

The next mutiny on the Bounty

PM

Suburban utopia

At this moment, everyone on the planet is watching the people of the USA and wondering how they are reacting to the present global crisis. For the most “dangerous” working class on this planet is the US working class. When its compliance with capital ends, US capital will collapse, and thereafter, like dominoes, all the secondary capitals. Some of those lesser proletariats seem ready for such an eventuality, are even preparing for the “day after,” expecting the big holiday.

But the US working class is not only potentially dangerous to world capital. If it keeps supporting it actively or passively, there can't be an end to the world's turmoil, destruction, and misery. The key historic question of our age is therefore: why is the US working class not letting go? Why are people still putting up with capital's arrogance and constant demands? What have they got to lose?

Try this: The US proletariat is living in a kind of continental Truman Show, in a consumers' paradise. They're already living in near-paradise, in a state of bliss, in a virtual utopia, beyond, in non-capitalism, in suburbia. And they seem to love it. They're disgustingly happy—or: they think they are. (Which is even worse.) As long as suburbia can exist, or as long as there is at least a believable pretense or realistic hope for it to come true, there can be no change on this planet, just the defense of the status quo with all means. Nobody wants to lose paradise, especially not to crazy terrorists who are willing to die in order to get there.

US suburbia is expensive for capital, but it's the price that world capital has to pay to support its champion and ultimate guarantor of survival, US capital. Since the early eighties, the US trade deficit has been expanding. Foreign capitalists are holding 36 per cent of federal loans, 18 per cent of private loans, and 7 per cent of US stock, all rising.

Even so-called national capitals would rather sacrifice their “own” nations (it's quite obvious that they're doing this already) than give up their subsidies to US capital. It's a strategic investment, well defined, ideologically air-tight, culturally defended by TV soaps, Hollywood productions, commercials, the media in general all over the world. US suburbia is the spiritual homeland, the implicit aspiration, of most inhabitants of this planet, be they in Palestinian refugee camps, Iranian neighborhoods, African or Chinese villages. It's the “regular lifestyle,” maybe even “civilization”. Suburbia is “what we want” and the Americans are already living it for us. The American dream has become the planetary dream. There's no clash of civilizations—sadly.

What is so attractive about the model suburbia? To own land, real soil, not just a flat on the 22nd floor, means that you really belong to the planet, that you are a serious inhabitant of the biosphere. Unfortunately, the suburban lot is too small to actually feed the family—but it conveys at least the idea of it, it signifies symbolic subsistence, virtual independence, a sense of autonomy. The suburban lot is the shrunken version of what free farmland in the west used to be, and it takes all its architectural and ideological connotations from that period of colonial expansion: the white man's home at the frontier. It's not communal land, with all its hassles of sharing, dividing, and the necessary communication. It's land with no strings attached, free land for free owners.

The fact that the banks really own the land by virtue of mortgages, or the employer, by virtue of the interests that can only be paid as long as he pays wages, doesn't diminish its ideological status. The land is virtually free, the idea of individual freedom is still there: this land is your land. You can mow the lawn or not mow the lawn. Here the tired heroes of work can stretch on the grass and enjoy a social moratorium.

The compensatory functions of suburbia within the framework of capitalist production and circulation are obvious. Suburbia did not come into existence as a surprising gift from capital, but it was the result of earlier struggles and defeats of company town workers against factory capital. But suburbia is an extremely costly and ineffective way of reproducing a proletariat. It is even more essential to keep two or three cars running, that are used to link the house with several workplaces, schools, shopping malls, leisure facilities, all kinds of services (doctors, lawyers, veterinarians, nail studios). The suburban layout is the least energy efficient of all known urban structures. Without the car, suburbia would collapse instantly and its symbolic subsistence would unveil itself as an almost total dependence on global macro-systems. Every US president is the champion and father of suburbia and therefore an oil president (particularly so the two Bushes). Without petroleum, suburbia collapses, the US working class deal is off and the road to all kinds of unthinkable alternatives is open. But, "there is no alternative," as Maggie Thatcher pointed out in 1980.

Suburbia was created as the model of paradise—in reality it never worked on its own. Independently from its ecological lack of sustainability, suburbia actually went in crisis for internal reasons right from its start. In spite of all the neo-romantic Hollywood movies, the man on his lot was faced with instant desertion by his wife. The American male's dream was dismantled as a trap of lies, deceptions, and impossible ambitions. The immense boredom of a life between single houses and shopping malls pushes young people into drugs, random violence, gothic and neo-nazi cults, and into acts of amok. At the end of the nineties, suburbia wasn't much more than a cynical joke, a depressed real estate agent's nightmare, or the downfall of gated communities. So, suburbia is clinically dead, but still here, still being maintained physically alive by all kinds of palliative therapies (communitarianism, Prozac, more police, security systems, the mobile phone, etc.). Paradise mustn't die, although fewer people live there and enjoy it less and less.

The camps

For capital, suburbia was meant to be the good weather deal, reserved for the most dangerous proletariat whose loyalty was essential on a global scale, the supervising proletarians. But there has always been a bad weather version of storing and reproducing the working class. This "other" deal we call the "camp" or more appropriately the "lager," for "camp" is derived from Latin "campus," meaning "field" and actually is a euphemism; the German term "lager" is a synonym of "depot, storage" (also of beer) and describes the concept more precisely.

The lager is the original way of keeping proletarians ready for work: the workhouse, the factory-cum-dormitory, prisons, plantations, orphans' homes, etc.

The lager is cheap in all aspects, for the "variable capital" (workers) is stored right on top of the "constant capital" (machines) and the synergetic combination of the two happens on the spot. Whereas suburbia is a form of symbolic subsistence of socially isolated families, the lager is a militarized, hierarchical, authoritarian form of community. The lager working class is brought together and pre-organized by capital itself. Communication between workers and bosses is instantaneous and fast—but also among the workers themselves. Lagers are ecologically very sound, energy efficient, not wasting space and resources. The heating of compact buildings requires little or no fuels at all, no transportation time is lost, cooking in communal kitchens saves food and equipment. All these advantages were essential to keep wages low without necessarily compromising the workers' health and fitness (although historically, they usually were). But there are also costs and risks. Suburbia "rules" itself by pitting the interests of individual units against each other. The lager however requires a professional crew of foremen, supervisors, cooks, doctors, ideologues, and clear formal lines of command.

Although suburbia has become the model lifestyle of the US and the world, there have always been extended areas of "lagers" even there: cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia or Chicago comprise huge housing projects,

neighborhoods of multi-story brownstones, and look more “European.” In a certain way, a city like New York is a refugee camp (or therapy ward) for all those who run away from suburbia.

In times of economic contraction and urgent need for cheap labor, lagers spring up almost spontaneously in manifold forms and shapes. Not only is the US the country of the biggest suburban sprawls, but it’s also the one with the world’s biggest system of lagers, counting more prisoners than the Soviet Union’s Gulag in its worst times. The wars necessary to safeguard suburbia’s petroleum supply have produced refugee camps all over the planet. Living in camps has become a quasi-permanent lifestyle for millions of people. But also, the armies fighting the wars are nothing else than mobile lagers. (Mental) hospitals, old people’s homes, trailer parks, institutions for the young, the handicapped, the “socially misadapted” etc. are created, whenever cheap storage of problematic or rebellious groups of the population is required.

As the official utopia of capital is suburbia, and historically camps were mostly used for repression and extermination, the lager has a bad name. But the idea of communal life itself on a lager scale (500 to 1000 persons) is actually not unattractive, depending on the conditions and the way such a community is run. Considering the current density of population of the planet, some form of communal or “lager” life is in fact the only sustainable option.

Even today the charm of lager-life takes on many different forms: holiday resorts, cruise ships, scout camps, summer camps, camp sites, open-air concerts, etc. The horrors of the death camps could not deter the Jewish survivors from organizing their own utopian lagers, the kibbutzim. (Unfortunately, at the expense of the native population.) Conviviality, spring swings, fall festivals, picnics, mass orgies, promiscuity, ecstasy: all these are human desires, utopian dreams or compensatory factors.

The lager itself, its architectural layout, isn’t repressive as such, it’s the rules and the authoritarian misuse that can turn it into a nightmare. It’s exactly because of their liberating potential that authoritarian lagers can’t exist without some form of death penalty. Terror and utopia always appear together.

In Europe, there’s a trend to return from the dull suburbs into the old downtown areas and into bigger buildings. One of the surprising differences between Europe and the US is the duration of vacations: 5–6 weeks, fully paid. These vacations are typically spent in “pleasure-lagers” around the Mediterranean, on the Canaries, or in Thailand, Bali, Cuba etc.

But, the authoritarian lager (be it fascist or Stalinist) has proved to be as unsustainable as individualistic suburbia. Without “external” subsidies from global exploitation, both systems must fail. Whereas these subsidies flowed and still flow to US suburbia, the Stalinist lager-economy choked on its own entropy. The obvious solution—combining real subsistence and self-governed communal housing—however would contradict capitalist organization, in fact make it superfluous. Suburbia and authoritarian lagers are as unsustainable as capitalism itself.

The mutiny on the Bounty

The mutiny on the Bounty in 1790 was an insignificant incident in history. It concerned only 46 men, but it was a laboratory of social relations and caught the imagination of anti-capitalist rebels as well as of capital’s social engineers. Moreover, the “incident” happened one year after the French revolution and only 14 years after the defection of the US from England. What were the next 200 years going to be like? Bounty or misery?

The mission of the Bounty in the global economy of 1790 was the transport of breadfruit tree saplings to the West Indies, that should provide cheap food for the slaves of the sugar-cane plantations, that in turn would mean cheap sugar for the working-classes of Europe, i.e. low wages and higher profits.

The mutineers on the Bounty were no pirates and no revolutionaries, they were desperate reformists. The rebellion sprang from the sailors’ realization that there actually is bounty, or plenty, for everybody on this planet. During their stay on Tahiti they encountered a more relaxed lifestyle that was in sharp contrast to the grim life in England and the stupid discipline on board the ship. Plenty of food, eternal summer, sex, music, dancing, no moral restrictions, spoilt the crew. What the sailors saw there was a reminder of the only really fundamentalist ethics: the fundamentalism of pleasure and relaxed company.

Of course, even Tahiti was no utopia: the society was aristocratic and patriarchal, included slavery, the death penalty, wars between different kings, etc. As guests of the king, the crew got a privileged treatment. There was no alliance between the working class on the *Bounty* and the lower classes on Tahiti. On the contrary, they demanded a better deal as colonialist exploiters. Furthermore, there was never a plan to jump ship collectively and to spend the rest of their lives on Polynesian islands. They all wanted to return to England. The stay on Tahiti was enjoyed as an exceptional situation, as a long vacation. But still: the idea that another, better life could be possible, made the crew susceptible to any provocation. Lieutenant Bligh must have got nervous when his *lager/ship* dissolved and when he lost control over the crew. So, when a slight complaint arose, he lost his temper and radicalized the situation. Somehow he shouted “war against terrorism,” when the sailors only wanted some understanding, better food, one more coconut per day, a better mediation between absolute freedom and nautical discipline. Bligh was abrupt, because he saw that there was no real legitimation of western civilization and capitalist self-abnegation, that he was defending a dubious cause. The bubble of a society based upon work had—at least ideologically—been punctured.

For capital, the question was: how can working class discipline and submission be guaranteed in the face of the ultimate temptation of plenty and leisure? How can the return to England, the home of Adam Smith and his organized scarcity, be secured, when the local/temporal balance of power is in favor of the workers? The answer had two parts. First, the management of ships was modified. Cruel punishment was abolished, schemes of commercial participation of the crew (small trade) were allowed, the communication competence of the officers was improved (words, not whips).

Secondly, the “temptation” effect of the Polynesian way of life was mitigated by introducing elements of it into the working class life. Exotism, orientalism, eroticism, sugary foods, new drugs, looser clothing, even “utopianism,” became part of western (first bourgeois, then proletarian) culture from the beginning of the 19th century leading to the hedonistic movement of the sixties in the 20th century. Swimming pools, coffee, tea, fruit-cocktails, sofas, verandahs, street cafes, shopping malls, beach life, holidays, served as a powerful antidote against anti-work attitudes.

In the case of the historical *Bounty*, the solution was colonial capitalism; today, no such way out is open. Instead of offering new pleasures, old ones are being replaced by inferior substitutes (e.g. on the Internet) or even destroyed by the decline of the environment. Consumer goods seem less and less attractive, so that president Bush had to exhort the Americans to consume more as a part of the “war effort.” The boycott of capital’s cheap imitations of real plenty and enjoyment indicates that a new sense of “Tahiti”, this time on a planetary scale, exists among the people. At the same time nobody has to fear the “return to England,” because we’re already there.

While the carrots are not tasty any more, also the stick is difficult to use, because there are no willing mutineers within the northern working classes, there’s just silent morosity. To enforce discipline, an enemy, a rebel, must exist. For 70 years communists played this role but got tired of it and vanished without causing the promised apocalypse.

What must a dangerous enemy look like? How can an enemy be presented as serious without being the real and objectively most dangerous enemy? How could it be guaranteed that shabby consumer society would look better again? How could you find and hit targets without damaging capital’s own machine and ideology? This task was even more urgent in the presence of a new, amoebic, cancer-like anti-capitalist movement that cannot be physically separated from the whole capitalist social fabric.

A demo of this so-called anti-globalist movement in Barcelona (17th March, 2002) against the EU-summit attracted 300,000 persons and was actually a “demo against everything.” For capital, the problem consists in making this widespread resistance seizable, and therefore attackable, by its forces of repression. The enemy has got to be singled out, so that it can be destroyed. So, inventing, financing, arming, and promoting the “Islamic terrorist” and his “rogue states” has been one of the urgent tasks of capital’s secret services for the last ten years.

Even the cleverest secret services can’t create an enemy, they can only try to give him a certain shape and appearance and to push him into a specific ideological corner. At the same time, it is obvious that most Muslim countries belong to the poorer regions of the world, so that all the aspirations to a just distribution of the wealth can be suppressed by attacking protest movements within them. The price for solidarity, a balanced life, for pleasure without victims, doesn’t have to be the rule of old mullahs, clan-leaders, or “Islamic dictators,” the imprisonment of women, the oppression of intellectual life, and monocultural regression. Of course, it is exactly this disciplinarian side of

“Islamism” that pleases the west (in analogy to Christian fundamentalists) and the global captain Bligh and that makes any solidarity between them and the western working-classes difficult.

It has happened many times in history that capital had to get rid of its own creatures when they got out of control: Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Marcos, Pinochet, Saddam, Milosevic, and now Osama Bin Laden. Capital itself is not fascistic, because fascist methods are not sustainably productive. However, in emergencies, fascists must be used to crush proletarian revolts. It is obvious that once you’re in a situation of two bad choices, you’d choose regular capitalism against fascism, you might even have to fight for it.

Captain Bligh/Bush of 2001 has realized that his crew is living under tight conditions on the one and only existing ship. We could as well consider the planet as an extended form of the United Global States (or Areas) under the strategic command of the USA. In any case, the recourse to the nation state is without any perspective, even as a defensive tactic. The US armed forces are our police force, why not invite them preventively before they are sent hastily in a less controllable emergency situation? It would be best if all nations joined the US(A).

One of the most stupid ideological props of some sections of the anti-capitalist movements is therefore anti-Americanism. The problem is not how brutal the police are and what uniform they wear, but who they’re fighting for. Whether we’re beaten up by our “own” police or by foreign police forces is of no major importance. Any demonization of the US as a “global satan,” as Yankee imperialism—where’s the empire, when the whole world is one?—will only help to disguise the real conflict, the one between global capital (including Arab, Israeli, Swiss, Chinese, and French capital) and the global proletariat.

Whereas global capital has become aware of its transnational unity and common interest and is trying to articulate it in some form of a global state structure, the global proletariat is just about to get to know itself and to see through the smoke screens of privileges, cultures, races, religions, and nationalisms. Global capital and the US Pinkerton are happy enough to deepen such divisions with exemplary raids or wars, whenever a good opportunity can be created or offers itself (as in the case of Sept. 11). When the last cabin door opens, the one of the US proletariat, nobody will be left to close the other doors again and Bligh must face the whole crew.

And then, there won’t just be a mutiny.

What capital is trying to do in the actual recession is to force us into all kinds of hopeless or symbolic mutinies (like hitting the Twin Towers). The actual strategy of tension (everybody is a potential terrorist) is a strategy of provocation. Even the so-called “war against terrorism” is really only a paper tiger. There will always be terrorists and Osama Bin Laden is one of their guys. We don’t need any heroes any more.

Unfortunately for capital, the last business cycles have left us with a big mass of monetarily devalued, but still very useful resources. A good example is Russia: its working-class has been surviving at a nominal monthly wage of \$20 after the end of the Soviet regime. The crisis in Argentina has ignited manifold forms of neighborhood kitchens, barter systems, even “non-profit” industry. All this happens without any preparation, not even as a strategy, but spontaneously. But what was born out of need in some places could become a conscious strategy of subversion and alternative forms of life in other places and would be even more powerful. So preparing subsistence, self-organization, empowering neighborhoods, making us “cheaper” during the crisis, will make the return of real capitalism difficult or impossible. If capital/state is planning to put some of us into camps (for terrorists), we’d better organize our own “camps” on our own terms, before they do it.

Global communities

The main objective of the crisis will be the preservation of the loyalty of the core proletariat in the USA by any means, including the sacrifice of the Japanese and European economies. Natural, human, and scientific resources are being wasted on a colossal scale without any benefit for humanity. If capitalism is the most efficient system to allocate resources, this planet’s future will be grim indeed. (They’ve had 200 years to prove their point.) In the face of these prospects, capital’s legitimation is thin and the movements against its running the planet are growing everywhere. The end of the neoliberal ideology is a fact. The new motto is pragmatism or muddling through without any respect for economic theories (except profitability). In the light of the embarrassingly poor performance of the old bosses, it is high time we thought about other options, about “taking over,” about our own pragmatism.

The objective ecological conditions for a good life for all 7 billion “sailors” on board the spaceship earth are widely known. The most crucial parameter to keep the planet alive (and the Polynesians on their islands) for future generations is global energy consumption. It is now 5 times too high. This means that the car, air-travel, detached houses in cold climates, international tourism, even individual cooking will have to go. Household appliances like fridges, washing machines, computers, vacuum cleaners, cameras etc. will have to be shared or rented. The overall industrial activity will have to shrink to about 20% of the actual size. Food will have to be grown as close to the sites of consumption as possible. Most of our urban lay-outs will have to be restructured, so that functions (living, working, entertainment) are combined on the same spot, to allow resource-saving synergies.

Just distribution of resources also means social and political justice, now expressed in monetary incomes. More than \$500 worth per year and person for everybody won't be possible. (This is still the double of today's Russian wage!) This implies, of course, that non-monetary systems of supply of food, clothing, medical care etc. must exist. The \$500 will only have the function of pocket money in a shrunken market economy.

These objective conditions would theoretically allow a sustainable lifestyle for all inhabitants on the earth without any need for fights or wars over scarce resources. Crime wouldn't make sense either. But these conditions cannot define life in its quality, above all they do not imply a collectivist, culturally homogenous way of life—on the contrary. It would free humans from restrictions and give them more time to express and develop individual and cultural wealth.

If we look at the changes that the above mentioned key conditions (there are some others) would necessitate, we're not talking about utopia, but rather about pragmatic arrangements, using exactly the experiences of that “muddling through” to which the majority of the inhabitants of the planet is being forced under unnecessarily bad circumstances at the moment.

Considering the ecological conditions and their urbanistic consequences for most metropolitan regions of the planet, the new basic form of life will be some kind of autonomous “lager” or—as I prefer to call it—palace. Imagine a community of about 500 persons of all generations living together in a compact building with all facilities—swimming pool, media salons, dining rooms, kindergarten—and you have found the most probable and globally sustainable way of life.

This palace is a place of intense social communication and creativity, not a traditional village, but a free association of free persons who can join it and leave it at their will. It offers more material and cultural pleasures than the suburban family house, more social stimulation, more exchange, more guests. Rather than re-inventing the world, we'll have to re-combine its already existing elements.

What we're looking for is a new global model way of life, that can suit such different situations as London, Lagos, Mumbai, Cairo, Berlin, or Sao Paulo. There will have to be a general dis-enclosure of urban spaces as well as of rural ones.

Our business is NO business. Instead of private shops, restaurants, cafes, workshops, we will need community-operated depots, cafeterias, semi-public spaces etc. Local communities can only be initiated and survive as globally defined communities. A double strategy of dismantling traditional oppressive structures and creating new communities without going through capitalist disintegration is needed. Local forces will not be sufficient for such a difficult task: we need planetary solidarity and support, politically and materially.

Global communities aren't just aspects of some “urban renewal”, but part of a global alternative. We have to think of the whole ship before we can design the new cabins. What is needed is an overall new start, new social relationships, new rules, maybe even new buildings. And once we live in our palaces, we'll be able to get rid of all those camps and lagers forever.

What could be the elements of such a global charter or covenant?

Even modern democracy seems to have been rather a heritage of the American Indians than the old Greeks. By sharing this “western” civilization with the whole planet again, the west would not impose its values or technologies on others, but rather give them back. It has always been a cheap trick exactly of the west to stress the “cultural difference” of (usually exploited and impoverished peoples), that had to be preserved by not spoiling it with human rights, western medicine, access to (tele)communication, etc.

All of this is just common sense, no “new system” or utopia. But it can't be implemented under the actual rule of capitalism. The task seems big, but to call it a “moral effort” would be a trap. We'll always be our old disgusting

selves. No new morality will help, no better human beings can be created. Evil behavior is not excluded, not even terrorism, the world won't become a virtuous and therefore dull place. Sado-masochism, running amok, brawls, murders, smaller wars, might be less probable but still possible, however without being capable of disrupting our lives systematically. Actually life would be much less virtuous than under capitalist conditions that include self-denial, a suicidal work ethic, and destructive altruism. Capitalist fundamentalism of saving, progress, and effort is at least as dangerous as religious fundamentalisms; it might indeed be their hidden source.

A possible future cannot be based on the atavistic utopia of the free man and his family on his land. We're already too many for that on this planet and the defense of such a lifestyle for some 5 billion of us implies injustice and permanent war. If we can't create global communities that are not defined ethnically and that are open for everybody to join and to leave, capital and its champion, US capital, will control our future. It will be a future of crisis, misery, war, and exclusion.

Will we succeed in convincing the suburbanites of the planet that life in a palatial community is richer, safer, and even more "romantic" than all those homes that are haunted castles? Or will the rebellion of those that are excluded from a decent way of life be needed to force us into our alternative palaces? This is the key question of our epoch, everything else—ecology, politics, wars, terrorism, crisis, state versus market—derives from it. If there's no global community movement, we can as well forget about the rest of it.

– January 28, 2002

The author of the temporarily out-of-print utopian "novel" bolo'bolo, PM, experiments with "how to get back the lost social awareness." A much longer version of this essay is available (along with more information on bolos) at the website <http://www.bolo-bolo.org>.

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