus been shown to be ontologically, artistically, and programmatically compatible. Their concord is founded on shared conceptions of the human condition, the necessity of emancipation via communist revolution, as well as the related

²⁹ Rosemont, "Introduction," 4.

³⁰ Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," 176.

³¹ Rosemont, "Introduction," 1.

³² Short, "The Politics of Surrealism," 19.

dependency of surrealism on a successful communist revolution. These theoretical grounds find artistic manifestation in surrealist objects, through which the fantasy lauded by surrealism is made concrete within the material reality emphasized by communist theory. Even so, the coexistence of the two forces in 1920s and 1930s Paris proved less compatible than their respective philosophies.

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Practical Inconsistency
Communism and Surrealism in Paris

Marx's analysis of capitalist power structures was poignantly apparent in the characterization of class hierarchy in nineteenth century France, to a degree uncommon in other Western capitalist societies. The formation and culture of the French social elite had its roots in the *ancien régime*, and was a system in which status and power were determined by the possession of capital as well as certain "cultivations" generally inaccessible to the masses. With such exclusionary social conditions, the French workers naturally found virtue in collective culture rather than the individualism of bourgeois society. This pre-existing working-class solidarity combined with France's history of political radicalism to create conditions ripe for the rise of communist politics.³³ Thus, *le Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) was established on December 29, 1920, the same day that a motion for the Party to join the Communist International was passed.³⁴

Seven years after the Party's creation, five surrealists led by André Breton applied and eventually earned membership to the PCF. Despite joining the communists as individuals

³³ George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France: From Popular Front to Eurocommunism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1-3.

³⁴ Edward Mortimer, *The Rise of the French Communist Party, 1920-1947* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 19.

independent of surrealist identity,³⁵ the surrealists believed that their artistic movement was a worthwhile endeavor in the pursuit of communist revolution. Specifically, surrealists believed their work had a visceral effect on the artist and viewer, one that was capable of transforming the mind in support of revolution:

[The surrealists] sought not so much to convince as to move, not so much to argue the cause of a particular programme as to arouse the feeling of revolt and to prompt the demand that *something* must be done. While the Communists instructed the proletariat in the strategy of revolution, the Surrealists were trying to bring about the emotional climate in which the revolution might break out.³⁶

Thus, the surrealists felt their artistic practices and intellectual experiments hastened the revolution's arrival—unsurprisingly, the PCF was not as convinced.

Communist Reservations

Despite surrealist confidence in the revolutionary effectiveness of their work, the French Communist Party was wholeheartedly unreceptive to their artistic efforts. For a political party that was first and foremost pursuing the mobilization of the working class, surrealist contributions were downright unacceptable; surrealist art was not appealing to the masses, let alone concretely helpful to the communist cause. In addition, the PCF found fault with Breton and the surrealists' insistence on the radical independence of their movement from political authority. In Breton's words:

All of us Surrealists want a social revolution that will transfer power from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, but at the same time we want to pursue our experiments in the life of the Mind without any external controls, including controls by Marxists.³⁷

³⁵ Short, "The Politics of Surrealism," 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 46.

Despite surrealism's affinity for communist politics, artistic freedom disallowed the abidance of aesthetic rules established by the Party.³⁸ Even though it was dependent on communist revolution, the independence of surrealism's aesthetic mission could not be compromised in support of PCF demands.

The Bourgeois Problem

While the PCF's reservations regarding surrealist art and its role in party politics were certainly well founded, an additional and more deep-seated problem left surrealism fundamentally unsuited to a communist agenda. Specifically, the comfortable bourgeois origins of the vast majority of surrealists were problematic on an elemental level.³⁹ Indeed, most adherents came from France's bourgeois or petit bourgeois classes and adopted surrealism only after finishing their university studies and experimenting with a bohemian phase characteristic of most artists and poets throughout the capitalist epoch.⁴⁰ As such, the surrealists' status within the very social class they were purporting to overthrow was hypocritical and counterintuitive, at best.

Rosemont was quick to defend this point, claiming that Marx and Engels "were no more proletarians than were the first surrealists." Rosemont cited a specific passage within the *Communist Manifesto* to support his claim; the text speaks of a time during class struggle's "decisive hour" in which bourgeois ideologists will renounce their class and join the revolution on the proletarian side. However, Marx notes that these bourgeois elites are the ones who "have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a

³⁸ Pierre Taminiaux, "Breton and Trotsky: The Revolutionary Memory of Surrealism," *Yale French Studies*, no. 109 (2006), 54.

³⁹ Short, "The Politics, of Surrealism," 25.

⁴⁰ Rosemont, "Introduction," 30.

whole⁴¹—and the surrealists cannot boast of this. In fact, regardless of ontological analogousness, most surrealists adopted communism only after reading Leon Trotsky's biography of Lenin,⁴² a revelation that provided a personal and emotional connection to communism based on biographical events⁴³ rather than a political affinity founded on thorough understanding of Marxist theory. Thus, the explicit exception allowed by Marx and touted by Rosemont cannot apply to the surrealists.

With the bourgeois status of surrealism thus established as extraneous to Marx's revolutionary exception, the entire foundation upon which it operates becomes contrary to communism. Specifically, surrealist thought projects cannot claim to oppose the ruling class, because they come from within it and are inevitably affected by the social conditions dictated by capitalist interest. Surrealism's fundamental understanding of the artistic mind actually participates in existing capitalist power structures—rather than combating them—based on the infiltrative nature of bourgeois oppression. In Marx's own words, “the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, etc., your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property.”⁴⁴ Thus, surrealism is incompatible with the communist agenda on matters of practice and principle.

* * * * *

A Fitting Metaphor

Although surrealism and communism are ultimately incongruous, a return to Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* proves insightful. As a surrealist object, one of its possible conceptual functions is as metaphor, a symbolic function in which “everything is comparable to

⁴¹ Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” 167.

⁴² Short, “The Politics of Surrealism,” 22.

⁴³ Taminiaux, “Breton and Trotsky,” 56.

⁴⁴ Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” 172.

everything else.”⁴⁵ As such, a careful analysis of the sculpture’s formal qualities reveals a possible metaphor for the entire surrealism-communism conversation; *Suspended Ball* becomes an allegory for the conclusions drawn in this discussion, all while reinforcing and fulfilling its identity as surrealist object.

The sculpture’s central focus is a hanging ball and resting crescent [Fig 2], and these two shapes signify surrealism and communism, respectively. As symbolic of communism, the crescent rests firmly on its solid platform, just as the ideology is grounded in conceptions of material reality. The ball, on the other hand, does not have such a strong corporeal foundation. Representing surrealism, it dangles by a string from a high crossbar, indicative of the artistic philosophy’s more ethereal and less concrete originations, compared to the communist crescent. Despite these disparities of derivation, the objects inhabit the same space, so closely that they nearly touch—perfectly analogous to the coexistence of surrealism and communism in Paris during the 1920s and 30s.

Beyond mere proximity, the ball and crescent appear surprisingly compatible. Although not as explicitly cooperative as matching puzzle pieces, the ball’s deep groove seems perfectly fitted for the upturned, curved edge of the crescent [Fig 3]. If fulfilled, this interaction would harmoniously connect both objects, as well as create a solid link between the platform and high bar that support each. Similarly, surrealism and communism give an impression of ideological compatibility. Their shared understanding of the human condition and desire for liberation via revolution lend themselves to collaboration—a bond that would reconcile fundamental theoretical differences by bridging communism’s material reality with surrealism’s more abstract emphasis.

⁴⁵ Matthews, “Object Lessons,” 185.

Even so, this hopeful interaction remains impossible. Despite the taunting closeness of the ball and crescent, their position remains static and separated, held in place by the solidity of the platform and surrounding cage. Of course, the ball could be pulled and released in order for it to touch the crescent momentarily, but the motion will inevitably cease; just like a slowing pendulum, the ball will return to its original place and the disjunction between the two objects will remain. The combination of surrealism and communism proves similarly unviable. Regardless of their potential for integration, surrealism's bourgeois formulation within the confines of capitalist power structures precludes a successful relationship with communism. The two may temporarily overlap, but their ultimate conflictions of practice and principle prevent a lasting connection.

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Concluding Comments

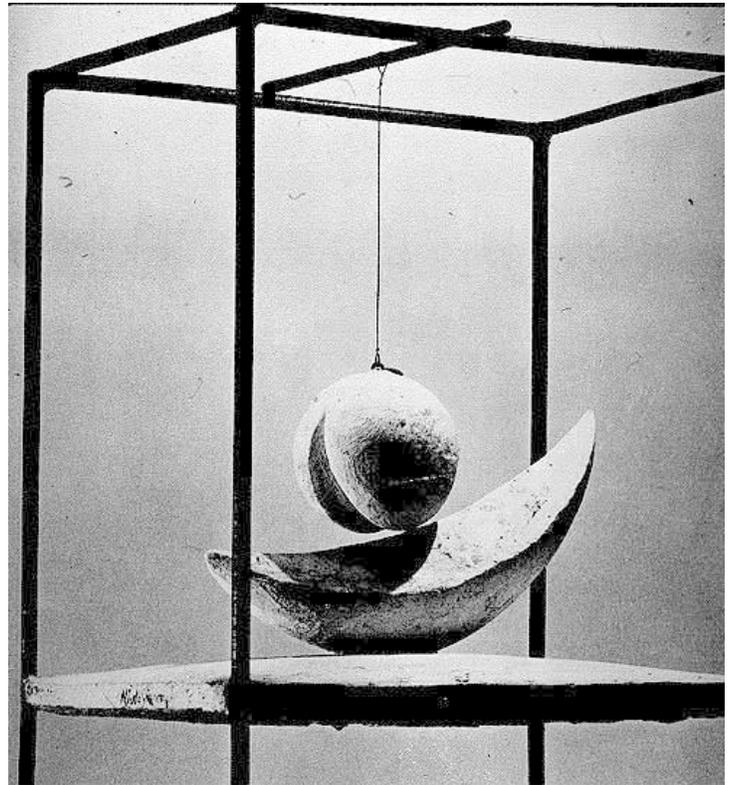
Although surrealism cannot seamlessly harmonize with communism on the basis of its fundamental (albeit involuntary) bourgeois ties, the value of its ultimate goal need not be discarded within a Marxist conversation. Only an alternate chronology is required, one in which the purity of the surrealist mission can remain intact. Rather than using surrealism as an artistic thought experiment to help catalyze a communist revolution, the “surrealist revolution” of the mind can occur in post-communist society when the social and economic conditions necessary for the mind's flourishing are already in place.

As a result, surrealism and communism are not enemies; quite contrary, they seem to be one and the same. Communism is the means to achieve a Marxist utopia, that final social state of total freedom in which oppression and antagonism, material and otherwise, are utterly absent—the mission statement of Surrealism if there ever was one. Surrealism, therefore, is

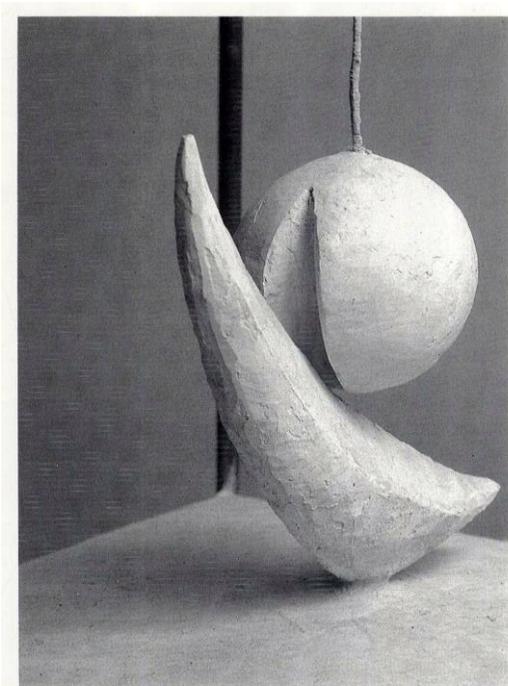
communism's final state. Surrealism *is* the Marxist utopia in which man is wholly and completely free from all systems of oppression—which, of course, would include the crucial antagonism between dreams and material reality against which surrealism was fighting all along.



[Fig 1]
Alberto Giacometti
Suspended Ball
1931



[Fig 2]



[Fig 3]

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