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Anything Can Happen

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Contents

"Be Realists,
Demand the Impossible!"

This slogan, developed in May by revolutionaries in France, flies in the face of common sense, especially the "common sense" of American corporate-military propaganda. What happened in May also flies in the face of official American "common sense." In fact, in terms of American "common sense," much of what happens in the world every day is impossible. It can't happen. If it does happen, then the official "common sense" is nonsense: it is a set of myths and fantasies. But how can common sense be nonsense? That's impossible.

To demonstrate that anything is possible, this essay will place some of the myths alongside some of the events. The essay will then try to find out why some of the myths are possible, in other words, it will explore the "scientific basis" of the myths. The essay, if successful, will thus show that anything is possible: it's even possible for a population to take myths for common sense, and it's possible for mythmakers to convince themselves of the reality of their myths in the face of reality itself.

AMERICAN "COMMON SENSE"

- It's impossible for people to run their own lives; that's why they don't have the power to do so. People are powerless because they have neither the ability nor the desire to control and decide about the social and material conditions in which they live.
- People only want power and privileges over each other. It would be impossible, for example, for university students to fight against the institution which assures them a privileged position. Those students who study do so to get high grades, because with the high grades they can get high-paying jobs, which means the ability to manage and manipulate other people, and the ability to buy more consumer goods than other people. If learning were not rewarded with high grades, high pay, power over others and lots of goods, no one would learn; there'd be no motivation for learning.
- It would be just as impossible for workers to want to run their factories, to want to decide about their production. All that workers are interested in is wages: they just want more wages than others have, so as to buy bigger houses, more cars and longer trips.
- Even if students, workers, farmers wanted something different, they're obviously satisfied with what they're doing, otherwise they wouldn't be doing it.

- In any case, those who aren't satisfied can freely express their dissatisfaction by buying and by voting: they don't have to buy the things they don't like, and they don't have to vote for the candidates they don't like. It's impossible for them to change their situation any other way.
- Even if some people tried to change the situation some other way, it would be impossible for them to get together; they'd only fight each other, because white workers are racists, black nationalists are anti-white, feminists are against all men, and students have their own specific problems.
- Even if they did unite, it would obviously be impossible for them to destroy the State and the police and military potential of a powerful industrial society like the United States.

THE EVENTS

Millions of students all over the world–in Tokyo, Turin, Belgrade, Berkeley, Berlin, Rome, Rio, Warsaw, New York, Paris–are fighting for the power to control and decide about the social and material conditions in which they live. They are not stopped either by the lack of desire, or by the lack of ability; they are stopped by cops. Perhaps they're inspired by other fighters who held on against cops: the Cubans, the Vietnamese . . .

Students in Turin and Paris, for example, occupied their universities and formed general assemblies in which all the students made all the decisions. In other words, the students started running their own universities. Not in order to get better grades: they did away with tests. Not in order to get higher paying jobs or more privileges: they started to discuss the abolition of privileges and high paying jobs; they started to discuss putting an end to the society in which they had to sell themselves. And at that point, sometimes for the first time in their lives, they started learning.

In Paris young workers, inspired by the example of the students, occupied an aircraft factory and locked up the director. The examples multiplied. Other workers began to occupy their factories. Despite the fact that all life long they had depended on someone to make their decisions for them, some workers set up committees to discuss running the strike on their own terms, letting all workers decide, and not just on the union's terms-and some workers set up commissions to discuss running the factories themselves. An idea which it's pointless to think about in normal times, because it's absurd, it's impossible, had suddenly become possible, and it became interesting, challenging, fascinating. Workers even began to talk about producing goods merely because people needed them. These workers knew that it was "false to think that the population is against free

public services, that farmers are in favor of a commercial circuit stuffed with intermediaries, that poorly paid people are satisfied, that 'managers' are proud of their privileges."[1] Some electronics workers freely distributed equipment to demonstrators protecting themselves from the police; some farmers delivered free food to striking workers; and some armaments workers talked about distributing weapons to all workers, so that the workers could protect themselves from the national army and police.

In spite of a lifetime of business propaganda about how "satisfied" workers are with the cars, houses and other objects they receive in exchange for their living energy, workers expressed their "satisfaction" through a general strike which paralyzed all French industry for over a month. After being trained for a lifetime to "respect law and order," workers broke all the laws by occupying factories which don't "belong" to them because, they quickly learned, the cops are there to see to it that the factories continue to "belong" to capitalist owners. The workers learned that "law and order" is what keeps them from running their own productive activity, and that "law and order" is what they'd have to destroy in order to rule their own society. The cops came out as soon as workers acted on their dissatisfaction. Perhaps the workers had known all along about the cops in the background; perhaps that's why the workers had seemed so "satisfied." With a gun pointing at his back, almost any intelligent person would be "satisfied" to hold his hands up.

Workers in Paris and elsewhere began to accept the students' invitation to come to the University of Paris auditoriums (at the Sorbonne, Censier, Halle-aux-vins, Beaux Arts, etc.) to talk about abolishing money relations and turning the factories into social services run by those who make and those who use the products. Workers began to express themselves. That's when the owners and their administrators threatened civil war, and an enormous police and military machine was deployed to make the threat real. With this crass display of the "forces of law and order," the king stood momentarily naked: the repressive dictatorship of the capitalist class was visible to all. Whatever illusions people might have had about their own "consumer sovereignty" or "voting power," whatever fantasies they might have had about transforming capitalist society by buying or voting, they lost them. They knew that their "buying power" and "voting power" simply meant servility and acquiescence in the face of enormous violence. The student revolt and the general strike in France (like the Black Revolt in the U.S., like the anti-imperialist struggle on three continents) had merely forced the ever-present violence to expose itself: this made it possible for people to size up the enemy.

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[1] Mouvement du 22 mars, *Ce n'est qu'un debut, Continuons le combat*, Paris: Maspero, 1968.

In the face of the violence of the capitalist state, students, French workers, foreign workers, peasants, the well paid and the poorly paid, learned whose interests they had served by policing each other, by fearing and hating each other. In the face of the naked violence of the common oppressor, the divisions among the oppressed disappeared: students ceased to fight for privileges over the workers, and joined the workers; French workers ceased to fight for privileges over the foreign workers, and joined together with the foreign workers; farmers ceased to fight for a special dispensation, and joined the struggle of the workers and the students. Together they began to fight against a single world system that oppresses and divides students from workers, qualified workers from unqualified, French workers from Spanish, black workers from white, "native" workers from "home" workers, colonized peasants from the whole "metropolitan" population.

The struggle in France did not destroy the political and military power of capitalist society. But the struggle did not show that this was impossible:

- Students at a demonstration in Paris knew they could not defend themselves from a police charge, but some students didn't run from the police; they started building a barricade. This was what the March 22 Movement called an "exemplary action": a large number of students took courage, didn't run from the cops, and began building barricades.
- Students knew that they could not, by themselves, destroy the state and its repressive apparatus, yet they occupied and started running the universities, and in the streets they returned the cops' volley of teargas with a volley of cobblestones. This too was an exemplary action: workers in a number of factories took courage, occupied their factories, and were ready to defend them from their "owners."
- The first workers who occupied their factories in order to take them over and start running them knew that they could not destroy the power of the capitalist class unless all workers took over their factories and defended them by destroying the state and its repressive power, yet they occupied the factories. This too was an exemplary action, but these workers did not succeed in communicating the example to the rest of the workers: the government, the press, and the unions told the rest of the population that the occupying workers were merely having a traditional strike to get higher wages and better working conditions from the state and the factory owners.

Impossible? All this happened in a two-week period at the end of May. The examples were extremely contagious. Is anyone really sure that those who produce weapons, namely workers, or even that cops and soldiers, who are also workers, are immune?

“SCIENTIFIC BASIS” OF THE “COMMON SENSE”

A “social scientist” is someone who is paid to defend this society’s myths. His defense mechanism, in its simplest formulation, runs approximately as follows: He begins by assuming that the society of his time and place is the only possible form of society; he then concludes that some other form of society is impossible. Unfortunately, the “social scientist” rarely admits his assumptions; he usually claims that he doesn’t make any assumptions. And it can’t be said that he’s lying outright: he usually takes his assumptions so much for granted that he doesn’t even know he’s making them.

The “social scientist” takes for granted a society in which there’s a highly developed “division of labor,” which includes both a separation of tasks and a separation (“specialization”) of people. The tasks include such socially useful things as producing food, clothing and houses, and also such socially useless things as brainwashing, manipulating and killing people. To begin with, the “scientist” defines all of these activities as useful, because his society could not run without them. Next, he assumes that these tasks can only be performed if a given person is attached to a given task for life, in other words if the specialized tasks are performed by specialized people. He does not assume this about everything. For example, eating and sleeping are necessary activities; society would break down if these things were not performed. Yet even the “social scientist” does not think that a handful of people should do all the eating while the rest don’t eat, or that a handful of people should do all the sleeping while the rest don’t sleep at all. He assumes the need for specialization only about those activities which are specialized in his particular society. In the corporate-military society, a few people have all the political power, the rest have none; a handful of people decide what to produce, and the rest consume it; a handful of people decide what kinds of houses to build, and the rest live in them; a handful of people decide what to teach in classrooms, and the rest swallow it; a handful of people create and the rest are passive; a handful of people perform and the rest are spectators. In short, a handful of people have all the power over a specific activity, and the rest of the people have no power over it even when they are directly affected by it. And obviously the people who have no power over a specific activity do not know what to do with such power: they won’t even start learning what to do with it until they have it. From this the “scientist” concludes that people have neither the ability nor the desire to have such power, namely to control and decide about the social and material conditions in which they live. More straightforwardly, the argument says: people do not have such power in this society, and this society is the only form of society; therefore it’s impossible for people to have such power. In still simpler terms: People can’t have such power because they don’t have it.

Logic is not taught much in American schools, and the argument looks impressive when it is accompanied by an enormous statistical apparatus and extremely complicated geometrical designs. If a critic insists on calling the argument simplistic and circular, he's turned off as soon as the "scientist" pulls out figures calculated on computers inaccessible to the public, and he's turned out as soon as the "scientist" starts "communicating" in a completely esoteric language which has all the logical fallacies built-in, but which is comprehensible only to "scientific colleagues."

Mythological conclusions based on mythological assumptions are "proved" by means of the statistics and the charts; much of "applied social science" consists of teaching young people what kind of "data" to gather in order to make the conclusions come out, and much of "theory" consists of fitting this data to the pre-established formulas. By means of numerous techniques, for example, it can be " proved" that workers would rather have high paying jobs than enjoyable or meaningful jobs, that people "like" what they hear on the radio or see on television, that people are "members" of one or another Judeo-Christian cult, that almost anyone votes either for Democrats or for Republicans. Students are taught one set of methods for gathering the data, a second set for arranging them, a third set for presenting them, and "theories" for interpreting them. The apologetic content of the "data" is covered up by its statistical sophistication. In a society where eating depends on getting paid, and thus where doing "meaningful work" may mean one doesn't get paid, a worker's preference for high paying over meaningful jobs merely means he'd rather eat than not eat. In a society where people do not create and control what they hear on the radio or see on television, they have no choice but to "like" what they hear and see, or else to turn the damn thing off. People who know their friends would look at them funny if they were atheists prefer to go to one or another Church, and almost anyone who knows he's in a society where he'd lose all his friends as well as his job if he were a socialist or an anarchist obviously prefers to be a Democrat or a Republican. Yet such "data" serves as the basis for the "social scientist's" conception of people's possibilities and impossibilities, and even of their "human nature."

The interviews, polls, and statistical demonstrations about people's religious affiliations, electoral behavior, job preferences, reduce people to monotonous data. In the context of this "science," people are things, they are objects with innumerable qualities-and surprisingly enough, each one of these qualities happens to be served by one or another institution of the corporate-military society. It just so happens that people's "material tastes" are "satisfied" by corporations, that their "physical urges" are "satisfied" by the military, that their "spiritual tendencies" are "satisfied" by the cults, and that their "political preferences" are "satisfied" either

by the Republican or by the Democratic party. In other words everything about American corporate-militarism fits people just perfectly.

Everything is tabulated except the fact that a working person serves as a tool, that he sells his living time and creative ability in exchange for objects, that he doesn't decide what to make, nor for whom, nor why.

The "social scientist" claims to be empirical and objective; he claims to make no value judgments. Yet by reducing the person to the bundle of tastes, desires and preferences to which he's restricted in capitalist society, the "objective scientist" makes the bizarre claim that this bundle is what the worker is; and he makes the fantastic value judgment that the worker cannot be other than what he is in capitalist society. According to the "laws of human behavior" of this "science," the solidarity of students with workers, the occupation of factories by workers, the desire of workers to run their own production, distribution and coordination, are all impossible. Why? Because these things are impossible in capitalist society, and for these "scientists" who make no value judgments, existing societies are the only possible societies, and the corporate-military society is the best of all possible societies.

Given the value judgments of these experts ("who make no value judgments"), everyone in American society must be satisfied. For these valueless "scientists," dissatisfaction is a "value judgment" imported from abroad, for how could anyone not be satisfied in the best of all possible worlds? A person must have "foreign based ideas" if he doesn't recognize this as the best of all possible worlds; he must be unbalanced if he's not satisfied with it; he must be dangerous if he means to act on his dissatisfaction; and he must be removed from his job, starved if possible, and killed if necessary, for the continued satisfaction of the expert.

To the American social scientist, "human nature" is what people do in corporate-military America: a few make decisions and the rest follow orders; some think and others do; some buy other people's labor and the rest sell their own labor, a few invest and the rest are consumers; some are sadists and others masochists; some have a desire to kill and others to die. The "scientist" passes all this off as "exchange," as "reciprocity," as a "division of labor" in which people are divided along with tasks. To the "social scientist" this is all so natural that he thinks he makes no value judgments when he takes it all for granted. Corporations and the military even give him grants to show that it's always been this way: grants to demonstrate that this "human nature" is lodged in the beginning of history and in the depths of the unconscious. (American psychologists-especially "behaviorists"-make the ambiguous "contribution" of demonstrating that animals also have a "human nature"-the psychologists drive rats mad in a situation similar to a war which the psychologists themselves helped plan, and then they show that rats, too, have a desire to kill, that they have masochist tendencies,. . .)

Given this conception of "human nature," the strength of the corporate-military system does not reside in the potential violence of its army and police, but in the fact that the corporate-military system is consistent with human nature.

In terms of what the American "social scientist" takes for granted, when students and workers in France started to fight to do away with "reciprocity," "exchange," and the division of labor, they were not fighting against the capitalist police, but against "human nature." And since this is obviously impossible, the events that took place in May, 1968, did not take place.

"COMMON SENSE" EXPLODES

The question of what is possible cannot be answered in terms of what is. The fact that "human nature" is hierarchic in a hierarchic society does not mean that a hierarchic division of people among different tasks is necessary for social life.

It is not the capitalist institutions which satisfy human needs. It is the working people of capitalist society who shape themselves to fit the institutions of capitalist society.

When some people buy labor and others sell it, each fights to sell himself at the highest price, each fights to convince the buyer and himself that the next person is worth less.

In such a society, students who prepare to sell themselves as high-salaried managers and manipulators must tell their buyers and themselves that, as "professionals," they're superior to non-University manual workers.

In such a society, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) workers who sell themselves for higher-paying, easier jobs, frantically tell themselves and their buyers that they're better, work harder, and are more deserving than foreigners, Catholics, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Blacks; black "professionals" tell themselves that they're better than black manual workers; all whites tell themselves they're better than all blacks; and all Americans tell themselves they're better than South American, Asian or African "natives." Since WASPS systematically succeed in selling themselves at the highest price, everyone below tries to make himself as much a WASP as possible. (WASPS happen to be the traditional ruling class. If midgets systematically got the highest price, everyone below would try to be a midget.)

To keep its relative privileges, each group tries to keep the groups below from shaking the structure.

Thus in times of "peace" the system is largely self-policed: the colonized repress the colonized, blacks repress blacks, whites repress each other, the blacks, and the colonized. Thus the working population represses itself, "law and order" is

maintained, and the ruling class is saved from further outlays on the repressive apparatus.

To the "social scientist" and the professional propagandist, this "division of labor" is as natural as "human nature" itself. Unity among the different "interest groups" is as inconceivable to the "social scientist" as revolution.

While holding as "scientifically proved" that the different groups cannot unite in an anti-capitalist struggle, the expert does all he can to prevent such unity, and his colleagues design weapons just in case people did unite against the capitalist system.

Because sometimes the whole structure cracks.

The same expert who defines the capitalist system as consistent with "human nature," with people's tastes, wishes, desires, constructs the arsenal of myths and weapons with which the system defends itself. But what does the system defend itself against: human nature? If it has to fight against human nature to survive, then by the expert's own language, the system is extremely unnatural.

Thus while some experts define the rebellion in France as impossible because unnatural, their expert colleagues design the incapacitating gases with which cops can suppress such impossible rebellions. BECAUSE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

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