

## counter-institutions

### New Spectres

The emergence of the student movement promises a renewal of revolutionary politics as well as the arrival of a new social force. Student insurgents have rejected established models of political action: they refuse to pin their hopes on the remote manoeuvres of parliamentary assemblies or party conferences. The main student movements are quite aware that their struggle is against the social system as a whole; they refuse to participate in it on its own terms.

In exchange for their political passivity bourgeois democracy offers people ballot papers—every five years. In exchange for this quinquennial "Participation" people surrender control over their everyday existence. The revolutionary student movements have denounced this capitalistic bargain as the graveyard of any hope of transforming society. Their aim is to create an extra-parliamentary opposition which aims to reconquer power from below — power over their everyday life exercised by the people themselves in all the particular institutions which comprise society, as well as in general social control of the economy.

In most of the advanced countries of the capitalist world students have already posed the demand for student power: for control by the students of the organization and content of the education they receive. On the whole this demand has not just taken the form of resolutions or appeals to the authorities. Instead it has been embodied in acts of the counter-institutions they wish to create.

The reaction of the authorities has been notorious. When their attempts at co-optation are rejected, they vigorously deploy the armoury of repression developed for such purposes: special police, para-military units, guard dogs, water cannon, tear gas, shock grenades, etc. The exact balance of force and fraud in each country varies with the strength of the student movement: but nowhere does the mask of repressive tolerance long conceal the true visage of authority, in its determination to defend the authoritarian principle.

Why are the actions of students feared and hated? What is it that has made students act, and what is it that gives a potentially revolutionary character to their actions?

### Bourgeois Society and the Spectacle

It is now commonplace that the advanced capitalist countries are moving beyond the first stage of industrial mass production. But they are doing this with a property system that remains basically unchanged. This fact furnishes the characteristic contradictions of modern capitalism. The immense productivity of these societies is, for them, their central problem. In economic terms the problem which faces each

capitalist society is how to absorb most profitably the surplus productive capacity which the process of capital accumulation throws up without undermining the value of existing capital.

In political terms the problem is to conceal from the masses the fact that the material preconditions for social liberation already exist. On the one hand, the best energies of modern capitalist societies are devoted to the profitable waste of resources (arms expenditure, advertising, built-in obsolescence, etc.) and on the other, to the distraction of the masses from awareness of the repression of man's historic possibilities which it practises on so vast a scale.

The two prongs of this operation are necessarily complementary. The citizen whose work is robbed of meaning by the capitalist production system is being conditioned for the role of passive consumer and inactive citizen. Of course those who operate this neo-capitalist dreamland know that it has a very precarious existence. Teams of work study engineers, ergonomists, labour relations experts, industrial psychologists and sociologists scurry about, all striving to ensure that the maximum surplus labour is extracted with the minimum of trouble.

At the same time similar teams of experts orchestrate the loyalty of the consumer to the goods which the system is prepared to supply him: market researchers, media planners, account executives, copywriters and so forth. The overdeveloped state of the mode of production entails a corresponding change in the mode of consumption.

In the liberal epoch capitalism consisted of a multitude of competing enterprises supplying the individual commodity to the market. In the modern capitalist economy competition is fiercer because it assumes monopolistic and oligopolistic forms, and works itself out on an international scale in the competition of national and international units. In a similar development the isolated, individual commodity is caught up in the general process of the spectacle and of spectacular consumption. Just as monopoly capital fuses together units of production so the spectacle fuses together the items of consumption into a given life style. Traditional bourgeois and proletarian culture is converted into raw material for the fashion industry. Late bourgeois society can offer the underlying population neither security nor adventure. Bourgeois politics with its soporific consensus tries to provide a substitute for the former while the spectacle provides a substitute for the latter. The chronic institutional stagnation of advanced capitalism is veiled by the dizzying succession of spectacles. Britain, the most stagnant capitalist country, has naturally become a centre of spectacular production. Within the electronic space created by the new media the consumer is drenched in the pseudo-dramas and myths of the spectacle: and the ethos and mode of the spectacle penetrates the entire culture. In effect this spectacle supplements the market as the overall regulator of the system. The true source of the

value of commodities—namely, human labour—is erased: only the spectacle itself appears to allot values, in the name of fashion.

Our waning imperial system needs its combination of bread and circuses to retain the support of the population. In late capitalist society the fetishized commodity and the spectacle conveniently answer this need. In helping to alleviate the curse of over-production the spectacle brings into existence a motley retinue of its own: television producers, fashion consultants, show business personalities, gossip columnists, public relations officers, press departments, etc. The very essence of the spectacle is that the spectator should remain passively receptive towards the whole design, however frenzied he is in the pursuit of a particular spectacular myth or fashion. So long as modishness is accepted as a vocation, then energy, even in quite creative ways, can be expended in its service.

How does this rapid evocation of modern capitalism help us to understand the role of higher education in Britain today?

Just as the colonization of Africa and Asia transformed the public schools in the nineteenth century, so the twentieth-century colonization of everyday life requires its appropriate educational institutions. The primary role of higher education is now to train the flood of technicians and manipulators which neo-capitalism and the spectacle demand. An important part of this training is provided simply by the way in which higher education is organized, regardless of the specific content of courses.

Any student who has gone through the mangle of repeated examinations, set text books, accepted authorities and styles of work (classes, lectures, weekly essays, tutorials) has undergone a most formidable conditioning process. The technology or science graduate who enters industry only to discover that everything he has been taught is years out of date thinks that he has learnt nothing. He is wrong. He has been taught to isolate the rationality of his technique and to leave unquestioned the social purposes which that technique serves. This lobotomy is worth time and money to the system and that is why it will pay for the process (education) which performs it — a process, incidentally, diametrically opposite in result to that attributed to it by educational humanists with their reverent obeisances to the 'whole man'. The burgeoning departments of social science, the colleges of art and design, the new universities all help to provide the specific skills which neo-capitalism or the spectacle require. Within this framework the personnel officer can bring to bear his knowledge of micro-social dynamics, the advertising copywriter display his cultured mastery of asymptotic hyperbole.

Before they can perform their allotted tasks the manipulators have to be manipulated. This is a dangerous process. The future manipulator needs to be fairly lucid — even have his own share of subjective cynicism — about how the system operates. The student who might become a political commentator or an industrial relations expert must know a little bit about Marx and the reasons why workers go on strike, qualifications which have not been necessary in the past. Such students must be taught their own role in a particular confidence trick: but not enough to rattle the whole game. Similarly the future fashion designer must be capable of creativity without resenting his subordination to the market and the rules of the spectacle.

### Student Power

The objective conditions for student revolt exist throughout the institutions of higher education. Everywhere one finds education subordinated to exams, competition and grading; most fields of study are stunted by academic philistinism and hostility towards ideas (especially new ideas); social relations between staff and students are usually infected by paternalism, deference, careerism and, of course, traditional status divisions. However the first students to revolt against such conditions may not necessarily be those who suffer them most acutely. Those students who are required to achieve some insight into the way the system works are likely to be the first to rebel against it. The student of social science is being given the training of a future 'directing' intellectual of the dominant class. He is being taught the techniques of domination which he must first practise willingly on himself as a professional preparation for the task of organizing consciousness in the service of capital. The nature of his training also demands that he should be acquainted with some of the major achievements of traditional culture at the same time as he learns the techniques of bourgeois domination.

The system, in this difficult business, has not yet learnt the way of painlessly socializing the new cadres it needs. The lobotomy does not always go well.

Unsurprisingly, those students whose studies invite them to perceive the whole game have been in the van of student revolt. They have begun by rejecting the passivity which the system seeks to impose on them. Direct action — sit-ins, occupations, etc. — is contagious and cumulative among students because it gives them a glimpse of disalienation. During such events the rock-solid structures of the institution seem to dissolve. The mysterious operations of bureaucracy are exposed. Familiar unquestionable routines no longer seem part of the natural order of things. Pretensions of authority seem arrogant and hollow. Before the laughing audience the conjuror has lost his mirrors, his curtain, his false-bottomed hat and his capacious sleeves, and is reduced to simulated jocosity and fervent hopes that the attendants will throw them all out.

Of course if the mass of students are not sustained by a sure knowledge of what they are doing and why, they may be alarmed by their new-found freedom. This is the source of the backlash against

role themselves. They want to substitute super-egos; their determination to the temporarily absent authorities with political agitation frowned on efforts to present an unsullied Education or the national press: freedom of the lemming, as he goes

But, good or bad, all these revolution from below, along committees; the discussion; the psychological terms to control even keep their heads: total control for the capitulation of the enemy. But has returned, that control was used system on their own ground by students

Often both student militants blind to the actual charge insurgents. The traditional revolutionary, one witness an uncompromising assault becomes agitated when the strike, deviating from the well-beaten path

The student radical, on the other hand militant action, becomes suspicious of an shove him precipitately into confrontation the established order — the capitalist might well become salted with capitalism — or against the vice-political activism, he is asking his own unfamiliar terrain.



The consequence may well be a bloody insurrection, since after the initiation everyone including the 'revolutionary' note that the moderates of the ethic of today and are uncertain of it pre tomorrow.

In such extremities, when they are before cry 'back', it is worth remembering that the power of students to determine the str education. Of course the eventual revolutionary bloc with working-class forces of the student lies in his university, his student.

### Revolutionary Roles

Any active student movement must win on its own ground: students must occupy factories. Student power is not constitutional rights but rather the struggle for mobilization and struggle. Engaging or college authorities students must win power, but these gains will only last if the mass of students has been armed. In