

Caution: Capitalism May Be Hazardous to Your Health

George Metefsky

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Part I

These are the last days of the Weimar Republic.

In Berkeley, police 'opened fire with buckshot on unarmed people by the Peoples' Park, wounding over a hundred and killing one, James Rector. Across the country—in Madison, in Ann Arbor—police repeated the same repression with only slightly less savagery. Meanwhile, the government is quietly extending its stop-and-frisk, no-knock police state over almost everybody under 30.

This escalating police repression of "cultural revolutionary" whites—escalating to the level previously reserved for Blacks and Latins—marks the ripening in this country of the revolutionary conflict between the people and fascism, the domestic manifestation of U.S. imperialism.

Most of us supported the Peoples' Park struggle, but without learning from it. Common analysis of its cultural revolutionary approach was blocked by the hardened split between "hippy-yippees" and "politicals." Yet Peoples' Park is important precisely because it enlisted mass support in a struggle against fascism. Failure really to mobilize this mass support was directly related to the lack of a common analysis, rooted in the refusal by both hippies and politicals to comprehend the ideas and experiences of their revolutionary brothers.

To reject any insight into cultural revolution under fascism, when we are all living in a police state, is suicidal. It means that we fail to grasp our whole situation—that we fail to unify our movement by making clear to everyone a correct response to the situation.

We can begin with two seemingly unrelated insights: from William Burroughs, that capitalism is an addiction, an obsessive-compulsive behavior pattern based in conditioning body chemistry itself. Just as capitalism enters into and regiments every aspect of our society (our external economic life), it sinks in, past the level of verbal conditioning, to our body chemistry, regimenting our metabolism (our internal economic life).

Second, from Huey P. Newton: That 3rd World people inside this country fulfill the same socio-economic needs of imperialism that are served by foreign colonies. Newton originally meant to explain the position of blacks ("the black colony inside the imperialist mother country") but other 3rd World people in this country also serve as objects of exploitation and class discrimination. Tracing the relation between total metabolic regimentation by capitalism, and this cultural imperialism, tells us a great deal about the fundamental fascism of this country.

Capitalism as an Addiction

We can understand how capitalism is an addiction when we focus on it as an obsessive-compulsive behavior pattern which permeates all life in this society. Capitalism combines the compulsive performance of meaningless, ungratifying work, with obsessive accumulation of property for the sake of accumulation itself, and the status it

brings, rather than consumption. We call this “addiction” to stress that the obsessive-compulsive pattern results from the habitual overproduction by our bodies of the hormone adrenalin, without which we neither function nor feel “normal.”

Adrenalin is the “fight or flight” hormone, a highly selective behavioral stimulant which we feel in emotions of fear, aggression, nervous excitement, anger, and bored tension. More important, adrenalin is a desensitizing agent, which sublimates our energies away from clear, diffuse awareness and relaxed creativity, fixing our attention when we are afraid or angry on a few facts or goals (obsessively), and on the nervous, compulsive manipulation of circumstances.

The obsessive-compulsive need for work-accumulation-status obviously fits in with the role of the capitalist in this society, which is accumulating endless wealth and power. But our society reproduces this obsessive-compulsive pattern throughout the whole middle-class majority, who are workers rather than capitalists, though they share in this capitalist psychology and in the uniform, plastic culture mass-produced for them by the capitalist economy.

While this kind of total obsession with work and material status doesn’t really fit the relatively low economic position of the middle class, it’s great for the economy, because it makes them better workers and consumers.

U.S. workers are among the most productive in the world. Yet the normal job (and normal education, which is job training), while demanding so much efficiency, consists of work that is fragmentary, monotonous, and basically alien to the worker. The worker feels no identity with his work because he has no control over it. He is given no control because the bourgeois, with their total need for wealth and power, keep control of the work concentrated in their hands.

The classic response to a creative idea is, “Do it our way!” The industrial worker, the technician, the salesperson and the petty bureaucrat are hassled with so much red tape—plus the standing demand for maximum output at the expense of quality work—that everybody loses interest in just about everything but collecting their paycheck.

Because people feel no identity with their work, they rarely develop the love for their work, the feeling of creation, that the artist has with his art. But if we don’t do our job out of love for the work, the only motivation left which can be trained to keep up such fast-paced, meaningless behavior is adrenal fear and aggression.

We are conditioned to secrete a spurt of fear at a million and one stimuli: “Work, or you’ll get yelled at...fired...Hurry, you’re late...don’t let the boss catch you standing still...keep your mouth shut.”

To avoid confronting authority, we internalize it. We oppress ourselves. Our fear is constant, turning into aggression which we direct against our subordinates, our friends, ourselves. We repress our own frail sensitivity and creativity: we become extensions of the machine.

Repressive work is nothing new in history. (A certain amount of aggression is necessary for self-discipline.) What is new is that in super-exploiting the alienated worker, capitalism has made work almost completely repressive. Even though people no longer need to work constantly to live, and work is physically easier, the middle-class worker has more anxiety and tension on and about the job than ever before.

He’s hyped up on adrenalin 8 hours a day. His body can only eliminate the stuff so fast; thus, chemical traces of fear and aggression would linger through the remaining 6 or 7 hours of wakefulness even if his “leisure” was peaceful and gratifying, which it usually isn’t.

In fact, the middle class becomes quite emotionally dependent on this adrenal surplus and the job that generates it. People who have worked for years with strong external discipline feel lost when they lose their job, and previously healthy people can even die shortly after retirement.

While the same emotional dependence on work appeared in previous societies, in the mass psychology of modern capitalism this need is developed into complex dependence on adrenalin-generating work-accumulation-status—a total addiction.

That this addiction involves dependence on surplus adrenalin produced within our bodies doesn’t make it any less an addiction, with total distortion of behavior to fit the chemical, and total need for the chemical in order for us to function. As long as we are “high” on adrenal surplus, we are slightly bored (from the desensitization), but excited, aggressive, and single-mindedly concentrated on what we’re doing.

“Coming down”—as we move, say from a job that demands adrenal flow to a relative inactivity—we are intensely bored and frustrated. But capitalism provides us with a “leisure-time” escape back into the bright, aggressive adrenal high, through the accumulation of commodities and property related status.

The property-form makes our relation to things both a spur and an outlet of aggression, so that our surplus adrenalin is directed outward, instead of turning to inward depression. Possessiveness is aggressive. With ownership many of us acquire a shoot-to-kill compulsion to hang on to our property—a thing—even when we don’t need it and others are dying for a lack of it.

We also acquire a terrific fear of losing what we have. After very fatiguing work, when we engage in the passive consumption of culture-packages (watching color TV), we are still involved in the tension of ownership and status. Less fatiguing work frees us to “work off” tensions through deceptively active “leisure activities” (but driving a shiny new car is not freedom).

Either way, we are expressing adrenalin, trying to fill up our boredom with commodities—failing because our adrenal pathology blocks any but the lowest level satisfaction of appetites (like the man who gobbles down his food without tasting it, because he’s late for work).

Besides, capitalism produces the cheapest, least satisfying commodities (look at TV) that people will tolerate—little but outlets for possessiveness. Baran and Sweezy (Monopoly Capital) found that 56% of what we pay for these plastic crap commodities pays for advertising—to make people owners, rather than to satisfy them.

We can never accumulate enough because we are always bored, never satisfied with what we have—because the only positive constant in our life is adrenal excitement. Like the middle-class family that buys a roomful of furniture no one is ever allowed to sit on, we are addicted to accumulation.

As William Burroughs writes: “Beyond a certain frequency, need knows absolutely no limit or control. The...merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client.”

Property ownership is a relic from the earlier scarcity economy. While there is still real material insecurity in the U.S. for the 40 million poor, who are very unhappy about poverty, the poor often lack the possessiveness—the obsession with accumulation for its own sake—that drives the middle class and the bourgeoisie.

The true addiction is of the middle class and the capitalist, who has a lot of property. But the middle class are workers, even though middle-class culture is mass-produced by capitalism. Their obsession with material status doesn’t seem to fit their modest affluence, until we look at their jobs again.

The production of goods and services, and low level management are so ungratifying and low-prestige that the worker and the foreman alike seek their outlet and status off the job, through the accumulation of commodities.

And property ownership leads the middle class to identify with the status quo—with the rich people who really own things. It represses the awareness of the real economic differences (in relation to the means of production) that exist even within the middle class.

Affluence itself co-opts the U.S. worker by mechanically satisfying his needs, but more especially by implanting in him new needs. The “message” of the capitalist commodity “medium” (particularly “mass media”) is plastic sensation, compulsive routine, fear and violence, and these constant new needs—in short, surplus adrenalin.

More, the message is that commodities (from Cadillac to Right Guard) bring prestige, that ownership equals social status. Status itself is bought and owned; a concrete place you guard jealously, excluding, depriving, and humiliating people who don’t have as much as you do. Middle-class status is nothing but the social expression of the fear and aggression generated by middle-class work and property ownership.

This fear and aggression demands an object, which the middle class find in the nonconformist and 3rd World poor. Thus completed, mass addiction to adrenal work-accumulation-status not only propels the worker into a synthetic “middle-class” culture and identity; it provides him with a psychology that is proto-fascist.

To be continued

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