

A Day In The Life

Fellow Workers as Cops, Guards & Censors

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A friend and I, one recent evening, stroll into the Oak Park Community Center. Sundry activities are taking place, bridge-playing, music groups, etc. We're not there 60 seconds when this guy—janitor, custodian or whoever he was—barges up with the cop-like "CAN I HELP YOU FELLAS?" At first, but eyeing the man, my friend tells him that, since it's a public place, we're simply looking around. The worker takes on an increasing anxiety, as though wondering who we are, what we're up to. Like maybe we'll steal the building! Or rape the females! (even though most, that evening, were there taking karate lessons).

Noting the worker's anxiety, my friend, quite Gandhi-like, tells him he is a bit too mistrustful of strangers, plus hung up on rules and regulations—to the level of being a robot. Well, "robot" is all the guy had to hear! During what he undoubtedly considered an "argument," hence threat, he must have signaled one of the other robots—I mean workers—to call the cops. 'Cause there the boys in blue were! Coming in from the other end of that long hallway!

My friend and I had to make a quick decision—either try reasoning with the cops as we were trying to do with this self-appointed guard, or get the hell out of the place. We chose the latter, since it wasn't a major issue (like no more nukes).

No, no major issue. But I don't reckon a minor one either. Certainly symbolic of something—this phenomenon of ordinary workers as "guards," "cops," and calling the real cops at the drop of a hat. It's a phenomenon seemingly non-stop. Just yesterday I'm at the Wayne State University McGregor Bldg. inquiring about renting there a room to put on a play. The young woman—no supervisor, just "reservation clerk"—informs me of the different prices. I thank her and am about to walk out when I hear, "Even if we rent you a room, WE'D FIRST HAVE TO CHECK OVER THE PLAY YOU'RE PUTTING ON!"

Yes, the worker as cop, guard and now censor. Anything else? And notice her using "we"—this complete, absolute identification with authority! As though this weren't enough for one day, when I walk back to my car I find the meter maid about to ticket me. I rush over, pleading with her that, since the ticket isn't yet written, to give me—just this one time—a break! No use. Her heart is harder than Pharaoh's when he refused to let the Israelites go.

Why this phenomenon! Why is it that working people, those that confront the public, are not infrequently "cops," 2-bit Hitlers! And the lower the job-status, ironic as it may sound, the more the 2-bit Hitlerism. Like the maintenance crew on the WSU campus. Two out of three act like they own the place, like it's their private domain, bugging a student or passerby on where he's going, telling persons when or if they could pin up a flyer.

Not enough the campus police. We likewise have these unofficial, self-appointed ones! (One time, at the Student Center Building duplicating office, I'm paying for my xerox-order and about to walk out when the janitor, having glimpsed my "porn" material, becomes menacing. With it happening again, I had to tell the SCB supervisor to keep this creep off my back!)

But why all this? Karl Marx, Erich Fromm and other theorists say that workers in capitalist society are alienated, that they don't own the place they work in, hence, have no real interest in it. True enough. But if they don't own the place, why are they often acting like it!

Well, they're undoubtedly looking out for their jobs, their bread & butter. As that worker in Oak Park was telling my friend, "If I lose this job, could you find me another one?" So, they become rule-happy (most likely never having heard of Henry Thoreau's, "Any fool can make a rule and any Fool can mind it."). They become little Hitlers, little Eichmanns, little Stalins.

Yet off the job they're suddenly human! And one wonders how these same humans can so quickly, on the job, become unfeeling, heart-hardened robots. One further wonders if the current 10 million without jobs is a curse or blessing. These 10 million, after all, are no longer oppressing or badgering anybody—at least routinely—no longer the self-appointed cops, guards, censors, even if they'd like to be. Like their fangs have been pulled.

Suppose everybody would be out of work—and production as we know it no more. It is pictured we'd have barbarism, everybody scrounging for what they could dig up with their bare hands! Maybe so. Yet on another level, wouldn't complete unemployment be complete humanization? To wit, no more robotization! Which is worse, running wild and scrounging for food & shelter, or ensconced in a secure little job, little economic niche and, in jealously guarding it, becoming a little Fuhrer, little Ayatollah!

I have no easy answer. I do know it's not the best of feelings being bossed by people who aren't even bosses! Policed by people who aren't even police! Hitlerized by people who aren't even Hitler! Though they are 2-bit ones. Yes, the Gestapo is alive and well. Just walk into any public building. These liliputians act like it's theirs! Or walk into a restaurant. Often as not, is the waiter or waitress a professional appetite killer? That's when you order something. And better order. Better not sit down to simply meditate or write a poem. You're then "loitering"—and sooner or later, by the waiter-turned-cop, told to be on your way, when not driven out.

At Lincoln Center, Oak Park, is a drugstore once called Cunningham, now Apex, the name-change to avoid dealing with the union. In front of the place, the past 4 months, is a small picket line. I don't cross picket lines, small or large. I do, from time-to-time, chat with those carrying the signs. I'm constantly amazed how human and down-to-earth they are, joking, carefree. They're a hardy bunch, on the line rain or shine! I often tell them I wish them all the success. But walking away, I'm soon muttering to myself: Success for what! For re-entering the robotization? Re-assuming the liliputianism, the 2-bit Hitlerism?

Like nurses. I won't say they're the worst in this hangup on rules, but them I'd recommend as a case study. Rules? Charts!

Whatever is not on their chart, no matter how rational, they just won't do! And whatever is on the chart, be it jumping in the Detroit River or whatever, they do! When after I broke my hip and had surgery, a penicillin injector was stuck in the back of my hand, to remain there for five days. Not very comfortable.

I asked the nurses to remove it, and use it only when I'm due for the shot. It was like asking Eichmann to spare the Jews. Undaunted, I asked the doctor. He said I could remove it. I removed it. You should have seen the nurses! Like I broke every one of the Ten Commandments!

Even after I reassured them I had the doc's permission, their anxiety went unabated. Why? Because it wasn't on the chart! Until it got on the Holy Chart, they acted like ships without rudders. But rudder or no, they never let loose of being Javert (of Hugo's *Les Misérables*). One even threatened me with a straightjacket!

When a few months ago the Detroit school teachers were into picket lines, I drove up to one such line and shouted, "HEY, YOU PEOPLE ARE SO DIFFERENT FROM WHEN YOU'RE IN THE CLASSROOM! YOU'RE NOW SO HUMAN!" They grinned.

I don't think they understood me.

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