

Caution: Capitalism may be Harmful to Your Health

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Part II: Alternative Cultures

Serving Capitalism

No one really consciously planned the thorough integration of the middle-class worker with capitalism. Capitalists were forced to develop a more productive worker, a more extravagant consumer, simply because their own fixation on accumulation (profit) is continuously frustrated by the tendency of the rate of profit to decline as automation grows.

While automation, partly replacing man with machine, may actually increase employment slightly as machinery doubles and re-doubles, the overall effect is to reduce employment—and consumer purchasing power—relative to the vastly expanded product. This means neither prices nor sales can be raised enough to pay for automation, and still maintain the same profit percentage.

U.S. capitalism is faced with a situation where more than 90% of the Gross National Product is sold at home; 2/3 of U.S. investment is at home; but only 1/3 of U.S. profits come from the overdeveloped economy at home. Two-thirds of U.S. profits come from the remaining 1/3 of U.S. investment in underdeveloped economies abroad.

Capitalism gets much higher percentages of profit from underdevelopment than from overdevelopment. Faced with a profit squeeze in the overdeveloped domestic sector, the U.S. corporate complex has no choice but to intensify the addiction of the great middle class to hyper-work and super-consumption, representing all alternatives. This is nothing but a more sophisticated imperialism—a cultural imperialism—for home consumption.

While U.S. imperialism rules at home with affluence rather than scarcity, its basic contradiction—that people aren't paid enough to buy back what they produce—has merely intensified into a contradiction between sensitive, creative man and totally repressive culture.

As capitalist mass culture expands, numbing our consciousness with adrenal surplus, we can become so caught up in work-accumulation-status that we never think about other ways of life, even when this one makes us unhappy. The pattern is self-sustaining.

Why Cultural Revolution?

To believe that revolution is possible in this country without destroying the psychological stranglehold of middle class culture upon the workers, as if revolution could be made by the 3rd World poor alone, is a delusion.

The vast majority of Americans are indeed working class; but the whole thrust of their culture, which is capitalist, has been to repress that class identity. They think of themselves as white, American, taxpayer, home-owners—not as workers. To bring about real revolution, it has always been necessary to raise the consciousness of the greater mass of the people to the point where they see the need for the revolution and identify with it.

This means that the worker's middle class identity, and culture supporting that identity, must be seriously weakened before they can identify with the revolution.

To avoid this hard fact, many leftists are fond of arguing from the revolutionary experiences of Russia, China, or Cuba, that a capitalist "crisis" will sooner or later reduce the middle-class worker to poverty, forcing him into revolutionary consciousness. They ignore the concrete lesson of the Great Depression of the 1930s, when workers' struggles were contained by middle class "liberalism" and channeled into purely economic reforms within the system.

The people of Russia, China or Cuba shared not only common poverty, but a common consciousness and folk culture that was quite distinct from the bourgeoisie. It was but a short step to class or national consciousness of common discontent of the fact that they had nothing to lose through revolution.

For a useful parallel to the U.S., we must go to the abortive revolution in France, May '68. Only with France do we find the same middle-class majority, and the same economic grievances: constant, irritating inflation.

France showed that it will not be bureaucratic unions which are the vanguard of the revolution in the imperialist mother country, but students and young workers who are not yet totally sucked into the hyper-worker/super-consumer role, who find a rebellious (if commercialized) identity in their "youth culture."

Even if the most advanced workers join the revolution out of plain economic dissatisfaction, reactionary union bureaucrats will oppose them, while the majority of the middle class continues to support reaction.

Imperialism supports a huge middle class within the mother country. There is far less revolutionary working class tradition in this country than in France, and workers are trained to shy away from it. To awaken them, middle-class culture itself must be smashed.

Middle-class culture is vulnerable. While people identify themselves as "middle class," they have merely exchanged working-class discontent for a more diffuse middle-class dissatisfaction, not just with the war, rising prices, and frozen wages, but with the whole game of accumulating plastic and hating people. Their dissatisfaction breaks through the officially approved consciousness in a million ways.

For instance, the middle class with its taste for folk music, and the lower middle class with their country and western, seek to identify with a real, soulful folk culture which middle class life excludes, in which they can be free participants rather than passive consumers. No one can identify with a Hollywood orchestra the way you identify with Johnny Cash.

The system never really succeeds in repressing people's common humanity—the "3rd world within"—and this conflict finally reduces the middle class to passivity and cynicism, driving them to the extremes of local reaction, or rebellion. Come a healthy people's culture, and middle-class culture tends to collapse like a sick balloon.

The most advanced part of the middle class—mostly young workers and students—are in fact beginning to break out of work-accumulation-status addiction. The very material affluence and leisure time which previously led only to endless accumulation, also gave people time to think.

And young people, in spite of the fact that public education and the mass media aim to imbue them with standard middle class ideology, are moving beyond middle-class cynicism to question the basic attitudes and values of this society: "Wait a minute..."

Do I really want a new car? I already have last year's model. Why should I work overtime so that somebody else can get rich?" The coincidence of mass education and free time gives people a chance to free their consciousness from the mindless accumulation, the stifling totality of middle class culture, so that they can explore the alternatives.

Alternative Cultures

The three alternative cultures in this country which, though partially co-opted by the power structure, exist as vigorous, independent people's cultures, are the Appalachian, black, and hip.

Repressed and materially impoverished by the all-consuming bourgeois mass culture, these cultures survive and flourish in the non-material attitudes, perceptions, values, ways of interacting, and in their unique psychological flavor—things that are the soul of a culture.

This unique and alien soul, with its special perspective on middle-class life, is precisely what the disaffected middle class finds itself lacking. Cultural revolution—the liberation of consciousness and the humanizing of values—begins as people move to explore these alternative cultures. But the liberatory potential of these alternatives varies.

Appalachian culture belongs to the country poor. It contains much folk wisdom about rural capitalism, much good Christian ethics, and even—at the source—some populism and primitive communism. Radicals dig it because they see it as the source of the culture of the great middle reaches of America. But the lively backcountry folk culture has been mass-reproduced for consumption by mid-America only because it is perfect material for the capitalist exploiter, only because it can be co-opted.

It is ethnocentric and racist. It is rural. For a creative, revolutionary culture capable of displacing middle-class culture within the urban pressure cooker, Appalachia can only be one source.

Within the U.S., the culture of the black colony everywhere has taken a vanguard role in the cultural revolution. Just as the special intensity of their oppression has forced blacks to the vanguard of the political struggle, surviving 400 years of constant persecution and exploitation has forged a black culture whose perceptions, and values are completely subversive of the status quo.

For instance, the Blues appeal to everyone—in our society, because the 3rd World in everyone cries out for some expression of their loneliness, frustration and despair in the face of capitalism. No matter how many people exploit it, black culture is a revolutionary people's culture, because it developed in opposition to and bitter knowledge of capitalism, and because it enabled blacks (unlike the American Indian) to survive cultural imperialism and grow as a cultural entity.

The bourgeois have had to segregate black and white, because middle-class culture can't bear to confront black awareness of the brutally repressive bourgeois regime. Nor can it compete with ghetto brotherhood and soul. The culture of black and white together—of the white who felt free with his black brother—has always been almost as suspect and hated. These were the original hipsters, and today's hippies.

The word "hip" comes from the black culture. "He's hip to that" means "He's aware; in terms of a particular scene (or scenes) he knows what's happening enough to avoid the worst and flourish."

A worker is hip to the factory when he sees the work is pointless, learns the shortcuts, and settles down to get his pay from the boss for the least work. But he may be hip only to the factory scene, and unhip to politics, if he voted for Wallace.

Someone is truly hip when he always looks for factors behind facts, the historical process behind everything, and develops a conscious response (praxis) relevant to social reality as a whole.

Obviously, according to this definition many visible freeks are not very hip while many hip people aren't visible. But in common usage, "hip" also refers to a definite cultural group, consisting broadly speaking of those who smoke pot and possess the characteristic style and culture, who are identified by middle-class society as "hippies."

Social identification leads to self-identity: by isolating and discriminating against the "dirty hippie," middle-class society forces him in self-defense to strengthen his identity by reaching beyond externals to the perceptions and attitudes which are the unitary core of hip culture. These common perceptions and attitudes, however incompletely grasped by most freeks, project a conscious mass response to society—a movement toward liberation from adrenal, middle-class culture.

Hip culture is widespread among the same students and young workers in this country who formed the vanguard in France, May '68. They see that the scarcity-based puritan-work ethic is obsolete, that the middle-class compulsion to do meaningless work is enslavement, that neurotic accumulation-for-status is the same slavery. They consume for gratification.

They would rather have the free time to reach out and build a classless, eclectic culture, whose roots range from Black America, to Appalachia, to India and the whole world. The hip movement represents the efforts of a good part of the white youth and workers to liberate themselves from repressive middle-class culture.

The key value of hip culture is free consciousness. All the religiosity, the psychedelic experimentation, represent efforts to free awareness from middle-class culture, to get to the Now which is the source of all pleasure and pain. But even more, freeks are trying to break out of the passive consumer role this society lays on us, past total openness, past a vision of the present as part of the whole historical process, to an active, conscious response to that process. A creative, unalienated response: "Do it now!"

Their desire for liberated sensitivity and creative response explains the emphasis hip people place on love and sexuality. To be creative, we have to love what we are doing and the people we are working with.

Now the normal job of this society conditions the worker to fear, to block out his distracting awareness and compress his free activity into compulsive routine. The hip respond by demanding either meaningful work or marginal employment: and by reducing their property and ownership fears to a minimum. Free from the role of hyper-worker/super-consumer, they begin to act out of sexuality.

All of a sudden, “thing” no longer refers to dead fragments of a world opposed to man by his completely adrenal reaction, following the model of commodities, the alienated products of his labor. “Thing” becomes the process, the unity of man and his work; freeks “do their thing.”

Although “plastic hippies,” who possess the material style without seeking liberation, use “doing their own thing” as an excuse for doing nothing—bullshit passive consumption of culture-packages—the original meaning of the expression was definitely liberatory. My thing is not the Man’s thing. It becomes our thing, a common awareness and interaction which is alien, and subversive of bourgeois mass culture.

The change from “doing your thing” to “doing your own thing” shows how the rapid spread and commercialization of hip culture has deformed its more overtly subversive values. Still, freeks are only the visible edge of a much larger mass of people in this society who are moving toward free consciousness and sexuality.

The practices of ultra-democracy and communism—almost equally important for breaking out of middle-class culture—tends to be restricted more to the real freeks, who reject all class and ethnic lines in search of “the good people” they see as the supreme value (rather than God, Country, etc.). Most freeks are still ultra-democratic, although class lines have reappeared between the rich, self-righteously “religious” plastic hippie, and the poor majority he excludes from his private scene. Freeks are generally anti-racist.

Many also practice communism, both because they value and like to live with other people, and to free time, because practical communism is cheaper. They share rent on a common house, the cost of food, and deep involvement in one another’s heads. The living commune demands almost familial compatibility and participatory democracy (a real encounter group) to keep it together. Sometimes lessons learned in living communes lead to work-communes, and people’s parks.

Even taken alone, the living commune shows that alienated middle-class life, based on “jobs” and private property, tends to collapse in the face of material abundance into a culture based on sharing. That hip culture has only slowly developed a communist politics shows the tremendous anti-communist brainwashing in this society. But freeks have made the massive rejection of repressed behavior for free activity—of capitalist accumulation—in favor of consumption “by each according to his needs.”

Fittingly, the “hip entrepreneur” who is busy making money off the hip thing has no prestige among freeks—a mere greedhead. Deformed though it is by the surrounding capitalist society, hip culture is the closest thing in this country to a revolutionary people’s culture.

Some leftists reject it because it lacks an explicit ideology, because it isn’t “political,” because it’s middle class. For the middle class it is initially far more important to reject endless plastic for the free time to think and experiment, than to be perfectly politically “correct”. China needed a political revolution simply to establish the pre-conditions for cultural change: order, material security, the 8-hour day. Here this economic base already exists.

This is not to say that we can complete cultural revolution without political change. We are faced not just with the inert resistance of an all-pervasive capitalist culture, but with a society that wages active genocide against deviant cultures. Hip sensitivity, and sensuality, under-employment and under-consumption strike directly at work accumulation-status addiction and the expanding domestic market.

To see people, even in far off Vietnam, as higher values than God, Country and Flag undermines imperialism. To reject middle-class ethnic and class prejudices, reaching out to 3rd World culture within the U.S. subverts the fascist horde. And no matter how innocuous practical communism may seem, it consolidates the theft of man-hours from capitalism. U.S. cultural imperialism must smash any cultural movement, no matter how deformed, whose growth blocks the capitalist exploitation of human existence.

When the police beat on people for playing music in the park, or for making a park, they plant the seeds of their own downfall. They reveal themselves as agents of the pig. Freeks have no choice but to take the offensive, to transform their culture into a cultural revolutionary movement, spreading over the economic base of the old

society. Our cultural revolution is already providing people with a revolutionary identity, which is the key to future political change.

(To be Continued.)

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