

ON THE POVERTY
OF BERKELEY
LIFE
and the
Marginal Stratum
of American Society
in General

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ON THE POVERTY OF BERKELEY LIFE

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Berkeley isn't ripe;
it's rotten 1

One might very well say that the city of Berkeley is the object of a greater number of mystified opinions and pronouncements than any other single city in the United States. If Berkeley is considered, it is almost always for the wrong reasons; it is seen according to the image of what it was supposed to have been years ago, an image which even in its own time scarcely penetrated beneath the surface of immediate appearance. It is considered, on the one hand, as the center of a dying or dead revolutionary spirit; or, on the other hand, as proof that revolution is impossible in this day and age, a utopian goal, the fantasy of a few misfits, screwballs and jaded intellectuals who agreeably move to Berkeley and stay put.

The failure of the American New Left and counterculture of the Sixties to go beyond rebellion against the largely superficial alienations of their marginal social base has led to a situation where the latent illusions they brought to light of day - stripped of their more excessive and untenable revolutionary pretensions - have become an inspiration to a generalized social reformism on a widely diffuse scale. If the New Left and the counterculture as distinct entities have disappeared in the process, and are now conjured up solely as a fuzzy memory, it's because they never attacked concretely their own bases in the social principles which always essentially *dominated them*: the commodity and the spectacle. No particular image of revolt or collection of images of revolt can stand up to these principles, because it is upon them that the social power of images is dependent. What the image of revolt does do is to modify the conditions of social alienation - and thus the struggle against it. It is integrated into the mainstream of social life, and is produced, consumed and reproduced by millions of proletarians as modified spectacle of their dispossession, whether as tranquilizer or as justification for cynicism and resignation.

Berkeley is a holdout against this process of integration.

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Not in the sense that it can resist integration in reality, but in the sense that it still pretends it can and acts out this pretension. Berkeley's prestige is not built on the present but on the past. It presents itself as concentrated image of part of a radical (progressive, non-conformist: take your pick) tradition that is at least partially salvageable, and which will somehow lead, by an organic development, to some sort - one knows not what - of serious transformation of society sometime in the vague future. As for the present, anything goes: it's all part of the "process."

Berkeley isn't ripe; it's rotten.

In spite of everything, including simple common sense, Berkeley remains an intellectual ghetto; ideas assume a fantastic form and are credited with a power unto themselves. That any high school kid could see that the social practice these ideas inspire is miserable doesn't seem to matter a whit. If social life in Berkeley is happily no longer dominated directly by the University, it is equally true that ideas in this town rediscover the conditions of the *academic marketplace*. They may be put into practice and thus given the semblance of being non-academic; but the same old abstraction and fragmentation sticks. The contempt for the University that is presently in vogue in Berkeley is in fact self-contempt. The institution is rejected so that its premises may triumph.

The University must in the end, of course, be accommodated, just as it accommodates itself - in spite of a few die-hard reactionary regents and administrators - to the reality it has helped create. It's not a matter of reluctant compromise, but of the objective fact that most of Berkeley life today has more in common with the University than it has differences with it. Not the least reason for this is the fact that the University provides the capital base upon which the rest of the show is founded, and without which half the commerce in this town - and probably half its inhabitants - would never have been here to begin with. Nonetheless, in spite of this undeniable dependence, Berkeley exists as though cut off from outside reality, as if it operated according to a unique logic of its own.

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This combination of accepted-and generally glorified-economic and intellectual marginality makes Berkeley a perfect testing ground for hundreds of potential palliatives for the propping up of decomposing American capitalism; commodities which in the present epoch are in very great demand indeed. If Berkeley is more or less written off by big businessmen, it's not because Berkeley threatens them, but because they stand more to gain from this calculated deduction than they do by trying to directly exploit its relatively paltry consumer market. Contrary to local myth, capitalists are not always blinded by their greed or by some psychological compulsion to meddle in every single aspect of life. In fact, they can't, and along with their buddies in the State bureaucracy, from the top of the federal government right down to the police, they are beginning to understand this and leave good enough alone. It is, rather, through their patience that the rulers of society turn Berkeley to their profit. They let the kinks, the extremes, the exaggerations of superficial revolt play themselves out here (and elsewhere, to be sure) before they prepare a general export. Not too long ago this process met with a great deal of opposition: the rulers are often themselves victims of their own image of refusal. Today, it has taken on the acknowledged character of a free center for "research and development."

It's not that Berkeley is unique in the sense that there are particular ideologies, lifestyles or activities that exist here exclusively. What is unusual about Berkeley is that it is an American city of significant population where rebellion appears to have the edge over traditional forms of resignation; and where it doesn't, provides these traditional forms with a "rebellious" context with which they are compatible ("Since we're neighbors, let's be friends"). The quantitative difference becomes qualitative. It is the *concentration* of superficial rebellion, the ideological glut, the pseudo-totality of all "possible" paths in the direction of fundamental social change that dominates, stultifies, hypnotizes.

The fact that seemingly *every* conceivable ideology and economic scheme is expressed in Berkeley, put into practice, succeeds or fails, gives rise to the illusion that Berkeley is a

center where history is being made: that it is a microcosm of global society. What is forgotten is that Berkeley's marginality is a pre-condition of all this activity, which is precisely why "everything is permitted." It's not that marginality renders the individual incapable of profound revolt; that he or she must wait for the millennium of an industrial workers' revolution, for instance, before history descends from the sky to accessibility. What is contemptible about the marginal American is his failure to see that his social position is the principal source of illusions about himself and the epoch, and to turn superficial differences of taste and mode of adjustment to alienation - between himself and the "mainstream" - against themselves, as the first act of his revolt against the reality for which he is the unwitting apologist: *proletarian misery* (that of others and *his own*).

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It is certainly not necessary that Berkeley be made the focus of this criticism of marginal America, or that Berkeley be mentioned at all. It's simply a matter of recognizing an objective fact and starting from there: Berkeley has become the geographic locus of the sorry aristocracy of American marginality, the place where the myriad illusions and pretensions of the marginal American are environmentally concentrated, where they are provided a terrain to play themselves out in practice, and where prestige and social aspirations are dominated largely by their terms. I am not interested in competing with the inevitable and predictable little careerists who, by dint of electoral politics, have dreams of a muni-

cial coup d'état (such a perspective lacks first a State and above all a coup). Nor will I compete with various leftist riff-raff who believe that a monopoly of representing Berkeley's past means something. To hell with the Free Speech Movement. Shit for People's Park. It's not a question of running down the historical becoming of Berkeley's illusions (and those of the marginal American in general), but of criticizing its illusions of becoming historical: of stating what it *is* and criticizing the misery it is helping to prepare for the future.

**1001 ways to avoid confronting
the fact that you are a worker 2**

One of the major points of equilibrium created by and for the growing marginal stratum of American society are the so-called "alternative institutions." These institutions represent in part the end result of the youth-hip movement of the Sixties, which developed the ideology and provided much of the initial cadres. They aim at ameliorating the more glaring defects of this society in modifying the form or content of one or another of its details. Alternative media will present more varied or "sophisticated" programming, with fewer commercials and more participation from "the community," i.e., mostly from other alternative institutions. Volunteer clinics provide specialized services (e.g., drug or abortion counseling) free of charge. Meeting places are established where diverse semi-outcast groupings (e.g., homosexuals) can discuss common problems. "Free universities" organize self-managed classes outside the official academic framework. Religious and/or therapeutic groups fill in where traditional religion and psychology lack credibility or are too expensive. Special interest (e.g., ecological) groups abound, not only as semipolitical pressure groups but as functioning social service operations; etc. The alternative cadre has his

own illusions, to which he clings vehemently. He principally defines himself in opposition to traditional modes of production and consumption, continually evoking their excesses and by implication the inferiority of those who still "choose" to remain there. He uses radical jargon, but only after it has been neutralized: "alienation" for the feeling of alienation, "exploitation" for extreme, "unfair" exploitation and so forth. If he ever had any radicality, he has repressed it; if any notion of "revolution" remains, it is vaguely sensed as a sort of long, gradual transformation of things. He wants capitalism without the defects. He is simply getting in on the ground floor of a new market. That he may have been prompted by altruistic motives at the beginning changes nothing. If the institution really does serve a need that has been neglected, the money will be forthcoming, and then these crusaders or those otherwise "interested" in or "concerned" about the problem end up with new, quasi-self-managed jobs while retaining the sense of continuing "the struggle."

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The more ambitious, particularly the new blood funneled through (from the University or off the streets) as more or less explicit on-the-job trainees, less humbly find their way into government service agencies (welfare, poverty, education, legal assistance, environmental protection, consumer protection, etc.), as the great new hope of untangling, from the bottom, disastrously inefficient bureaucracies. The hold-outs, who remain behind as more or less direct inspiration and who continue to absorb the surplus, thereafter endlessly decry this type of "cop-out," as they gloat over their "subversion" of the system which consists of soliciting and re-

ceiving institutional or governmental money while at the same time retaining their "autonomy," or at least most of it.

More explicit in terms of the domination of *economy* over their primary social activity are the proprietors, individual and/or collective, of "alternative" stores and businesses. By an interesting irony, the hippies who were despised by the reactionaries, in initiating from the base the independent production of various tailor-made goods and services before this diversification of the market was undertaken from the top, served to *reintroduce "free-enterprise"* capitalism on the margin of a global economy that had long since superseded it. The insufficiently sensitive response of the bureaucratized economy to the diversity of demand at the base - a diversity which increases in importance as the standardized survival needs are filled for almost everyone, and which is only temporarily and unpopularity repressed by the crude state-capitalist regulation of consumption to accord with production - makes both possible and necessary the autonomous development of new markets. This marginal development, which serves as a cheap testing ground and source of ideas for capital, in catering to desires as yet unnoticed or unexploited by it, *recreates in miniature the historical development of commodity production*: direct, quasi-artistic production for use; incipient bartering or selling of surplus products; large-scale cooperative production for sale, notably outside the local marginal community; development of irregular (transient) workers into wage-laborers hired by the initial core group, in a few cases going to the point of unionization; attraction of outside capital for the expansion of successful enterprises and/or competition from thence-inspired mass-market counterparts. The new petit-bourgeoisie rediscovers the same vision as its predecessors of a just society of independent producers and distributors who differ from the large capitalists in offering unadulterated, quality goods at "honest" prices - that is, precisely *capitalism's classical ideological version of itself*. Whereas the old petit-bourgeoisie was driven into the proletariat or the margin of society by large-scale capital which could outproduce and undersell its "mainstream"

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commodities, the *neo-petit-bourgeoisie* thrives precisely on its own marginality and that of the commodities it produces. The same economy that relegates the proletariat to the margin of life is revived from its own margins by the continually generated economic reactions to its cruder aspects.

At this point, the distinction between the upper cadres of the alternative service or "community" institutions and their more explicitly economically oriented counterparts, the proprietors and managers of "alternative" business, has all but evaporated in Berkeley. Whether they peddle fancy clothing or proffer progressive theater, wheedle money for stereos or whittle away at some big bureaucracy, they share the same taste in houses and their decoration, patronize the same restaurants, shop in the same stores, are seen in the same cafes and bars; all depending of course on the level they've attained in the unwritten hierarchy and on their ability to keep pace with the ever elusive trends of fashion and social prestige.

What about those at the bottom of the hierarchy? They work (or strive to get work, or hustle): that is the essential base upon which the mini-celebrities of Berkeley bank, quite literally. It's not that those at the bottom necessarily work for these mini-celebrities directly; most people have no choice but to accept jobs in more visibly compromised enterprises. As with any representation in this society, one cannot judge the social power of the image presented by our local crew solely on the basis of the immediate economic or political force directly at their disposal; just as one cannot judge Berkeley solely in terms of the number of proletarians who work or live within its borders, or by the amount of nuisance its official political representatives are able to cause. Our mini-celebrities themselves are among the first to recognize the surplus power which derives from what they represent socially; their prestige is in fact founded on their ability to manipulate their situation. Their prestige is based on their ability to *play two sides*: to be at least tolerably successful in the world of conformism and at the same time to be able to present the appearance of being non-conformist. The econ-

omy and hierarchical politics appear to slip in, as it were, through the back door. The power of their cliques and consumption habits derives from their ability *to resemble those excluded from participation*, and especially the *contradictions* of the excluded: to express positively the *achievable* goal of, in the future, resolving these contradictions on the side of all that exists, and to make it forgotten that this goal presupposes that it comes out of the hides of those at the bottom in the present. Meanwhile, the big-time economic and political interests, less deceived and less reticent about their motives, happily sit out on the porch, confident that their local proxies will send those inside back out with ballots and job applications, rather than with rage and the theory of their refusal.

The community of illusions which is Berkeley provides a new twist to all the old compensations for the worker, compensations which are thrown together in one big melting pot, lose their historical specificity in the ideological sauce, and are regurgitated and dished out randomly by the ladle of the market. Even the most conservative labor leader of the old workers' movement would be positively astounded by the forms of adaptation to work that abound in this supposedly progressive community. All the more so since, while in previous epochs these forms had to be forced on the proletariat, most workers in Berkeley choose them freely, of their own accord. This active resignation to work is undoubtedly one of the most significant aspects of Berkeley life in particular and marginal life in general, at once because of the immediate domestic tranquility it insures, its function as potential retreat from those at the bottom of the national work-force (similar to the function of unemployment insurance, only more effective because less bureaucratic), and the possibilities it uncovers, though still a long way from fruition, for a generalized reformism of work (mostly, needless to say, the reformism of its management).

The *collective* is the purest form of the organized illusion of the suppression of alienated labor, not because it *thinks* of itself as model of, or transition to, post-capitalist social relations, but because it does away with the most immediate

objectification of capitalism: the capitalist. The collective *relocates* the traditional division of labor between capitalist and worker, both *among* workers and *within each worker*. It doesn't go beyond separation; it internalizes separation. This internalization, and the subjectivist outlook it implies, leads the collective cadre to believe that he has created something new, special. He's got it upside down; he's just filling a need that was already there. Similarly, he believes that the form of his enterprise is at the origin of the "quality" of the goods or services he offers up, that his form of production and/or distribution has forced the market to cast off some of its basic principles. On the contrary, he is simply a tiny pawn in the movement of the commodity, whose creation of the demand for quality consumption necessitates quality production and distribution.

The superficiality of the collectives' notions of themselves is best shown by the ease with which the same illusions and poverties are adopted in marginal outfits where the petit-capitalist remains. At the top of the list is the resurrection of the *company family* from the period of unfettered capitalist monopolies and the decades of class struggle that finally sent this infamous institution to its grave. The difference being that while Andrew Carnegie and his ilk created company towns based on the totalitarian imposition of survival over life, of the needs of production over consumption and leisure, the modern petit-capitalist seeks to recreate the company family by *minimizing* the importance of survival, by giving the appearance that the organization of work is simply an accidental, parenthetical and even unfortunate product of individuals. He would like it to be believed, would like to believe, and sometimes even does believe that the reality of hierarchy in his enterprise is offset by commonality of personality, beliefs, tastes in consumption and the pursuit of the good life. He generously offers the use of his swimming pool, or even his yacht, on days off (particularly to those workers who are sexually attractive, by a strange coincidence); he invites his employees to parties; he "understands" if they take another job making live dollars an hour instead of three or four; if he's really "cool," he'll let

his employees stay at his home during their personal crises, and will Offer his mature advice and services as confessor. He frequently reminds his workers that x number of years ago he was at the bottom too, making even less money than he shells out today. *He's* not out to screw anybody. He just has to make a living. He's so sympathetic. And he finds plenty of suckers who'll buy it, lock, stock and organic barrel. Or else, in the slightly larger enterprises, plenty who'll "put in the hours" (months, years) to arrive at this privileged status: maybe next time they too will be taken along to see the museum in Los Angeles, or will be the contented recipients of a few free lines of coke.¹

It's an old adage among salesmen that the person who believes in his product sells the most. This is one of the dominant characteristics of the marginal labor force: they may resent the boss, but they want the goods (or believe firmly in the service). In other words, they support, often more zealously than the boss himself, the *objective basis* of the boss's power. The objective hierarchy is reduced to a question of the proprietor's *personality*. From this point of view, the worker criticizes the *pretension* of the boss, not because of the *fundamental* pretension of his business - that he promises what the commodity promises which is exactly what it can't do - but because the boss doesn't play out the fundamental pretension credibly or consistently enough. The worker, in the peak of inversion, thus presents *himself* as the pure spokesman of the commodity, and the boss as its unfortunate, parasitical excrescence.

The fetishism of quality is not only the fetishism of the product; it is the fetishism of *oneself* as having a quality, mediated by the product. Among marginal workers, this

¹ One can already see the neo-company family aspect of the marginal economy extended into big business. In the Bay Area's "Silicon Valley," many enterprises have built lavish, in-plant recreational facilities for their workers. Flexible work hours are commonplace; the employment ads seek out "the individual," and heavily emphasize the opportunity to be "creative." While the old company was paternalistic, the modern version is liberal-humanist: following the general trend of the family's reform, it affirms that its "children are people too."

fetishism is usually dominated by its contrast with the economic mainstream; more precisely, with the *image* of the economic mainstream as seen from afar and the particular economic role for which the marginal worker is usually cultivated in the first place (white collar functionary or low man on the blue collar totem pole). While in the traditional division of industrial labor, the skilled worker had an overriding objective reason to defend his privileged status - namely, money - most of the wage earning "craftsmen" of the marginal labor force today are relative paupers compared with the meanest union laborer. One might think that this relatively impoverished status would disillusion the marginal worker about the importance of his skill; but quite the contrary, the self-image assumes a much greater subjective importance in that it is all the more necessary as compensation for the economic disparity. Most of the time, of course, reality lags far behind the image, a fact best shown by the disdain of mainstream firms for a worker's experience in the marginal world; if you want back "in," you start where you left off: at the bottom. No matter, however, since most prefer to stay where their "value as a human being" (a phrase rich in implications) is rewarded, where their slavishness is touted as freedom, and where their ignorance and dispossession are passed off as conscious choice. *The* essential quality - the one which is indispensable and which makes all the others possible - of the marginal worker is the same quality demanded of workers everywhere: submission to the rules, tastes and humiliations of the commodity and its market, and intimidation in the face of work, its most immediate and concrete objectification. The marginal worker is in a definite sense the best available human advertisement for the system founded on this quality, the person who puts his entire personality at the service of this quality in an apparently unified and uncontradictory fashion, and in whom the essence of this quality is therefore most easily overlooked and forgotten.

He's not out to screw anybody. He just has to make a living. He's so sympathetic. And he finds plenty of suckers who'll buy it, lock, stock and organic barrel.

The street vendor is the clearest example of the human advertisement: his unspoken sales pitch is quite literally his personality. One buys not from a faceless institution, but from an individual like oneself. The economic process is superficially demystified in that there is no distributor to mediate between producer and consumer. At the same time, the hodge-podge of street vendors alters the decor of the commodity: social space appears less organized, less bureaucratized. Pedestrian arteries are narrowed so that the pace is slowed, and the area seems to teem with people. Reduced to a crawl, everyone in general, though perhaps no one in particular, seems to belong where he is, without, however, having any special purpose in mind, without being only a mere consumer. The crowd assumes its own personality, which one can take part in or ignore, and this ability to choose allows one to dally among items for sale without feeling guilty, awkward or manipulated.

The transient elements of the marginal labor force - students; recruits from the traditional lumpenproletariat temporarily become wage earning; professional travelers seeking adventure, which consists primarily in going from place to place to see the same type of social relations they're used to, not only in the places they end up but in the process by which they get there (long-distance hitchhiking, for instance, is mostly a matter of "adventure" of surviving the ordeals of a miserable, banal day to day existence in order to relate the experience to someone else later on); people seeking the more immediate "adventure" of working among members of an interesting social milieu; intellectuals who have not yet found a market for their production; aspiring specialists of culture (musicians, artists, poets, etc.) who

have not yet been, and may well never be, "discovered"; people just out of school trying to postpone indefinitely the reality of having to work; the list is endless - these transients serve to depress the wage market, as they do not consider themselves workers and are willing to work for relative peanuts in order, "for the time being," to "get by." The youth/hip movement of the sixties, and to a certain extent the beats before it, has left a legacy glorifying this mini-stratum for being against the established order, "non-materialistic," and so forth. In fact, these people are often more traditional than the "co-opted" workers they despise, and not only at work. They reject the "fetishism" of commodities only to be more tightly defensive of the few they can afford. Identifying America with a few vulgar and ill-conceived stereotypes of financiers and politicians - an outlook culled mostly from newspapers, high school textbooks and leftist primers - they fancy themselves to be anti-American. Their practice, however, corresponds more closely to the maxim. "America isn't American enough"; their "individualism" is one of the purest remaining expressions of the Western self-made man of yore.

Of course, American individualism² has long since lost *most* of its material base in areas where it first developed. But our heroes are truly democratic, and in areas where this base isn't quite gone, they aim to finish it off, to see that any individualism founded *directly* on the battle of man against natural alienation is totally displaced by social alienation - by the *image* of struggle against natural alienation, by the struggle against natural alienation *chosen* as more "real" than confronting the miseries of the life they have lived up till their transformation, and which lead them to take to the hills. (Cutting down a tree or milking a cow or generally living a life dominated by the myriad banalities of rural life necessary simply in order to survive is, in this mythology, more "real" than, for example, selling the tree-cutters and cow-milkers, or their employers, the real estate on which

² e.g., that described by de Tocqueville.

they do these various things.) Thus, while self-righteously condemning industrial pollution and the general destruction of the environment, they have served and continue to serve as the pioneers of the complete conquest of the rural West (as well as, to a lesser degree, other areas of the country and the world for that matter) by modern, spectacular social relations. Predictably, they bring government bureaucrats, real estate developers and bankers hot on their heels, in order to be sure that no trail is left without its full complement of roadsigns, no growth is left unplanned, no country song is left unrecorded - in short, that no market is left undeveloped and no aspect of life is left unorganized. Finally, our crusaders dutifully decry, as the years pass, how *their* "unspoiled" area is going all to hell.

The division between permanent and transient marginal workers parodies the function of the marginal labor force as a whole in its relation to organized labor. The division has an objective basis. First, the marginal workers are, as a block, a central means by which this society hierarchically interprets the discontent of all workers. Following this interpretation, the society lays out *in advance* a general program of superficial refusal. Finally, the marginal workers' resignation to work threatens the job security of union workers. Yet, out of mental laziness and all manner of silly prejudices, almost all union workers ignore this. The attitude of union workers towards marginals is almost always dominated by the acceptance of the image of self-sufficiency that the marginals put forth. The union worker typically sees the marginal worker as simply someone who has *chosen* to live in a separate world that lamentably is not separate enough (as one union carpenter put it to me, "Does anyone really live in Berkeley?"), and who challenges the "victories" of the "labor movement" (which latter the majority of present day American union workers know next to nothing about from direct experience, acquiescently leaving it to the union bureaucrats to achieve for them their "real" goals).

This narrow "class consciousness" of union workers is remarkably similar to the attitude of those conservative "taxpayers" who accuse unions of being responsible for

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inflation. The conservative man of resentment assumes that unions are the true representative of workers' interests against capital, and thus accuses the union workers of arrogance and selfishness, deliberately blinding himself to the fact that unions assume a social function which escapes the control of each union worker and the ensemble of union workers; a social function necessitated by the very logic of commodity production and consumption that our good taxpayer seeks to turn against the unions.³

The marginal worker, for his part, is frequently contemptuous of unions because of their stodgy, bureaucratic regulation of work. Of itself, this is perfectly intelligent. However, the marginal almost universally loses sight of the fact that, despite his own exclusion from unions, his own survival is financially tenable in large part because of the generally high level of wages that have resulted from decades of union activity (sure, the wage increases "won" by the unions were a trade-off for their workers' acceptance of the system, but that is a different issue). Thus his attitude tends to rejoin, at least in form, that of the conservatives: ignoring his own stake in the set-up because his involvement is indirect, he places himself above it. His criticism simply falls into the hole of the ideology of free labor.

* * *

³ By contrast, a small but noisy international contingent of ultra-leftists have made the startling discovery that unions are essentially business institutions, and take every dumb example of opposition to unions by their membership as evidence of an impending social revolution. What these geniuses have in common with our conservative taxpayers on the other side of an imaginary barricade is, to put it mildly, precious little experience with both unions and union workers. As if it were not the case that the union worker's main relation to (and complaint about) his union is that he pays dues, which, like insurance payments, is just so much of his paycheck flushed down the toilet; that far from plotting the revolution, most non-attendants of union meetings are at home glued to the t.v. ; that most union people would laugh if someone told them that unions present themselves as the workers' revolutionary alternative to capitalism; and that most union workers support their unions during a strike not out of ideological conviction, but because they're not quite so stupid as to overlook the fact that there's a payoff coming at the end of each admittedly ritualized and ridiculous melodrama of parading around with the same picket signs that were used three - or thirty - years ago.

Parallel to the recent transformations in the overall class structures which have produced the marginal worker, there has developed another, more durable, explicitly modern social stratum: the *cadres*. The cadres are the metamorphosis of the old urban petit-bourgeoisie of independent producers *become wage earning*. Because the cadres don't possess the instrument of their work, their real interests - with the relatively limited exception of the hopeless upper cadres - are even closer to those of the proletariat than were those of the old petit-bourgeoisie. However, the cadre's social conceptions and dreams of advancement are tied firmly to the values and outlook of the bourgeoisie. Although the cadre's economic function is usually linked to the "tertiary sector" - to services and especially sales, the upkeep and eulogy of commodities - his existence as a cadre is defined more by his practical attitude toward the State, work and the commodity than by his particular economic role. In short, he buys the lot in exchange for a few ordinary privileges, principally the ability to consume just a little more than others.

It is mostly for the cadre that the marginal worker produces his quality goods and services, and it is upon the cadre market that the marginal worker is largely dependent for his livelihood. Proportional to the degree that he believes in his work, the marginal worker tends to put forward the ideologies and representations of the cadre *in the extreme*; for as long as he is a marginal worker, he generally lacks the means to consume extensively the types of commodity that he himself produces. While the cadre believes himself rebellious because he disdains some of the trash of the mass market - as well as because he is anti-imperialist, shares the housework, finds discrimination truly shocking and other such tame, bargain basement banalities - the marginal worker enjoys (or at least pretends to enjoy) the supplementary rebellious self-image garnered from knowing that he is not such a vulgar consumer as the average cadre.

The cadre rarely speaks of his own work, for he would like to pretend that he will some day live out his dream of being a satisfied consumer without also being a worker.

When he does speak of his job, it is generally to say that it too is somewhat unorthodox: he participates in decision-making, it's not too boring, it's somewhat challenging, it's doing "some good." On the other hand, the cadre likes to speak of the work of the marginal worker, and even heaps approbation upon it. First comes the rhetorical question, "Do you like your job?" to which the answer is a mandatory 'yes,' because without a conscientious craftsman who takes pride in his work, the cadre is without hope of obtaining the perfect commodity. The cadre reveres the "self-employed," to make it forgotten who's working for whom; he admires an "independent spirit" in order to conceal who's dependent on whom for what. There is also a real envy: knowing himself to be miserable in his own work, the cadre hopes that some of the social magic he projects onto others will rub back off on him.

Perhaps even more than all the other separations, that which everywhere divides the marginal worker from what roughly could be called ordinary workers is that the marginal worker is identified-rightly or wrongly-with the life, tastes and desires of the cadre. The marginal worker supports this separation precisely to the point that he lives out the image of himself that the cadre - in this case rightful spokesman for the society - creates: that he has already rebelled; that he has squared the circle and integrated rebellion into this work as well as into his leisure; that in order for him to transform his existence it is necessary for *others* to rebel.

The intellectual is the cadre who is most proud that he works, who wants his work to be visible. The intellectual wants the world to know that his activity-the production of ideology-is work, just like making cars. In fact, the intellectual goes one step further: if many workers play down what they do forty hours a week, the intellectual steps forward as the representative of the proletariat. The more that silence surrounds the worker and his alienation, the more the intellectual feels obliged to provide meaningful social commentaries. The intellectual is the

spectator who can't bear to simply stand and watch a spectacle with his hands in his pockets. He has to write something down.

(From Call It Sleep, a videotape by Isaac Cronin and Terrel Seltzer. Transcript of the videotape is available from Isaac Cronin, Suite 270, 1442A Walnut Street, Berkeley, CA 94709, at \$3.00 each.[Address obsolete] Reprint unauthorized.)

**There are no jobs which are not compromised.
The difficulty is not to isolate which occupations
are patently filled only by assholes, but for each
individual to determine how he himself
reproduces and supports the system.**

Illusions are not free from the tendency of use-value to fall. In the wear and tear of daily life, the tendency of this society to fragment everything, a coherent illusion about oneself becomes increasingly difficult for the marginal worker to maintain without appearing ridiculous. The differences of the marginal worker from other workers tend to become less and less ends in themselves and more and more simple *supplementary* compensations to the average alienation. Slowly but surely he becomes proletarianized. His aspirations to simulate the cadres who consume his products-and him-are sustainable only to the degree that, like the cadre, he eclipses from his consciousness what he actually does five (or whatever) days a week. His practical life is ever more dominated by an existence that is qualitatively indistinguishable from that of ordinary workers everywhere. In spite of his frequent pretensions to superiority, the marginal worker starts with effectively no better understanding of himself and the world than does anyone else. Often he is more deceived, because he wants to place endless qualifications on why his condition is really not so lousy. Beyond the superficial differences between his situation and that of the vast majority of other Americans, the malaise that comes to him too is that life is far, far too

ordinary. The disadvantage of the marginal worker is that he personally is very persuasively seduced to go through the labor history of the last hundred years step by step, in order to finally arrive at mundanity, and with an intense consciousness of each miserable footfall.

There are no jobs which are not compromised.

The difficulty is not to isolate which occupations are patently filled only by assholes (cops, clergymen, politicians, corporate directors, movie stars, etc.) but for each individual to determine how he himself reproduces and supports the system (which is to say, his own misery), the margin of freedom he has at his disposal ***if he takes it*** and ***how*** he is going to use it, and, ultimately, how he can contribute to making presently unavoidable misery avoidable (revolutionary strategy). Each proletarian finds himself faced with the same task as the global proletariat: not to choose sides, but to ***make*** sides. Those who want sides drawn for them by others are, regardless of their brand of ***religion*** (it is always a matter of religion where it is a matter of good and evil), always the most conservative at root.

In general, those who dispose of the largest amount of ***money*** are those most inclined towards the passive consumption of the status quo. But the power of the economy is such that it turns this fundamental recognition upside down as a weapon in its own arsenal. The economy is the inheritor of religion not only historically, but also in its daily ability to provide a self-justification to the vast majority on the basis that they are not fat cats, that they are not patently assholes. The point is not to justify the rich, but to criticize the "poor," whose poverty consists first of all in their belief that their misery could possibly be resolved within the seemingly limitless confines of the commodity economy. A person inevitably accords a positive value to the power of his masters whenever he accords himself a positive value based on the roles accorded to him today, in this society. Such a person defines himself in his masters' terms and is thus defined by them.

**Consumption of reform and reform
of consumption: it's natural, man** **3**

When the first natural foods stores appeared some fifteen years ago, they provoked little comment, other than the effusive praise of a few dazzled hippies, occasional exclamations concerning outrageous prices by startled shoppers, and glowing recommendations on the part of certain shoplifters. In retrospect, however, these stores can be seen as having been among the first symptoms of a profound development in commodity consumption. This is not to credit their lamentable proprietors with any great foresight (many went broke); it was mostly by accident that they found themselves straddling the tip of an economic iceberg.

The classical bourgeoisie promised to liberate man from natural alienation, but only succeeded in transforming it into social alienation. Faced with a situation where the global social alienation accumulated by capitalism has rendered the bourgeoisie and its state-capitalist surrogates purely and simply obsolete, the present rulers can do no better than to return to their original battle against natural alienation, promising to make a better job of it this time around. Graced with information received from their old faithful, scientific thought, they inform us that they have discovered an ever-growing number of problems whose existence was previously unknown, not the least of which are the problems that have been created by capitalist development itself.

One has seen in the last few years an orgy of publicity announcing the end of America's romance with technology, the undesirable effects that accompanied this romance, and the fact that it has failed to deliver. The image of unlimited progress and the betterment of life for all, which was supposed to accompany this permanent technological revolution, is dead and gone.

What is lost sight of in this revaluation of values is the fact that it is precisely the same patterns of thought, of judgment and criteria, once used to support technology-for-

itself, which are now used to analyze the present "crisis," to criticize the excesses of the past as well as to propose solutions. It is not the end of the "American way of life" that we are witnessing in this country, but its superficial modification by means of its extension to previously unexploited or underexploited terrains.

As opposed to the image of the scientist of the past, the specialist whose knowledge was supposed to be so intrinsically esoteric that the spectator was simply supposed to passively accept whatever the expert said, the present situation encourages a much more subjective model, where each individual is supposed to investigate the ramifications of every aspect of his daily life and make "rational" decisions concerning it. At the same time, the old model promoted by the spectacle - that each commodity was of itself good and therefore desirable - is replaced by the call for the critical consumer, who is to judge the value of each commodity according to what use he himself can make of it, and who, at the same time, is supposed to demand that the economy respond to his needs, the awareness of which he develops in his role as semi-professional scientist.

The crossroads where these tendencies meet is the *natural commodity*. It is there that they find themselves concretized as consequence of practice, answer both the objective needs dictated by the material resources of modern capital and the subjective needs dictated by the consciousness of the more sophisticated consumer. The natural commodity is the better-consumed commodity, the quality commodity consumed at the right time and place with as little waste as possible. Money relations must appear to be inconsequential or at least secondary, and uninflated by the rules of fashion (the consumption of style is devalued in favor of the style of consumption). It is not so much that natural phenomena *per se* are consumed (though this is certainly one of the new terrains that has been developed into a gigantic market in the last ten years), but that commercial hype and technical alteration of raw materials must be reduced to a minimum; the needs being satisfied must appear as independent as possible from the social system,

which latter is justified only as the means by which these needs are met.

To speak of preserving neighborhoods today is like advocating the canning of rotten fruit. What the automobile hasn't finished off directly has been obliterated by the housing market, modern architecture as a whole, and the dominant etiquette of secure isolation which today is more or less spontaneously pursued by alienated man.

One can examine the transition from the cult of technology to the natural commodity-and see just what is carried over (everything fundamental: its alienation)-by considering the fate of the king of commodities in the earlier period, the automobile.

It has become commonplace to note that Toyotas and Datsuns (or better, Volvos, BMWs and Mercedes) have displaced the Cadillac in the social hierarchy of prestige. In fact, the criteria of prestige have themselves been altered: the cornerstone of American prosperity in the 50's and 60's - "two cars in every garage" - has been devalued. Not in terms of cost - a Volkswagen in 1983 can easily cost more than a Cadillac did in 1973 - but in terms of ideological mileage. What is now prestigious is to make no big deal about one's car: to have an "efficient" vehicle is important, but not that much more so than having an efficient dishwasher or hiring a good plumber.

The present disgrace of the automobile may be compared to the demotion of a ruling bureaucrat in the Communist bloc: total affirmation gives way to an embarrassed silence and in some cases public ridicule. Of course, the social system which allowed for the now-acknowledged past excess must never be called into question, nor even the fact that the discredited culprit has left an indelible imprint on the

basic means by which social regulation is carried out. It is the victims of the system who must absorb the loss, who must make renewed sacrifices to reverse the consequences of the actions that they had little choice but to participate in to begin with; although no one is shot for having once owned a Lincoln Continental.

As opposed to the environmentalists and economists, for whom the problems presented by the automobile are inevitably reduced to quantitatively measurable criteria ("efficiency"), US Senator S. L Hayakawa, in a speech in 1979, partially revealed the underlying social context of the "energy crisis." In a moment of unusual candor - and assuredly for all the wrong reasons - Hayakawa proposed that the price of gas be raised to a point where poor and unemployed people could no longer afford it. As the Situationists put it (and for better reasons!): "One's status is assessed by the nature of the place one lives in and by the extent of one's personal mobility. In the last analysis, we no longer live in a city but in a part of power. We live somewhere in the hierarchy. Our actual rank can be ascertained by the scope of our travels" (*Internationale Situationniste* #3, 1959).

The main mistake made by the environmentalists and economists is to see the private car as essentially a means of transport. On the contrary, it is first and foremost a means of separation, an extension of the isolation of the family unit (or its pseudo-alternatives whose fundamental quality remains isolation). What is traffic? The circulation of commodities, principally the commodity of labor. This is why public transportation is no answer to the private vehicle: it merely isolates people together, people locked into social roles whose objective basis is beyond their control.

One of the latest fads on the part of so-called city planners - most of whom are at least lucid enough to realize that the automobile has become dictatorial in its domination of urban space - is to reduce or even eliminate the traffic on selected urban streets. When this step is undertaken in residential areas, it is generally accompanied by an ideology of "preserving the neighborhood." This is a case of falsification

gone wild: to speak of preserving neighborhoods today is like advocating the canning of rotten fruit. The neighborhood as an active social network has long since expired; what the automobile hasn't finished off directly has been obliterated by the housing market, modern architecture as a whole, and the dominant etiquette of secure isolation which today is more or less spontaneously pursued by alienated man.

The social function of traffic restriction in commercial areas is even more blatant, a simple rubric for the more effective showcasing of commodities. Its logical extension is the shopping mall, where the commodity organizes space not only horizontally, but also vertically, diagonally and circularly. The tension that inevitably results from driving is reproduced and intensified, in the mall, in the ant-like procession of grimly determined people. The noise of motors and horns is replaced by muzak and the endless discussion of rubbish; the intersection.⁴ by turnoffs into dead-ends which one should, in order not to miss the latest wonders of the world, cruise into and check out. In the shopping mall, and less intensely in traditional commercial areas blocked off to traffic, one becomes a driver without a car. The machine is left elsewhere, outside, but the role remains; in fact, the role is laid bare, without even the paltry insulation afforded by the mechanical quirks, the butts in the ashtray, the debris on the seat or floor, or the sad aesthetic knick-knacks that give a vehicle some semblance of the owner's subjectivity.

A more developed and self-contained form of the driver without a car is provided by the running and jogging mania. Now it is foolish to contest running on the basis of whether or not it is good for you. Judged on the terms by which it presents itself, the cult of running (and of fitness in general, as well as of the natural commodity as a whole) is relatively immune to criticism (few are the advocates of obesity and heart attacks). This is one of its greatest strengths and

⁴ This is a full stop in the original text. It is unclear whether it should have been a comma, or whether something else was lost during the original typesetting.

attractions: there is a definite "use value." Implicit in the fetishism of running is that it is an escape from the ordinary, from life that is dominated by commerce, from life that escapes the control of the individual. (To run or jog, or simply wear running clothes, particularly in commercial areas, presents the image that one is more than a simple consumer; one is going *somewhere*). The individual appears as central, without props (except perhaps special shoes), as both subject and object of experience; but precisely in this emphasis, it is forgotten that he appears central only because he is socially isolated.

It is not merely that running maintains the body in order that its owner can continue to perform, in a different time and place, alienated functions. The activity itself is no less alienated: its primary prerequisite is that encounter is abdicated, just as in the case of driving (the latest popular addition to running paraphernalia, portable headphones, simply makes the isolation that was already present vulgarly apparent). That this appears as the product of choice and not of necessity only reinforces the power of the illusion of independence it offers.

The sexiness of running clothes reproduces the general use to which sexuality is put by the spectacle: the passing but *unobtainable* eroticism of the commodity. The closest one can come is to imitate it, join the running crowd. More frequently, one remains an admiring spectator. In part, the sexy runner has displaced the sexiness formerly attributed to the automobile, whose image has become more functional and utilitarian.

It is not only in urban areas that space has come to be defined by the extension of the automobile's alienating roles to non-mechanized forms of transport; space in the "wilderness" is rapidly becoming, in the United States and above all in California, as predictable as the route of a cable car. A whole vocabulary accompanies this relentless process of colonization. There are no longer meadows, fields, valleys, forests, hills; there is "open space." One doesn't explore; one engages in "cross-country hiking." The notion of "wilderness" itself has come to signify those areas which

are officially designated as fair game for the imposition of every natural consumer's habits. The image that is consumed is the desirability of getting away from the crowds, in order to make it forgotten that the problem is not so much the number of people in any given spot, but their alienated way of life and the fact that separation goes wherever they do.

The absurd contradiction of officially designated campgrounds overrun by Winnebagos, radios and beer busts simply serves as a foil for the natural consumer. The pathological need to denounce this form of obeisance to conspicuous consumption reveals just how close is the self-righteous backpacker with his biodegradable bag of granola.

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A complete tourist guide has long been available for every major trail system in California: where you can go, how long it will take, how difficult it will be, what you can see. No small amount of credit is due to the wholesome cretins who write and publish this stuff for having helped make, for example, California's John Muir Trail worthy of its nickname, "the freeway of the Sierras." (That they often give the Boy Scout Manual as a secondary reference is not so surprising either).

The extension of the commodity's use of non-urban space to include the thorough *organization* of alienated leisure, as well as of the harvesting of resources, encourages as reflex the spread of *mystical* attitudes towards nature. One drives *x* number of miles and walks *y* in order to see redwood "cathedrals"; to see "God's country"; and to generally be overwhelmed by this or that "awesome" natural phenomenon. There is certainly no shortage of preachers either. This

is only another concrete case of the general social phenomenon which everywhere sees mysticism walking hand in hand, down the aisle as it were, with bourgeois science. This will continue to be the case until it is seen that the problem with science and bourgeois thought in general is not that they are "too rational," but that they are *not rational enough*.

* * *

The goal of the natural commodity and its spectacle is to extend scientific rationalism to every gesture. The nature that it aims to conquer is first of all "human nature." Partly as a result of the generally recognized failure of the so-called human sciences, at least in their traditional forms – psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine and so forth - and partly as a result of the delirious discovery of ever more problems that beset alienated man, each individual is invited to take up the slack where the experts are flagging. A clear example is medicine, which has become so completely bureaucratized, specialized and expensive that it cannot even pretend to take care of ailments until they become critical. Instead, each person is encouraged to pursue on his own the therapeutics that are right for him or her, whether it be a regimen of exercise, some form of psychotherapy, a change of diet, a reform of one's sexual activities, or whatever. All of which, by some strange coincidence, is bound to lead, in the "natural" course of things, back to the matrix of consumption. In addition, each person is drilled as the policeman of the superficial transgressions of others against the dominant "holistic" etiquette. One can: criticize one's neighbors for wasting water; castigate others for driving too much; bitch at people smoking in theaters. The list goes on and on: if this society has a surplus of anything, it is banalities to rearrange.

The present depressed state of the American economy provides an exceedingly favorable terrain for the development of the natural commodity; just as the natural commodity provides endless "sensible" alternatives to forms of constunption [*sic*] that require an ever-increasing growth of

purchasing power. What is particularly notable is the confluence of requirements placed on the consumer. To the demands for "austerity" dictated by the supposed fight against inflation, for example, the natural commodity responds with a back to the basics approach, a redefinition of luxury towards durability and simplicity. A good analogy would be the replacement of the all-electric kitchen by the Japanese tea garden.⁵

“A computer in every home.” The human toll that is to be exacted by the new wave of American economics is nothing less than the reduction of every person, starting with and emphasizing young children who are least equipped to fight back, to complete identification with the aspirations and imperatives of Power.

The economic pressure to consider leisure more carefully, in more and more *businesslike* terms, equally finds re-inforcement, and development, in the ethos of critical consumption. Though only tangentially related to the natural commodity - in that the natural commodity demands that the consumer gain an encyclopedic knowledge of everything that concerns his existence - the movement towards bringing into the home electronic gadgets formerly limited to the workplace should be seen as part of the same overall process. The subjectivization of science is simultaneously the technocratization of daily life (according to the reformed image of the technocrat who "plays hard as well as works hard"). The largest retailers in the country are already demarcating the lines of battle for the onslaught that is being

⁵ One of the social bases for the rampant fascination with the Far East is that the traditional Eastern view of luxury is well suited to the direction that the American economy must now take.

prepared in order to relocate the center of consumer prestige from the garage to the study: the watchword of American economic development in the next twenty years is forecast as being "a computer in every home." This new hierarchy of consumption is already being sketched out by the children who are trussed and stuffed in preparation for what is planned to reach fruition in their young adulthood: the neatest kid on the block is no longer the one who has a hula-hoop or a plastic yo-yo, but the one who has a video-game set-up on his television. Everywhere, the desire to play is colonized by the ever-increasing dependence on technical stimuli, in a way that makes conventional t. v. appear medieval. The human toll that is to be exacted by the new wave of American economics is nothing less than the reduction of every person, starting with and emphasizing young children who are least equipped to fight back, to the tastes and manias of the lifelong computer programmer, whose enthusiasm in discussing the capabilities of the latest "toys" and his "games" with them is in direct proportion to the boredom and monotony that characterize his manner of speaking and his social existence in general. What is in fact demanded by the great new hope of the economy is ultimately the complete identification of each individual with the aspirations and imperatives of Power.

**The superficial critique of bureaucracy, or,
down with authority, long live the police! 4**

I have already sketched, in the above discussion of medicine, one dimension of the alteration in the division of labor between the individual and bureaucracy. This is only one of the reforms that is rising everywhere in response to a generalized superficial dissatisfaction with bureaucracy, which at times even leads to the elimination in disgrace of certain bureaucrats, right up to the top, but which only aims, consciously or not, at achieving a more efficient, "objective," apparatus of exploitation.

That aspect of bureaucracy which leads it, by its own internal logic, to take its bureaucratic desires for reality makes bureaucracy the breeding grounds of excess. This visibly, for decades now, already constitutes the substance of what has made the rulers of the Eastern bloc and their official ideology a bad joke in the minds of probably the majority of the people burdened by them. One of the, most successful transitional solutions developed in the past ten years to a remarkably similar predicament facing Western bureaucrats has been for these latter to not only acknowledge the existence of corruption, greed and stupidity within the bureaucracy, but also to include the public (mostly in the form of "public opinion") in the entire process of uncovering these excesses.⁶ Watergate and the demise of Nixon was merely the most grandiose episode in this process. It has become almost cliché that you can make a fortune if you can uncover and describe the lurid details of bureaucratic aberration. Hence the litany of newspaper articles, books, TV shows and movies concerning the CIA, 57 varieties of conspiracy, Vietnam atrocities, the number of women John Kennedy fucked, how Hitler got away with it, the plight of some poor schmuck who got the runaround, and so on *ad nauseam*.

The beauty of the whole set-up is that the bureaucracy appears to take a beating while in reality it is being reinforced. So little is required to make it forgotten that the real victim is not the bungling bureaucrat, but the spectator over whose head the hue and cry necessarily transpires. This flows from the fact that people are purely and simply addicted to power, spellbound by it; which is not surprising, since they are bombarded by its image 24 hours a day. Have a little patience, we're working on it, they're told. We're so well equipped to relieve you of your problems, or at least the

⁶ In the East, the public is generally informed only after the fact; a discredited bureaucrat may be subject to a trumped up public ridicule, but for reasons usually as phony as that which previously made him officially a model proletarian. In any case, the fall of a Stalinist in power is more often than not the result of a banal personal power struggle; or occasionally, a ritual sacrifice used to announce a policy change.

worst of them. You don't really want to wade through all this boring crap, do you? Our style is so much more entertaining. And besides, who would listen to *you?* - the banal misery of your banal life *just won't sell*.

Bureaucratic reform from above has become so omnipresent that its origins in the spectacle are erased from memory. It appears, rather, as resulting from the spontaneous initiative of the base. The expression "Catch 22," for example, is known and used far beyond those who have read the book whose title coined the phrase.

Contrariwise, the popular contempt for bureaucracy felt at the base (principally the contempt for its most obvious symptoms) is taken up at the top, providing a reassuring familiarity to the spectator that some of the big shots, at least, are not too out of touch. The pseudo-critical notion of "hassle," for example, has leapt from its counterculture origins to the mouths of some of the most powerful figures in government. Further, the dominant image of the bureaucrat is being methodically humanized. The bureaucrat is no longer presented as the model of virtuosity by definition, but as a subjectivity who faces the same needs, desires and contradictions as anyone else. This elimination in appearance of the distance between the bureaucrat and the average individual serves a multifold function. First, it encourages a sympathy with the bureaucrat on the basis of his consumption habits (in the case of Jimmy Carter: anyone who loves to fish can't be all bad). Second, by exposing the occasional use of power for narrow personal gain, and the rapid punishment of any bureaucrat who dares to step outside the code of professional conduct, it promotes the image of an equality of sacrifice made for the common good. By implication, the lowly worker who transgresses the strict separation between labor and leisure would be guilty of a crime against the nation. Third, in exposing all the personal frustrations, conflicts and stress to which a bureaucrat is subject, a justification for the economic privilege enjoyed by those at the top is reinforced ("Who would want that job?"; "He can have it." - are frequently voiced opinions about elected officials, for example). Finally, various failures

of the system are mitigated or even explained away as the result of *personal* weaknesses of the individual bureaucrat or bureaucrats in charge of whatever is determined to be inadequate (another parallel to the East here: it is always the personal shortcomings of a falling bureaucrat that are cited when he is discredited).

* * *

Ronald Reagan's celebrated campaign against "big government" is perhaps the best example of how the superficial critique of bureaucracy is manipulated by Power.

Liberalism (following Bolshevism) proposed bureaucracy (principally governmental) as a corrective to the anarchy of the market. Its ideology was not only that it would revive and maintain the economy, but at the same time that it would protect and even improve the lot of those at the bottom of the economic ladder. In response, Reagan came along at the right time and place with, *in part*, the right product. Unlike his detractors, he at least had the sense to realize that liberalism had failed: both economically, according to liberalism's own standards, and ideologically, in that those at the bottom were becoming more and more aware that they weren't going anywhere, except perhaps down.

Reagan's trick is to turn the liberal ideology on its head: now, it is "free enterprise" that is supposed to protect the populace from the *ravages of bureaucracy* - among whose consequences, Reagan would like to have it believed, are *both* the general social ills that the bureaucracy has done as much to aggravate as to relieve, *and* the particular dilemmas of the economy.

To be sure, Reagan is only dimly aware of what he's about, and has gotten as far as he has largely in spite of himself and his moth-eaten ideas. The old trouper is still riding the same ideological hobby-horse that he mounted forty years ago, out to slay the dragons of communism, godlessness and moral decay, in the name of nostalgia for a good life that never existed. Conditions haven't changed and

more or less accidentally put him on top, no sir. Why he was always right, all the time, all along.

Reagan *has* learned to tailor his song and dance to the particular interests he's addressing. The routine didn't need much work when it came to big business: he's simply going to make it easier to make money and develop capital, period.

For the so-called middle classes, a few pirouettes are required. First, he must assure them that the source of their woes is not capitalism, which has allegedly taken its "fair share" of the lumps, but its overregulation. Second, his battle against bureaucracy begins by attacking at the point where its most unpleasant symptoms are most evident to the middle class: the tax man. Finally, he points out, never directly but by dozens of little inferences, that the gutter in which the federal bureaucracy forces the middle class to toss its hard earned money runs straight downhill to the people at the bottom of the economy. It's incredible but true: the system is portrayed as having become so ineffective because it has become the property of the poor and their patrons. Starting from the fact that the most *obvious* recipients of government money who engender no obvious return are the poor, the worst victims are cast in the role of the worst villains. You can't afford to send your kid to college? Why, it's because the poor are the only ones who qualify for scholarships. You can't afford that vacation you always dreamed of? Well, that's because of the tax money you've contributed to the welfare mothers who we all know run around fucking everything in sight in order to screw you. The mental step that would logically follow - that it's the niggers and the illegal aliens who are accountable for the humdrum treadmill of your daily life - is left to be concluded independently (this is known as "free thinking"). The big shots who actually possess power will of course piously deny any complicity. Don't you see that Reagan has moved a couple of Negroes and a few Hispanics to Washington? And you must know that our firm is an equal opportunity employer!

Reagan's performance for the people at the bottom of the economic heap is predictably the most difficult. The center

of his pitch consists first of all in his willingness to be frank about the failure of the society to significantly alter the conditions of those surviving below the "poverty line." His image of personal honesty is calculated to at least get people to pay attention. This sets the stage for the presentation of the two-faced liberals as the straw men on whom anger and discontent should be vented. These are the villains who have not only bureaucratized your life, humiliated you, and offered only stop-gaps to your predicaments, but who have also made it impossible to improve your situation immediately, for they have constricted the economy - which is ultimately your only hope for qualitative change - to the point where it can barely break even, let alone integrate more people as productive members of society, that is, as full-fledged consumers.

Reagan's thesis that the economy and only the economy can solve the problems of inequality and poverty is scarcely original: it was already, for example, the ideology of numerous black leaders, including King, who saw the "War on Poverty" as the logical follow-up of the Civil Rights Movement. What is original about Reagan's stand is that he portrays social welfare programs as being an *impediment* to economic integration rather than a "head start." While the liberals proclaimed 'We may be giving you only scraps, but it's better than nothing,' Reagan counters, 'All you've been getting is scraps, and that's all we propose to take away, your dependence on scraps.'⁷ It's not hard to see that behind the benevolent assertion that "inflation hits the poor the hardest" is the more diffuse lie of upward mobility proffered by classical bourgeois ideology; regardless of the particular superficial condition of the economy, it is always those at the bottom who are its greatest victims.

Although Reagan has spoken of programs that would force people on welfare and unemployment to work, it is

⁷ This is something like the attitude expressed in a Marx Brothers film, when Groucho justified his refusal to pay his employee Chico: "Well, you don't want to be a wage-slave, do you?"

unlikely that he would be prepared to hire the enormous amount of personnel that would be necessary to police them. However, he can accomplish the same thing more slowly by decreasing staff and increasing regulations. His plan is to let calculated inefficiency make life on welfare or unemployment unbearable, literally make it into a full time job - or preferably, worse. At the same time, the economic squeeze will be applied by freezing the level of benefits. The idea is to provide "incentive" - i.e., to make a job that pays piss wages seem attractive. The most lucrative form of assistance that Reagan offers the "private sector" is not tax reform or even "deregulation," but that old capitalist standby: cheap labor.

It is easy to point out some of the blatant contradictions of Reagan's anti-bureaucratic campaign. In order to maintain the American auto industry, for instance, as well as numerous other domestic industries, he will have to instigate some sort of foreign trade barriers. The military establishment is an obvious, and gigantic, sacred cow that will only get fatter. For all the rhetoric concerning the "individual," we see campaigns against abortion, determination not to legalize marijuana, proposals for renewed covert domestic surveillance by the CIA, and so on. Virtually the sole exception to Reagan's equation of the "individual" with *economic man* was his stand against the draft, which was mostly a matter of political opportunism and on which Reagan, by provoking international antagonisms for archaic ideological reasons, may still have to reverse directions if his blunders are sufficiently successful.

Finally, one knows well that there is another bureaucratic institution that will not suffer too much in the next few years: the police.

While the liberals proclaimed 'We may be giving you only scraps, but it's better than nothing,' Reagan counters, 'All you've been getting is scraps, and that's all we propose to take away, your dependence on scraps.' This is something like the attitude expressed in a Marx Brothers film, when Groucho justified his refusal to pay his employee Chico: "Well, you don't want to be a wage-slave, do you?"

It is not only from above that the police have been getting some much needed support. The notion of victimless crime, which burgeoned notably with drug use and changes in sexual etiquette, is widely accepted across the country, if only in the name of economic efficiency. By contrast, the image of legitimate or serious police functions is strengthened. Endless debates are carried out concerning how the police function, sometimes reaching the absurd conclusion of demanding more sophisticated means of surveillance and harsher retribution against criminals.

A slightly more leftist tinge comes in with the call for the police to concentrate on "crimes against people, not property." In response, the police are already well equipped, having assumed their rightful roles as the best practitioners of psychology: emphasis is placed on the "human trauma" of crime, striking directly at everybody's fear. An illuminating example of the type of "people" the leftists propose to protect was shown in Berkeley in 1976. In response to a series of rapes and burglaries, the police were called in to organize an anti-crime drive initiated at the base. This showed well the nature of Berkeley neighborhoods: it's only necessary to organize a neighborhood bureaucratically because it's really just a collection of isolated living units. Some leftists involved criticized collaboration with the police, but their criticism remained purely moral as they

refused to see that not only administratively, but also ideologically in upholding the "community," the police had stolen their thunder.

Endless debates are carried out concerning how the police function, sometimes reaching the absurd conclusion of demanding more sophisticated means of surveillance and harsher retribution against criminals.

Crime is the strongest argument in favor of the police. In response to crime, bureaucracy appears necessary to walk down the street. The crisis thinking provoked by crime places everything in the here and now. This is a way of thinking that the leftists are hard put to argue with, since their own efforts are in no small part aimed at manipulating crises as well, though they generally choose (and pump up) crises that are more abstract. The usual response of leftists to crime is a petrified sociology of the problem. Thus they lead themselves up the blind alley of apologizing for criminals. This is due not only to the self-perpetuating nature of their ideology, but also to their acceptance of the image that the criminal is anti-social. On the contrary, "The criminal has always been bourgeois - like the retribution which consists in robbing him of his freedom." The criminal wants the goods, even a female body - become commodity, without paying the price. Though the criminal may find work contemptible even if available, it is precisely his consumption of the image of happiness and his image of happy consumption that define him as a criminal (as opposed to someone who simply does something illegal); which give him a social role in the division of labor, which make his actions predictable, and which lead the police to catch as many as they do.

More than in any other segment of American society, it is

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among urban blacks that the notion of criminality as being anti-social is lived out. This is not to make light of the fact that in many black areas you have to be tough simply in order to survive. Nonetheless, there is a strong undercurrent of etiquette among urban blacks that makes a hustler a very prestigious thing to be. In cities across the country, thousands of black kids want to be the baddest nigger in town.

The opposition within the black "community" to crime often tends to reinforce the equation of anti-social and criminality. For the primary source of this opposition-at least the most vocal-comes from precisely those blacks who have sold out: who aspire to be classy second-class citizens.

The Black Panthers were among the clearest examples of what happens when would-be opposition to the society seeks to incorporate and valorize the attributes which the criminal lives out in his daily existence. The Panthers became the greatest victims of their own outlaw image. First ideologically, in their identification of the police as *the* enemy beyond which it was scarcely necessary to look, and thus tactically, in the resulting reduction of conflict to suicidal shootouts. It may very well be true that the FBI or other police agencies were determined to crush the Panthers by hook or by crook. But the Panthers made it easy: they just couldn't give up the lure of the fast life and fast money. While the Panthers campaigned to get hard drugs out of town, the more cynical leftists in the know were debating what percentage of the money collected to fight sickle cell anemia went to the Central Committee's cocaine fund. The Panther leadership was constantly in and out of jail, not only on political charges but also on banal felonies. The differences between the Panthers and a more ordinary criminal gang was that Leninist ideology solidified the hierarchy and provided a rallying point for the release of incarcerated big-shots-become-martyrs. Although he's evidently purged everything else, including simple common sense, from the Panthers, Huey Newton to this day has still not purged himself of the self-defeating macho pride of the wheeler-dealer man of the street: in spite of numerous very

close shaves in the courts, he seems incapable of keeping guns out of his pockets and his hands to himself.

Leftists lead themselves up the blind alley of apologizing for criminals.

The same social etiquette that makes criminality prestigious among many blacks is otherwise reflected, in the streets and other public places, in what might be termed the cult of bad manners. The symptoms are well known to just about everyone: radios blaring, smoking in buses, more or less random harassment, the search for excuses to pick a fight, and so forth. This certainly has the effect of reminding whites that the era of the nigger who knew his place is over. The problem with this terrorism of daily life is that, like all terrorism, it replaces strategy with the repetition of a few fetishized tactics, reducing rebellion to a self-perpetuating triviality.

It is indisputable that, as the plutocrats of high politics press forward their mobilization of State power to ensure nothing but the survival of the economy, crime is going to increase. In a word, it's going to become for a growing part of the population the only type of job available. And as such it should be treated: it is as stupid to be proud of being a good burglar as it is to be proud of being a good grocery clerk. The toughness required to survive in an American ghetto is as much a product of this society as the toughness required of a coal miner: they exist only as the necessary subjective response to the division of alienated labor. Contrary to the outlook of the old Black Power movement, urban black anti-etiquette is not the radical refusal of the dominant humanism, but its "bad" flip-side: their fundamental point of unity is that each makes a virtue out of the particular forms of people's *misery*. It is the *authorities* and their sociological henchmen who broadcast the existence of a direct line between the crime rate and revolutionary violence: *don't they wish* that a person needed a conditioned

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inclination and/or previous experience to loot a store, bum a government building, or kill a bureaucrat.

* * *

"Fifty percent of the people in this country don't vote. They simply don't want to be implicated in organized society. With, in most cases, a kind of animal instinct, they know that they cannot really do anything about it, that the participation offered them is a hoax. And even if it weren't, they know that if they don't participate, they aren't implicated, at least not voluntarily. It is for these people, the submerged fifty percent, that [Henry] Miller writes."

-K. Rexroth

While the percentage in Berkeley of the traditional American non-participants Rexroth speaks of is likely far lower than fifty, the ranks of non-participation are on the other hand swollen with the refugees from ten-plus years of the steady decomposition of activism. In the sixties in Berkeley, everything centered around community; today nothing is more suspect. Politics is as likely a conversation stopper as anywhere else; the militant is widely considered the modern version of the loser.

The organizations which affirmed their existence publically when the community was a dominant representation in Berkeley life have given way to the clique, the unofficial organization, as the principal mediation between the individual and society. As opposed to the bureaucratic model where everyone has a clearly identified role or series of roles which he repeats again and again, the clique is founded on change and apparent fluidity. It presents its origins and *raison d'être* as accidental: completely subject to the actions of individuals, who make of it what they choose.

In solidifying the means of measuring activity in the individual's personality, the clique presents an excellent terrain for the valorization of commodities. The focus of consumption is re-oriented so that commodities appear as

mere props dominated by the subject. This is a far more sophisticated stimulus to consumption than advertising, which is broadly recognized as being manipulative and obnoxious. In the clique, one consumes not only a product or an idea, but above all its subjective effects on one's closest associates. One consumes not in order to participate in an obviously hierarchical appearance, but in order to share the experience.

**The culture of decomposition and
the aestheticization of daily life** **5**

As almost every twit of a feature writer has expounded at least once, the hero as a type has long ranked high on the list of socially endangered species. This is generally attributed to a number of factors: the conquest of previously sacred terrains by big money (e.g. sports). the banalization of the celebrity's mystique through the gossip press, and occasionally through the autobiographical exposition of the misery of life at the top; the wane of simplistic good vs. evil reasoning in regard to social conditions: and so forth. All of this contains a certain partial truth. Yet rarely is the movement of the celebrity towards the mundane seen as part of a broader trend whose most important element is the reciprocal movement of the individual towards the celebrity. "Everybody's a star" announces one rock song; putting this in somewhat better perspective. Andy Warhol noted, "In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes." To narrow it down further, one could revise Warhol's statement to read that everyone is allotted fifteen minutes worth of big time fame extended over sixty-odd years of existence.

In this movement, the process of identification is in part reversed: now role influences stereotype as much as stereotype influences role. Life becomes a co-director of, and a commercial for, art. The expression "It's plastic" as an all-purpose derogatory description reveals that the concept of art as a congealed, motionless object is passé. Plastic is eternal, permanent, useless. Art is life, motion. What is

beautiful is what is useful: movement, change.

Culture is still the location of the search for lost unity, but in this search, culture as a separate sphere has been obliged, *in part*, to negate itself. Each person contemplates not only objects and images, but also the aesthetic totality that he has made out of his daily life. Personality is the new artistic medium: one plays with it dramatically, aesthetically, spiritually, like an artist who maintains a distance from his creation. Though universally presented and for the most part perceived as a matter of individual choice, this process is no more free from economic necessity than are traditional cultural forms. If, for example, people are asked to sell, as their labor power, less of their muscle, then it is in large part their personalities which are required to make up the difference. Wit, charm, good humor, good taste, etc. are much more in demand than brawn and the traits traditionally associated with it, such as inflexibility and persistence.

The aesthetic criteria used to judge personality are part of the backbone of the social hierarchy. One source of their strength is that one's status as judged by aesthetic criteria is not *always* directly determined by one's economic standing. The street person, for example, is not simply disdained because of his financial incompetence; often, his resourcefulness is admired. What condemns the street person, equally if not more than his poverty, is the fact that he doesn't bother to aestheticize his misery according to modern etiquette: his misery is deemed "weird" because it is consumable only *en bloc*.

Personality is the new artistic medium: one plays with it dramatically, aesthetically, spiritually, like an artist who maintains a distance from his creation. This process is no more free from economic necessity than are traditional cultural forms.

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The traditional feminine role concentrated, and was the single most important form of, the refuge of the individual from the ravages of history. In the family, in private life, there was, to a degree, a certain margin of choice left to individuals, semi-autonomous from the general political-economic reality. Of course, this retreat was particularly miserable for the woman, and, of course, modern feminism has attacked this form of misery directly. Yet because of the limitations of its attack - its compatibility with other forms of misery - feminism has had as its most general result the effect of being the most single important mediation by which the aestheticization of daily life - its complete proletarianization - has been carried out.

The proletarianization of women is only superficially understood as the entrance of women into traditional fields, such as the labor market. As the traditional anti-historical feminine role has broken down, the character of the proletariat has itself changed. The traditional fields are themselves no longer what they were: if you will, proletarianization has been feminized.

In the workplace, traditionally feminine traits - moderation, tolerance, modesty, adaptability, favoring of immediate experience over generality - are becoming the norm in the standards of professionalism, displacing traditional masculine qualities such as arrogance, bravado and pretension as the compartments requisite to success. Success itself is no longer viewed one dimensionally as movement towards the top of the economic hierarchy: following the criteria of many women in the corporate world who do not aspire to become the ultimate honcho, working conditions and rewards are also judged "humanly," especially in terms of the social interaction a job affords. One learns to appreciate "the finer things in life."

In "private life," the day-to-day functioning of the home is assimilated into economic jargon: e.g., "management of the household." One hears of the "politics of housework"; "everything we do is political." What one does with the trash implies a political decision. Serious proposals are put forward to pay housewives for their work, or at least to

provide them pensions - though one can easily imagine with what success.

Psychology as a serious academic/professional discipline - as a field with credible pretensions to being a science - could only exist as long as private life could be studied as a self-contained entity. The end of the traditional feminine role, the proletarianization of women, is the end of psychology. As soon as the misery of private life becomes social - not something you hide - therapy becomes a mass commodity, as vulgar in its manifestations as different styles of shoes and equally prolific. Despite the frequent arriviste manipulation of the old psychological ideologies, the mass proliferation of therapies-for-sale has less to do with ideas than with the general recognition of the social misery of private life, and the concomitant search for individual solutions which are less demanding than a full scale attack on the objective bases of that misery. The retreat of numerous feminists into psycho-therapeutic pursuits is one of the most glaring signs of feminism's limitations: discovering that *real compensations* are lost in the destruction of the feminine role, they go about creating new compensations which are supposed to be different - because non-male or anti-male - but which in fact rediscover all the old poverties and feminine specializations.

Feminism fails to conceive of consciousness itself as a social relation. Consciousness is seen as a possession, a fixed point which requires information or data to move it up. Consciousness goes back and forth, not up.

In the matrix of social contradictions which feminism has brought to light of day can be found the raw material for numerous other ideologies, illusions and attitudes that are going to play a decisive role in the daily life of the next ten years. As in the case of feminist psychologies, it is for the most part a matter of renovating the old poverties through

feminist emphases and reforms. Starting, for instance, from the widespread recognition that women have up till now been hierarchically excluded from history, a vocal if not large contingent of feminists have undertaken the search for the unknown or unheralded female celebrity of bygone days. This plays the social function of reinforcing the notion that history is something that took place in the past - it's something you read about - while at the same time it democratizes the general identification of people with names and personalities famous. Further, it combines with the ever-present demand for the esoteric cultural novelty. On the whole, the massive proliferation of literature by and for women - emphasizing especially those qualities that women have historically been more insightful about than men, such as nuances of character - was the most notable development in the Seventies on the literary terrain. A similar trend has been marked in film.

One of the most extreme contradictions that is embodied by feminism - though it is by no means unique in this - is the tendency to judge people and actions in terms of practice, while at the same time failing to conceive of consciousness itself as a social relation. Consciousness is seen, rather, as a possession, a fixed point which requires information or data to move it up. Consciousness goes back and forth, not up; and it is precisely where feminism allows itself to petrify in the defense of the *achievements already made* by women, *in the hierarchy*, that it appears most ridiculous (such a petrification is already implied when it is acknowledged that certain people have a "higher" consciousness than others).

The tendency of feminist criteria to judge people and events on the basis of practice, as opposed to what people say about themselves, rejoins political reality on the broadest level: less and less, and only in what is quasi-universally recognized as the stupidest attitudes of Power, are ideologies judged at face value. This is most clearly concretized in the global decomposition of Communist ideology; even the Western press has been harping on the blatant contradictions of doctrinaire Communism for nigh on fifteen years (the ultraleftists here prove they are worthy children of their

epoch: they think they have discovered something when they broadcast the startling revelation that Communism is state-capitalism and, as a whole, counter-revolutionary).

In Berkeley perhaps less than anywhere, no one ideology can hope to pull a coup of consciousness, present itself as the be all and end all. It can compete for a star role in the ideological market, but it cannot hope to go beyond or dominate the market. In a movement which mirrors the general overdevelopment of the economy and the function of each commodity in it, ideologies can no longer hope to dominate the individual totally, but only to reform him or change him. The function of culture and of ideology is to provide criteria for judging practice. In the eyes of tourists, Berkeley may be renowned for its cults and its leftists; but in town, no one appears more foolish than someone who's lost his sense of priorities - someone who's into a "heavy trip."

The irreversible development of the ideological market as *market* is the material base of the necessary *cynicism* of modernism. The ideology which seeks its momentary glory by seizing center stage of the modernist spectacle must already from the beginning foresee and calculate its subsequent demise. In an apologetic orgy of false modesty, each ideology must re-establish the trust of the doubting consumer - who knows that hundreds of modern ideologies which promised *the* answer have reduced their adherents to a rash of frustrated dropouts and a handful of pitiful zombies - acknowledging the individuality of the consumer at the outset so that this individuality can be held in reserve and invoked when the magic fades ("it wasn't *for me*").

As long as the world is ugly at its core, aesthetics as a specialized activity will never disappear.

Robert Crumb, the dean of underground comics and in his day arguably one of the ten most significant artists in the world, is one of the best examples of the modern cynic, because he's so encyclopedic in his cynicism, and specifi-

cally about non-conformist roles. Superficially, Crumb's appeal appears to be that he's anti-ideological; in fact, it's that he credibly attempts to be *un*ideological (his most sympathetic character is appropriately "Mr. Natural"). His ideology is to be unideological. Delirious with his ability to mock the excesses and pretensions of modern roles, he ends up seeing *every* human activity in terms of roles and thus at the same time mocks all attempts at serious individual struggle. Everything is reduced to its most obvious contradictions, which are developed to absurd conclusions. For Crumb, the rebel is simply a neurotic individual who's trying to get other, 'average' neurotic individuals to join him in doing something neurotic.

One of the cynic's most appealing weapons is precisely his aesthetic description of the misery of others. Like the protagonist in one of the classic hardboiled American mysteries, he animates the mundanity of his own life with the poignant, off-beat, slang and/or offensive put-down. Many roles in this society are accompanied by a semi-specialized vocabulary; the cynic takes it one step further, in that his specialized vocabulary is, to the degree that he's good, totally individualized. Which is, in the end, the whole point. It's not that this or that criticism of another has any practical consequence that *changes things*; the cynic's aesthetic insult is foremost an aestheticization of himself. Nor, for the sophisticated cynic, is it a matter of simply seeking passive approbation; the highest (and for many, the only real) approbation of the artist is for someone else to pick up the art form and take it to a more developed or refined level. The cynic demands another cynic, just as the commodity, too, demands a successor in its own image.

In France in the late Fifties and the Sixties - and eventually throughout Western Europe - the most radical theoretical critique of society up till then was developed from the critique of culture: cultural specialists negating their own positions in order to attack, with more coherence, the presuppositions of culture, and by extension, the entire social system whose very basis is the representation of life opposing itself to life: "The entire life of societies in which

modern conditions of production reign presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*," wrote Debord in 1965 (*Society of the Spectacle*). This is not by way of advocating any particular strategy - even less a formula for the renewal of radical critique. Yet it is worth emphasizing, by counterpoint, one key terrain on which revolutionary theory lags light-years behind existing conditions. This lack is nowhere more glaring than in the United States, where cultural representation is a hundred times more significant as social tranquilizer than all the political ideologies put together.

As long as the world is ugly at its core, aesthetics as a specialized activity will never disappear. It is self-evident that specialized criticism, whose conscious or unconscious function is to provide a social base for cultural consumption, continues apace. Those radical cynics who wish to believe that it's all just a series of fads - reducing everything to its least common denominator and themselves victims of the appearance that the commodity is incomprehensible, magic - simply demonstrate that they have even less imagination and know less about living than the cultural specialists whom they feign are beneath contempt. Art, like Dracula, may be dead, but it flies very well nonetheless.

On the limited terrain of cultural production as such, there is an immense quantity of important contemporary phenomena that remain completely unchallenged - to be realistic, completely unnoticed - by radical critique. In the US alone, one could count among these: the rise of country music, the decline of rock 'n' roll, the proliferation of punk rock, development and counterdevelopment in the world of film, and the social nexus of Latino culture.⁸ On the one hand, it's a matter of starting from the premise that culture feeds upon, and puts to work, real proletarian desires. Which are the aspirations that are recognized and manipulated by these cultural forms? In precisely which ways is dissatisfaction

⁸ An excellent contribution to the critique of pop music, as well as a wide ranging discussion of contemporary Britain in general, has recently appeared under the title, *Like a Summer With a Thousand Julys*. It is available from BM Blob, London WCIN 3XX, England. [Obsolete postal address]
[\[http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/archive/local/summersintro.html\]](http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/archive/local/summersintro.html)

integrated and integratable? Beyond this, the question remains as to what the moments of choice for the people who produce and consume these cultural forms are going to be in the next few years. Narrowly, under what conditions can one expect the direct producers of these cultural forms to recognize and turn against the alienation inherent in their activities? More broadly, under what conditions will the consumers leave in the dust, or even directly attack, the cultural spectacle? The riotous activities of English youth, who *put into practice* the calls for "burning and looting" with which both reggae and punk had teased and manipulated them for years, have offered one of the clearest recent outlines of answers to the latter of these issues.

**A few recent developments in the movement
to suppress the global commodity economy** 6

In the period preceding 1968, social opposition was presented in the spectacle as an aberration, the product of local exoticisms. To round out this self-fulfilling prophecy, the spectacle depicted as universal models precisely those revolts, uprisings and coups most dominated by archaic conditions and ideologies. Though this tried-and-true method has lost its monopoly on the image of revolution, it remains, for all its crudeness, one of the most powerful weapons in the eulogy of existing conditions. The tremendous *prestige* of a "successful revolution" eclipses the memory and lessons of less durable but *more profound* social experiments,⁹ making it appear that all possibilities have already been tried, and making it forgotten that all "successful revolutions" to date have only supplanted one hierarchy with a

⁹ It also tends to foster a delirium in which relative sobriety goes all to hell. The revolution in Iran, for instance, saw countless left-of-Leninist revolutionaries blackening thousands of pages in misplaced ecstasy. Someone like Ken Knabb could even see in Iran "the most beautiful event since the Hungarian Revolution." After a dozen-odd years as a Situationist, Knabb has got to know better than to separate the actions of rebels from the consciousness with which they operate. Yet, in isolated desperation, Knabb fetishizes the Iranians' methods while willfully ignoring their goals.

new one.

This form of reasoning continues to dominate the consciousness of the vast majority of those Americans who consider themselves revolutionary, and to dominate public debate on the issue. It is not sufficient to recall, in criticism of such myopia, those historical examples of proletarian revolt which in a previous epoch went further; such examples appeared, to be sure, but they *were not adequate either*. That they were *more* adequate has for the most part become the raw material for a sophisticated *academicism*; such a reliance on the past always tends towards the presentation as an *absolute truth* of that which was simply better.

The more lucid analysts of the Western press - predominantly European - have at least recognized that a multitude of oppositional movements have developed in the last few years, in various areas of the world, that go beyond and view with contempt the traditional false categories of revolution, especially the antagonism capitalism vs. Stalinism. The few Americans among these journalists do have one advantage over the vast majority of American oppositionists: these journalists, if only on the level of straightforward reportage, know of and speak of opposition that does not simply feed the ideological mill. Yet what they share with the radical mob is the notion that it is all still a foreign exoticism; better informed since for the journalists it's not only a matter of the "Third World," but remaining on the touristic level where, for example, a magazine such as the *National Geographic* can present social contestation in West Berlin as one of the principal cultural enticements for the sophisticated traveller. By far the most visible response to the reportage of radical events and currents overseas is a new type of tourist, who, despairing of making a difference in the class struggle in his own locale, chooses one or another of the more volatile areas in the world to visit under the largely self-illusory pretense of, in descending order of practicality, learning something, participating in a revolt, or showing this or that foreign proletariat what's what. The pattern comes full circle when such people return home as

specialists of foreign affairs; some of the more ambitious even become . . . journalists.

The American economy has been able not only to absorb a large segment of marginalized persons as capitalists and workers, but also to allow room for the expansion of marginal enterprise. Primarily for this reason, but also for others, the marginal stratum of American society is as an ensemble the most conservative national grouping of declassed persons in the advanced Western countries. The contempt felt by its European counterparts for the United States, including for the legacy of what is frequently termed "American hippies," is on the whole justified. Granted, this contempt is often founded on illusory and ideological bases; the resignation of the Europeans is frequently simply less *visible* and less *concentrated* than that of the Americans they despise. Nonetheless, their contempt has an overriding objective basis whose validity as a criterion of judgment is indisputable: in the United States in the last ten (at least) years, the *best* of serious social contestation has been limited to a few isolated incidents, which, though often very exemplary in themselves (the 1979 gay riot in San Francisco and the 1980 potlatch in Miami come to mind), have provided almost no continuity, geographic proliferation at the moment of confrontation, or even irrevocable development which would at least begin to clear away various archaic ideologies and representations. On the other hand, in numerous countries, mostly in Europe, marginalized people and others have begun to take concerted steps which, for all their hesitations, weaknesses and bullshit, can be credibly recognized as the beginnings of a movement or movements.

One of the first, and in terms of explicit radical consciousness one of the best, developments in the Seventies of practical opposition on the part of principally marginalized individuals took place in Italy in 1977-8. At its height it was able to call at least 50,000 against the government *and* the Communist Party. At one stage in 1978, a thousand-odd radicals at Rome University - and not only students - engaged in pitched battles against, *at the same time*, Communist Party hacks and the police. The

organized "ultra-left" (extra-parliamentary left), swamped by contradictions stemming from the fact that the movement had left it behind, was thrown into complete disarray.

Within weeks of the initial skirmishes in Rome in early 1977, the movement spread to numerous cities in the north. Demonstrations frequently became riots (often, but not always, in the wake of police provocation); in some cases, the pretext of a protest march was dispensed with altogether. Businesses, cafes, hotels, offices of political parties were damaged, looted or destroyed. Even reporters were impressed by the degree of self-organization of the rebels, reflected both in the systematic execution of widespread destruction and in the ability to gather thousands at short notice.

"The 'movement' declares itself 'autonomous': it doesn't accept any 'mediation' and asserts that it is independent of all organized forces. 'It is not a student movement. It's a movement of struggle uniting workers, feminists and the unemployed.' In 1977, unlike the 'Italian May,' no powerful leader has emerged. 'We refuse all delegation of authority,' insists one rebel"

(Le Monde, March 14, 1977).

With the Communist Party forced into a position of actively supporting repression, a temporary void in the organized counter-revolution appeared. This void was filled by the terrorist groups, principally the Red Brigades. The terrorists at first appeared, even to many serious rebels, as embodying a critique from the left, in calling for the extension of sporadic armed acts that had developed from the movement (several gun shops were looted; some police were disarmed at gunpoint; the celebrated tactic of "kneecapping" was largely developed by "unorganized" revolutionaries). It soon became apparent, however, that these spontaneous acts

based on the needs of the immediate situation were not being extended, but rather turned into ritual by the Red Brigades and their ilk. The new specialists of revolution seized the initiative from the movement only to turn it over, in short order, to the State. Terrorism, which sees revolution as being conducted according to the rules of classical war, denies revolutionaries their basic weapon: the ability to *determine their own forms* of contestation. The creativity with which, for example, the "Metropolitan Indians" were able to reduce their enemies (notably unionist and other Stalinist bureaucrats) to ridicule, is rendered obsolete when each battle is treated as though it were the final one. Terrorism ends up creating *within* regional areas the same conditions of conservatism and nationalism that is initiated by international wars. Supported by an outraged public opinion, trumped up by the political parties, by neo-fascist bombings attributed to the left, and above all by the Italian press, the Italian police unleashed a wholesale repression which saw thousands arrested (few of them terrorists) and many more very successfully intimidated.

One of the most fundamental things understood by the largely marginal persons who gave the Italian situation its initial impetus was the need to unite their struggles with those of the workers, the latter having shown in the preceding years an exemplary militancy and sophistication in battles of their own. During '77 and into '78, tens of thousands of Italian workers were involved in open struggle, here with, there without deliberate co-ordination with the activities of more marginal persons. The workers' creativity often matched that of the best of the marginals. Absenteeism, so often limited elsewhere to an impotent abstentionism, became a conscious and developed weapon: the absent workers frequently used their stolen time, not as an end in itself, but as a means by which they could develop struggles outside the workplace. The level of shop-floor organization and resistance was remarkable. Perhaps the most important social function of the Red Brigades was the wedge that it restored to the State to drive into the developing collaboration between workers and marginals. It provided the

State with the image that violent revolt had specifically marginal goals and interests, separate from those of the proletariat as a whole.

The opposition which developed in Switzerland in 1980-1 took up much of the best of the previous Italian situation. Rejecting almost from the start the notion that a dialogue with Power was possible, and equally rejecting the notion that revolt must justify itself, the Swiss movement quickly went beyond the issue that triggered it: State denial of a subsidized cultural/youth center in Zurich free of external control. (Those proto-bureaucrats who persisted in presenting proposals and reforms of proposals for a mutually acceptable compromise were rapidly seen as being conservative and generally out of it). The refusal of the Swiss government to grant "free space" to alienated youth was taken for what it was on the broadest level: an act of contempt on the part of the particularly stodgy Swiss ruling class for the desire of Swiss youth to *live differently*. What was treated as contemptible was in fact the alienation of these youth that the Swiss bourgeoisie had created in the first place, and above all the fact that young people had the nerve to express this alienation publicly.

Within the Swiss movement, various traditional marginal ideologies, principally economic and cultural alternatives within the existing system, seemed to be at least tolerated if not actively supported by many of the rebels. On the other hand the degree of bitterness and despair reached a remarkable, if not decisive, level. One of the most significant ideologies that emerged stemmed from the violence of the movement itself: the ideology of street fighting as an end in itself. Yet this ideology, precisely because the initiative remains with the rebels, must correct itself rather quickly or else disappear: either new forms of contestation will appear or police repression will eliminate it perforce. On the whole it outlines a positive direction; it polarizes things each time it is deployed.

Rejecting almost from the start the notion that a dialogue with Power was possible, and equally rejecting the notion that revolt must justify itself, the Swiss movement quickly went beyond the issue that triggered it.

A noteworthy tendency among Swiss youth is their international consciousness. One of the most positive proletarian actions in the last few years was the spontaneous riot in Zurich in response to the death in battle (September '81) of a young *West German in Berlin*.

The movement of Swiss youth was in no way comparable to the Italian on the level of co-ordination and contact with more mainstream workers. The beginnings of such a solidarity were, however, outlined when an assembly of young rebels passed a resolution in support of striking newspaper printers, and followed up their decision by seeking out and burning scab-printed papers some ten days later (December 1, '1981).

Though less a matter of a self-organized and self-conscious movement than the Swiss, the social opposition that appeared in Britain in 1981 was no less ruthless in dispatching a long antiquated image of national tranquility and polite tolerance for misery. While the initial skirmishes in Brixton (April) were triggered by a racial incident, it became obvious to all, including the authorities and the press, that the violence of the ensuing months put into question a great deal more than the long-standing tradition of British racism, brutal and obnoxious as that racism is. By early July, thousands of white youths had joined their black peers in rioting, looting, burning, and street battles with police.

The Laborites and the leftists quickly promoted the self-serving notion of unemployment as the root cause of the outbreaks. This wore thin rapidly: burning and looting are not economic acts; they are anti-economic. Tory Home

Secretary William Whitelaw pointed out, in deploring the riots, that "If we are going to attract jobs and give people hope, the image of the area is crucially important." The demand for employment was destroyed right along with the image; not hope for scraps, but a despair of living; not work and its constraints, but the pleasure of destruction became the order of the day.

Everywhere the playfulness of the rioters was attested to: "Chief Constable [Liverpool] Oxford said the rioters ranged in age from 12 to the early 20s. He said the younger ones regarded the violence as a 'huge joke' "(*San Francisco Chronicle*, 07/06/1981). "Toddlers 4 or 5 pushed supermarket shopping carts laden with goods" (*San Francisco Examiner*, 07/06/1981). A Wimpy bar manager said: "It is not racial, just pure hooliganism. They want excitement and they want to destroy things. They are not short of money" (*New Standard*, London, 07/08/81). In Toxteth, rioters played "dodgems" with stolen cars. In a more extensive subversion of modern transport, a small cavalry of youths on motorbikes and scooters invaded the resort town of Keswick, systematically looting and destroying.

Throughout the period of the revolts, a great deal was made by the press and by officials of the influence of television on the rebels. Though doubtless the spectacular publicity of an outbreak in one area started young people elsewhere thinking about their own situation in very immediate terms - in all some fifty distinct areas were affected, from urban ghettos to country towns, throughout England and as far north as Dundee, Scotland - the underlying notion behind this explanation was a pathetic sociological analysis along the lines of "too much violence on t.v." At least one incident in Toxteth (Liverpool) indicated a radically different attitude on the part of riot participants towards the media: "Youths armed with axe handles attacked a British Broadcasting Corporation film crew, injuring at least one crewman and stealing at least \$23,000 worth of photographic equipment, a BBC spokesman said" (*Chronicle*, 07/08/1981).

Unlike the situation in Northern Ireland, the British struggles were advanced from the outset precisely because of the absence of external issues. It was discovered that revolution is the most exciting activity available, and also the most appropriate response to boredom and alienation.

The common denominator of all the "Whys?" finally came down to boredom, frustration and alienation. Maggie Thatcher, and numerous others, of course assumed that such an explanation would carry a pejorative connotation. On the contrary, it was the very lack of a "cause" that gave the revolts their inspiration and momentum. Unlike the situation in Northern Ireland, hopelessly bogged down in nationalist and religious ideologies, the British struggles were advanced from the outset precisely because of the absence of external issues. It was discovered that revolution is the *most exciting* activity available, and also the most *appropriate* response to boredom and alienation, in that it directly attacks their social bases. Thatcher's plea for a return to law and order in the name of "civilization" - recalling the words of another atrocious female who ruled in London a century ago - only added, in its contempt, fuel to the fire.

A few weeks of riots accomplished more in the British class struggle than sixty years of Labor politics. The riots demolished not only the image of the friendly police (two of whom were stabbed by youths in August), but also smashed through that quintessentially British polite veneer of life, the etiquette that has for so long bound working class Britons to tradition and authority far out of proportion to their objective social position. When various cretins in power decry the lack of parental control over the rioters, and the general breakdown of the family, they reveal by contrast their fear that the British workers *will be educated by their children*. Clearly, the anger and spirit of British youth has gone beyond trade unionism, no matter how militant, and has also swatted away the flies of leftism and "community organiz-

ation." The only prospective "responsible leaders" to make any real headway out of the events of '81 were a handful of black bigshots who came up with for the most part strictly segregated groups of black boy scouts, pathetic in their numbers, to support patently reformist schemes for community control of police, replacement of existing police chiefs with new, more "human" ones, job-training schemes and so forth, in the name of "defense committees" or what have you. Though still far from reaching the point of any significant and durable self-organization, strategy or theoretical orientation, British youth have given would-be Leftist manipulators even shorter shrift. In a particularly exemplary action, a number of Toxteth youths shouted down Trotskyist Claire Doyle's plea, at a "community" meeting, for (doubtless Trotskyist-led) "street defense committees," with the response "We will organize ourselves" (*New Standard*, 07/07/1981). According to a first hand report, she was further silenced by the repeated chorus, "Bigger cages, longer chains."

Against all pleas for moderation, hope ("hope is the leash of submission") and deliberately vague (because empty) promises for the future, British youth have made the minimal but essential first qualitative leap: they have attained the consciousness of their own power. Social contestation in West Germany and Holland, though much more continuous and long-standing, has shown less of the healthy distrust and disgust for respectable causes than has the British. The most important tendencies in both countries have been the respective squatters movements, whose directness and concreteness have placed their participants in conflict with the authorities with little reformist or bureaucratic mediation. However, a rash of demonstrations and protests whose numerical weight has generally been in inverse proportion to their subversive content - centering for the most part around disarmament, peace, ecology, anti-nuclear everything and U.S. involvement in El Salvador - has largely overshadowed the squatters to the point where the latter sometimes appear as mere adjuncts to a generalized reformist turmoil. The squatters themselves have to a

degree supported this appearance: indirectly, by failing to polarize the non-leftist content of their struggles, and directly, by participating in events staged in pursuit of the stale spectacle of polite opposition. Within the squatters' ranks, there have developed various forms of compromise, ranging from agreements with landlords to a semi-professional corps of persons whose gratis presence is tolerated while they renovate run-down buildings and then move on. Contrariwise, there are doubtless thousands of people uninvolved in squatting whose activities are far more intelligent than those of the squatters' right wing. Throughout Germany and Holland, contempt for the most excessive symptoms of leftism - dogmatism, manipulation, Stalinists - runs quite high, and is opposed by a widespread, rudimentary democratic practice. Yet for the most part the goals remain murky at best and often non-existent.

The worst of the internationalist tendencies in the Dutch and German situations consists in a parochial interest, appropriately heavily influenced by respective Socialist Parties (their Swiss and other national counterparts have itchy fingers for this pie as well), defined largely by Cold War repercussions. The naive anti-imperialism which combines protest of US action in El Salvador with a general anti-Americanism reinforces a social climate whose rallying point is moral indignation and whose unifying element is an extended, Euronationalism. Even the best of the internationalist tendencies - communication on all levels (text, phone, visit) among squatters in various countries - has largely remained on the level of information and instruction in specialized *techniques*.

* * *

The weight given above to various struggles is not necessarily reflective of their relative objective development or importance. In part, it is a matter of the availability of information, through the press and through international

contacts. I can say with certainty that, in addition to the locales already discussed, incidents or struggles with a definite proletarian content have taken place in the last few years in Copenhagen, Spain, China, South Korea and Argentina. There are undoubtedly numerous other important developments that simply haven't come to my attention. And beyond these, there are of course those areas of the world where ideological currents have so dominated struggle that any proletarian content has only ended up going to the profit of those ideologies and their masters (Portugal and Iran are only the most striking examples).

* * *

Two countries - Poland and South Africa - have stood far above all the rest in the last five years as the most developed centers of proletarian subversion. The criteria that distinguish them from the others are simple: revolution has become *the* central social issue in both countries, and revolt is not limited to any particular sector of the proletariat.

The situation in Poland has already been so well publicized and so widely discussed in all manners of forms - in the press and the media, in pamphlets, periodicals and books - that, in spite of the rampant falsification and omission that characterizes most of the commentary, a relatively clear picture of the social nexus and moments of choice in the Polish struggle are reasonably accessible to almost anyone, at least in the West, and to virtually anyone who is going to read the present text. Thus, in spite of the gigantic objective importance of the recent Polish developments, discussion here will be limited to the lesser known and understood of the two current centers of international subversion: South Africa.

The South African insurrections of 1980, virtually across the board, marked advances and extensions of the positions of '76, of the consciousness of the rebels and of the forms of struggle deployed in the assault on the South African State.

The South African "Soweto student revolt" of 1976 - which in any case was not limited to Soweto, students or 1976 - is fairly widely known and recognized, to the point where it has attained, in widely disparate circles, the status of a landmark in international revolution, and is spoken of with all the reverence and due spirit of holy affirmation appropriate to all the latter-day gurus of the left.¹⁰ What is truly remarkable is not the affirmation of '76, but the fact that, for whatever reasons, the bourgeois press has enjoyed a quasi-total monopoly in discussing subsequent South African developments, notably the insurrections of 1980 which, virtually across the board, marked *advances* and *extensions* of the positions of '76, of the consciousness of the rebels and of the forms of struggle deployed in the assault on the South African State.

Whereas one of the first issues confronted in 1976 was the relation of the so-called "Asians" (people predominantly of Indian descent) and "coloureds" (people of mixed race, often of Malay descent) to the rebellion of "Africans," the events of 1980 *began* among one of the social groups previously considered to be of dubious loyalty: the coloureds, who "enjoy" a marginally superior position in the South African hierarchy vis-a-vis the people of native African descent. The initial skirmishes took the form of a strike by

¹⁰ There is an obvious falsification involved in the left's efforts to present '76 as compatible with their own goals and methods. This has been discussed extensively in the pamphlet, "Reflections on the Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Revolution", available from me.

coloured students in the Cape Province, in protest of the huge disparity between the money spent on their schools and that spent for the education of whites. Many Indians quickly took up the struggle, which earned them a massive repression in their townships; the "Africans," though apparently suspicious at first, soon became involved to the point where, in most areas, they were the principal combatants. That which in the 1970's had been a key issue of theoretical struggle on the part of the partisans of "Black Consciousness" - namely, the reorientation of all non-white people towards a positive and unified self-definition as *black* - became a practical banality, no longer a goal but a point of departure.¹¹

In the social tumult of 1976-77, contestation in South Africa was largely confined, perforce, to black areas. It is shortsighted and in fact racist to maintain that the struggles of this earlier period were limited to "symbolic" gestures against the dominant society; there is nothing symbolic about the social function of South African township beer halls, golf courses, schools, stores, houses of sell-outs or police stations (all of which and more were attacked in that period). The acts so callously described by white assholes as "preying on their own kind" demonstrated above all the *class* consciousness of the rebels; what was combatted was not, as the conservative whites would like to believe, purely racial inequities, but the social system based on the domination of commodities, which flourishes in South Africa *by means of* racial divisions.

However, the strategic necessity of attacking the society on the enemy's terrain remains, and it was just here that the rebellion of 1980 saw its first decisive leap. In late May, some 3,000 coloured people, mostly young, staged a sit-down protest in the heart of downtown Cape Town; which predictably became, given the mentality of the South African police, a street battle between protestors and cops. Before the tumult had subsided several months later, one

¹¹ Thus when I speak of "blacks" I mean not only people of native African descent, which is the definition put forward by the National Party in order to play one group off against the others, but "Africans," "coloureds" and "Asians."

had also seen the burning of a building in Bellville (white, though formerly coloured, suburb of Cape Town), an act which went a long way in promoting a generalized feeling of siege among whites in the traditionally "liberal" southern port-resort.

Whereas in 1976-77, a nascent black bureaucracy - the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) - was in part able to dominate and mediate the activities of South African rebels with a certain credibility, in 1980 the nascent student leadership was forced to retreat into the woodwork at a fairly early stage. In early June, the initial organization of coloured student leaders (the "Committee of 81," centered in the Western Cape), openly dissolved itself: "The students Committee of 81, which coordinated the boycott, said the protest was not having any effect and urged a return to classrooms" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 06/06/1980). Whether it was a matter here of chickening out, or whether it was a matter of tactically recognizing that to continue would only invite State repression, is academic. The practical point is that the situation itself had no place for this committee; far from flagging at this point, the student strike continued to grow, and the effects provided by its initial impetus spread throughout black society, both geographically and in the extension of the struggle far beyond the student terrain.

The attempts of the African National Congress (ANC) to interject its own careerist leadership aspirations into the struggle were even more ineffectual. Long since left without a practical power base within the country, the ANC has survived as a strictly exile organization, largely through the support of Moscow (lacking such support, the Pan-Africanist Congress and other exile splinter groups exist today mostly in name only). The ANC's notorious recruitment policies in southern Africa among exiles fresh out of the townships at home has little to do with its ideology as a classic Leninist-nationalist "liberation organization" (an ideology completely inappropriate to South Africa's developed economy and *modern proletariat*, and whose tactical orientation is frankly idiotic). The ANC has rather induced a fair number of exiles into obeisance simply

because many exiles have nowhere else to go in order to survive. For those in the organization's camps who begin to doubt the promise of a glorious return, a ruthless military discipline is deployed to keep them quiet (in this regard, the Stalinists of the ANC are the worthy heirs of the National Party, which had its origins in the explicitly *anti-imperialist* Afrikaner movement of the '20s).

When, on June 1, 1980, ANC commandos bombed two South African oil refineries, they generated a lot of press, and doubtless a fair amount of fear on the part of whites and an equally fair amount of passive approval on the part of blacks. The course of the struggle was perhaps momentarily stalled while everyone pondered what came next, but simply continued from its own momentum and development, with the fireworks eclipsed from memory, if not forgotten.

Only the *authorities* maintained the posture that the struggles that developed were the work of professionals or "outside agitators," whether communist or even American (!) inspired. This was as predictable as the labeling of rioters as "criminal elements," a simple reflex on the part of Power which knows well the degree of hatred and bitterness felt by the majority of South African blacks, but which must nonetheless feed the mill of deliberate self-delusion on the part of the majority of South African whites. One reformist member of Parliament, Dr. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, was more candid: "The police find themselves in an almost impossible situation. They have to maintain law and order and prevent anarchy and looting in a community that finds itself in a political vacuum" (*Chronicle*, 06/19/1980).

In the period from May through July, the following exemplary acts had taken place in South Africa:

- A black adult who addressed a meeting of student strikers, seeking to convince the students to call off their boycott, was stoned to death in Port Elizabeth.
- A white cop was stabbed to death in the township of Elsies River, outside Cape Town.
- A black cop was set afire in Bloemfontein.
- A cop was stabbed in the Onverwacht township near Bloemfontein after a police station was overrun by blacks.

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The crowd of 600 wrapped up the evening looting stores and burning cars.

- June 16, the anniversary of the beginning of the uprising of '76, was marked by a very successful worker stay-away in the Cape Town area, and by huge gatherings of people in the Cape Flats townships, in spite of a police ban on meetings of ten or more persons. By the 18th, the Cape Flats were a battle zone. At least forty-two and perhaps as many as sixty persons were shot to death by police, with hundreds injured, mostly by bullets. Countless businesses were looted and/or burned; several schools and at least two factories were torched; roads were barricaded, at one point cutting off Malan airport from Cape Town, and passing vehicles were destroyed. Needless to say, fire crews, police and whites in general were not well received in these areas.

- Simultaneous to the warfare in the Cape Flats, a strike wave broke out in Eastern Cape cities, notably Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage, centers of South Africa's auto industry. Beginning at the Volkswagen factory and spreading eventually to about a dozen other plants, black workers demanding a 70 percent wage increase and other concessions bypassed the official union structure (which immediately called for a return to work). In a remarkable show of solidarity, workers stayed out for three weeks until their demands were largely met, in spite of having foreign-based strike funds cut off by the government. The South African Army was called in to protect plants in Uitenhage; on several occasions police used dogs, tear gas and buckshot to break up groups of strikers near their workplaces.

It should be noted that the student boycott continued for months after the major incidents of May-July; a large number of students simply never bothered to go back to school at all.

The decisive involvement of workers in the South African struggle, an involvement which has increased in importance since 1980, clearly has South Africa's rulers very worried indeed, as shown for example by the emphasis given by the Security Police in the past two years to curtailing the activities of black unionists and other radical

workers. When in early 1982 a young white unionist, Dr. Neil Aggett, died while in police detention, some thirty to forty thousand black workers immediately staged a brief work stoppage in protest. Far from being a matter of a softening attitude among blacks towards the typical forms of white opposition - almost invariably feeble expressions of a guilty conscience at having their way of life so *obviously* based on the victimization of blacks - this action should rather be seen as one more example of the developing consciousness among black workers of the class nature of their oppression, and of their struggle.

As in the case of the Stalinist bloc, one cannot judge unions in the South African context with the same criteria as one does the union rackets in the industrially developed West (with the obvious exception that the official unions maintained by the government in selected industries, run mostly by whites and always for whites, richly deserve such contempt). The new "autonomous" black unions in South Africa have, rather, a much less clearly defined role in the class battle array. Though they tend to center their activities on reformist issues, many of their apparently reformist demands are at least implicit attacks on the entire social structure. Demands which often call for doubling or even trebling wages, for instance, challenge the foundation of cheap labor without which white South Africa and its modern economy could not survive. Almost invariably, strikes focus, at least in part, on racial restrictions in job availability which keep black workers largely in unskilled and therefore replaceable positions. Black workers, moreover, are clearly aware that much more is at stake in each skirmish than a few motley reforms, which is doubtless the main reason that most who become involved pay attention in the first place. Further, the union form is frequently the only available means by which black workers can more or less openly take a political stand, serving as a *de facto* forum of proletarian expression as well as an albeit thin buffer of protection that makes united action possible.

On the other hand, the new South African unions present possibilities for a new conservatism. The problem, or

potential for problems, lies not so much in the likelihood of the solidification of union hierarchies, for the government can be expected to remove from circulation any individuals who stand out as too effective, powerful or popular (as the Aggett case showed, not even whites are exempt from this). Rather, the possible source of the creation of a certain social equilibrium which, even if temporary, can only work to the profit of the system - posed by the unions consists in the fact that the very form of struggle they promote could tend to mediate and circumscribe the struggles of the most industrialized sector of the South African proletariat. As with any labor union, the tension always exists between "realistic" demands and ultimate goals; between the immediate situation of the organized segment of the workers and the interests of the working class as a whole; in short, whether the union becomes something to protect and conserve, its existence secured at the price of moderation, of limiting the scope of its actions and concerns to more or less classical industrial action, however "militant." It is worth noting in this context that a certain "enlightened" sector of South African capital wants to see black unions gain legal status, preferring to deal with a predictable organization rather than an "anarchic" assembly of workers. Largely due to pressure from this sector, unions in many areas have been granted a *de facto* legal existence, and in a few cases are recognized as parties to labor contracts.

There is admittedly a great deal that mitigates against the black unions becoming petrified institutions, above and beyond governmental resistance. The massive reserve labor pool in South Africa, bolstered by the atrocious "homelands" scheme of the government, makes the withholding of one's labor a very tenuous weapon. It is entirely possible, often probable, for the government to simply fire the workers of entire industries, ship them wholesale to the home lands (in the case of "Africans"), and bus in from the homelands or elsewhere new recruits who are likely to be unaware of the entire situation (as was done, for example, in the 1980 strike of Johannesburg transport workers). Further, the efforts of the government to more explicitly stratify

nascent class divisions within the black population are well known and understood: any sort of development of an "aristocracy of labor" is bound to be seen as playing into the hands of the whites, selling one's soul for the altogether dubious "privilege" of slightly better pay and permanent residence in urban townships. Finally, any sort of credence given by whites to unions - even (if not especially) by liberal whites who would of course like to see issues of black and white obscured by a nice Western style union organizing drive in which they or at least their children could play a modest part - only leads to the question, "What are we doing wrong?"

Developments in South Africa overwhelm all accounting. That which would cause headlines in most countries is often, in South Africa, so commonplace that it scarcely qualifies as news.

South Africa today is the most clearly polarized country in the world. Not only is society divided into two parts, but those who know they must do away with the system, though their methods are very understandably unclear, have fewer illusions about their situation than do their counterparts anywhere else. Why do South African blacks, to take our one example, refuse, with violence if possible, to occupy the new, "improved" townships that the government so generously offers from time to time? Because they know that every reform is repaid a thousand times over in that fundamental currency, social control. In spite of often the direst material poverty, the inflation rate that commands foremost attention is the rate of humiliation.

"South Africa: a world in one country," touts a Johannesburg tourist calendar. South Africa reveals not the excesses of global Power, but its naked and brutal truth. Liberalism and Stalinism, the two principal forms of geopolitical domination, fuse, in South Africa, into one, permeating each other and together the society, they reveal their common rotten core. Bureaucrats in power world-wide wish that South Africa would fall into the Indian Ocean. Short of a proletarian revolution elsewhere - always the essential form of international solidarity - South African rebels can in the

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foreseeable future expect no appreciable assistance from outside, least of all from the "front line" southern African States supposedly hostile to their southern neighbor but in fact dominated by its economy. It is rather the South African proletariat that is showing the world the pathway towards progress. And progress for them can only mean continuing the adventure of total negativity; doubting everything and enforcing this doubt; forgiving nothing and forgetting even less. Those who are officially the most unskilled are today at the forefront of the struggle to make specialization obsolete.

All this world is like a ghetto called Soweto.