

**Autonomy
Press**

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**ART and
ANARCHISM**

**FARQUHAR
McLAY**

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FOREWORD

It is May 1982 as I write. The official unemployment total stands somewhere round about the three million mark. The real total is unquestionably very much higher—probably by a couple of million or even more. This cynical distortion is brought about by Job Creation Schemes and Youth Opportunity Programmes which help minimize the total and take pressure off the government whilst doing nothing whatever to ease the misery and waste of unemployment. The official total also ignores the vast numbers of married women who do not sign the unemployed register yet who are eager to take up a creative role in the community. Then there are the sick—a significant number of whom have been driven into illness by long years in the debilitating squalor of chronic unemployment. And we can add to all these the poor who pack Britain's antiquated jails: men and women who, ensnared by poverty and deprivation, have at last been squeezed right out of the system, into grim and filthy confines, through the gibbering mummery of the law.

Similarities with the situation which obtained in the Thirties are found only on the surface. At a deeper level there is one crucial difference. In the Thirties the working class—in the sense of a social group with a fixed relation to the means of production—still existed. As a result of the upper class monopoly of education, the ethics, ideology and cultural style of the working-class took on a solidity and cohesion which lent it cultural identity and was the source of its great strength. First popular education, which was in essence a bourgeois promotion aimed at fostering bourgeois sympathies in working-class minds, but more especially the advance of communications technology, particularly television, set about eroding the old working-class values. It was an attempt to strip man of his working-class identity, as at the time of the Industrial Revolution they sought to crush out of him his sense of personal identity. It goes on to this day. Television, owned and controlled by big business and the state, produces a mass cultural product which is a direct and unrelenting reflection of capitalist/fascist/materialist savagery: these are the new gods whose image we must do obeisance or be forever in outer darkness.

Before capitalism art had no existence outside of work. Work was, in fact, what we now call art. Before capitalism work held within it the

major expression of man's spiritual being. Capitalism, producing nothing but unwanted products and imposing the need to buy, to sell, to profit alienated work itself and structured it anew along uncreative and soul-stultifying lines. Work deprived of all spiritual content and fulfilling no genuine social need reduced man to the level of the machine he operated.

No one should grieve over the absence of such work. Socialist job-protection and the call for the "right" to do such work are proof only of the moral and political bankruptcy of the people who presume to speak for the workers.

It is among the millions of unemployed today, and the countless more of the future as the pitiless advance of automation and computerisation plays havoc with men's lives, that the revolution will have its roots. Texteth and Brixton, short-lived and ill-directed though these protests were, have made that much plain. For man's needs run far deeper than the diet of bread and circuses, pills and television, and the glamour of Westminster politics can ever satisfy.

Ultimately the Lord of man's destiny will not be the ogre in the White-house or in the Kremlin with his finger on the nuclear button— it will be man's hunger to create, to shape and control his own life, and to grow.

FARQUHAR McLAY

ART and ANARCHISM

In the December issue of ANARCHY 1970 George Gardstein wrote:

'A concern with 'the working class' or with 'workers' is not a humanistic concern, not a concern with real human beings. The term 'worker' denotes not a full person, but a component in production, a part-person, a role. To be concerned with 'the workers' is not to be concerned with men, but with abstractions. Industrialism treats men and women as mere functions, and is concerned with them only insofar as they play their roles properly. Socialism reveals its bourgeois basis by swallowing industrial jargon and the attitude to men that it denotes. When 'workers' stopped playing the role allotted to them by the Bolsheviks, and marched through St. Petersburg in 1921, Lenin said they were acting against the interests of the 'working class' (which they were: they were acting in their own interests as people) and Lenin had them shot. Socialist workerism is bourgeois ideology and viciously anti-human.

It is not difficult to find close at hand illustrations which support Gardstein's thesis. Take the Right To Work Campaign. The whole of the socialist movement, including sections of the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the various marxist groups, participated. And what was the case they were presenting? 'Here,' they were saying, 'here is the worker imploring you, the state or monopoly capitalism, begging you to allow him to allow him to continue in his role as worker— in other words, begging you to continue to exploit him.' Is it so surprising that the Right To Work Campaign got a wonderful press?

Another example is the famous Jimmy Reid Sit-in. Here we had workers actually continuing to produce without being paid any wages. There was, in Jimmy's own words, to be no bevvying, no bad language, no slacking, no unofficial tea-breaks, no wondering in and out any old hour: the workers were to keep going just as if the bosses were still present, which is what they did. Some people thought this was revolution. But the establishment and the media— they weren't fooled for a minute. Before too long Jimmy was inundated with offers, all of which he swiftly accepted, to appear on TV and in the newspapers to enlarge

upon this strange and wonderful new departure in worker/management cooperation. Needless to say Jimmy is no longer in industry: he is a full-time expounder of the ideology of workerism. Such men are always valuable to the state.

It is of course quite natural that the alienated worker should resist being thrown out of a job. It's not just the misery of the dole he has to fear. If you're doing alienated work, if you've had all forms of genuinely creative activity shut off from you all your life, your role as worker is your only source of identity. In capitalist society identity and work role are one and the same thing. The question is always what do you do for a living? and once that question is answered the proletarian need be examined no further. Whatever else he may have in him—the things he does for love rather than money—these are of no consequence, peripheral, just a way of passing the time. What determines the prole's fate is not entirely his relationship to the means of production, not the amount of money he takes away in his pay cheque—because after all it costs nothing to read the books which would open his world (or for that matter to write the books). What ultimately determines the prole's fate are the cultural class barriers within which he is trapped.

Far from trying to break down these barriers workerist propagandists like Reid and workerist politicians like Foot and Benn do their utmost to reinforce them. The idea of the worker changing into something else and ceasing to be a worker would make nonsense of this rhetoric. All right, they say, the millenium may one day come, but in the meantime we cannot allow you to be a man, a full-person, you have to stay a worker, a wage slave. They perpetuate the myth that there is something called 'the dignity of labour'—that the worker takes a pride in his work, even under capitalism, and therefore it is a crime to deprive him of 'the right to work'.

All this sounds very fine, but the reality is different. The worker is ordered to produce things on too big a scale for any one man or group of men to be able to relate to in any meaningful or self-satisfying way. They can't ask questions about what they produce. Paul Goodman in his COMMUNITAS lists some simple questions a worker ought to be able to ask:

Is the function good?

Bona fide?

Is it worthwhile?

Is it worthy of a man to do that?

What are the consequences?

Is it compatible with other basic human functions?

Is it a forthright or at least ingenious part of life?

Does it make sense?

Is the use as simple, ingenious, clear as the efficient means that produce it?

Is the using a good experience?

How many jobs under capitalist production at the present time could stand up to that kind of scrutiny?

If the worker could not only ask these questions but do something about it when the answers were in the negative then it might be possible to talk about him having some 'pride in his work'. The truth is he doesn't ask because he works blindly, automatically: the results of his labour have no bearing on his labour: what he thinks or doesn't think, feels or doesn't feel, has no bearing on the results of his labour: he is, in a word, alienated: he is his work and his work is alienated.

In a situation like that it's just a bad joke to talk about pride and dignity.

Only when work becomes art do the horizons broaden out sufficiently to allow us to talk about pride and dignity in labour. Generally speaking, in left-wing circles art is considered an irrelevance: a kind of fiddling, while the struggle is raging elsewhere: an evasion. Marxists tend to take this view.

When Hegel was setting up his philosophical system based on the dialectic of the spirit, he rejected art, because art was rooted in the sensuous, in sensation. He saw art as an outmoded form of thinking about the world, a primitive form of seeing the world, a form which had been superseded by the intelligence, the intellect, the spirit, mind—call it what you like. Art, as far as Hegel was concerned, had no place in the domain of the spirit.

So when Marx came along and turned Hegel's spiritual dialectic on its head, turned it into a materialist dialectic, art was again left out. It just wasn't then to be dealt with. To be negated.

For marxists art has no primary dynamic: it is to be accounted for in the usual way through an economic analysis of society. The marxist doesn't see art as a special language expressing the world within us, the world of imagination, the world of the human psyche, the deepest and most personal part of man. The marxist simply sees art as a class tool expressing class interests.

You can see the marxist approach to art in the social realism that flourished in the USSR in the wake of the revolution. Art, in fact, had become simple state propaganda. It was the same in fascist Germany, and here again Hegel was the intellectual springboard. It's not so much pictures in a gallery or stage censorship or even the burning of books—it's what the denial of art means in terms of the state's manipulation of the individual. Artists and writers are there to ask questions: they are there to empathise with all kinds of people, to explore every kind of human situation, to fetch up into the light of day things which the collectivist ego, the nationalistic ego, the class ego and the occupational ego strive to keep hidden. It is out of these questionings and explorations that art gets made, that experience is accumulated. If man is not free to be an artist, if he is not free to make things on which he can put his signature, so to speak, then he is not free at all.

As Kropotkin showed in *MUTUAL AID*, there was no such thing as art before capitalism. The work done in the free medieval cities we now call art. By the same token there was no such thing as a working class: each man's craft was what we now call his art. Let me just quote you a passage from Kropotkin*.

'If the medieval cities had bequeathed to us no written documents to testify to their splendour, and left nothing behind but the monuments of building art which we see all over Europe, from Scotland to Italy, and from Gerona in Spain to Breslau in Slavonia territory, we might yet conclude that the times of independent city life were times of the greatest development of human intellect during the Christian era down to the end of the eighteenth century. On looking, for instance, at a medieval picture representing Nuremberg with its scores of towers and lofty spires, each of which bore the stamp of free creative art, we can hardly conceive that three hundred years before the town was but a collection of miserable hovels. And our admiration grows when we go into the details of the architecture and decorations of each of the countless churches, bell-towers, gates, and communal houses which are scattered all over Europe as far east as Bohemia and the now dead towns of Polish Galicia. Not only Italy, that mother of art, but all Europe is full of such monuments. The very fact that of all arts architecture—a social art above all—had attained the highest development is significant in itself. To be what it was it must have originated from an eminently social life.

Medieval architecture attained its grandeur—not only because it was a natural development of handicraft; not only because each building, each architectural decoration, had been devised by men who knew through the experience of their own hands what artistic effects could be attained from

stone, iron, bronze, or even from simple logs or mortar; not only because each monument was the result of collective experience, accumulated in each 'mystery' or craft—it was grand because it was born out of a grand idea.

'It sprang out of a conception of brotherhood and unity fostered by the city. It had an audacity which could only be won by audacious struggles and victories: it had that expression of vigour, because vigour permeated all the life of the city. A cathedral or a communal house symbolised the grandeur of an organism of which every mason and stone-cutter was the builder, and a medieval building appears—not as a solitary effort to which thousands of slaves would have contributed the share assigned them by one man's imagination; all the city contributed to it.

'The lofty bell-tower rose upon a structure, grand in itself, in which the life of the city was throbbing—not upon a meaningless scaffold like the Paris iron tower, not as a sham structure of stone intended to conceal an iron frame as has been done in the Tower Bridge. The cathedral of a medieval city was intended to glorify the grandeur of the city, to symbolise the union of its crafts, to express the glory of each citizen in a city of his own creation.'

Which is just about as far as you can get from anything that prevails today. Industrialism put an end to the worker as artist. The cybernetics revolution and the advance of automated technology may well put an end to the worker as worker. I would like to see that. But we know that the new elite, the systems analysts, will pursue the state's priorities rather than ours. These new technologies can be highly selective: space is researched, not oceanography, chemical weapons, not agriculture, cars and aircraft, not the city transport system. I'm not a medievalist, I'm not proposing we try and turn the clock back, and neither was Kropotkin—he was only highlighting an evolutionary pattern. At the same time I think it would be hopeless to look for global miracles from the new technologies in the future: as long as the state is running the show they will be used against human beings, they will be used to manipulate and neuter and keep the great mass of the people in bondage. We will still be living in a world of scarcity economics, because new technologies will no doubt be able to create scarcity much more efficiently than today's haphazard methods.

All right, we have a situation where the people are moronised by the work they do. The worker may be better educated, in the formal sense, than ever before, but bourgeois education is not helping him to break his chains, his cultural chains. It would be strange if it did.

Bourgeois culture is above all a commercial enterprise. Its whole dynamic is pecuniary. Political democracy brought education to the working class—and communications technology, the cinema, radio, television and the printing press had a whole new market opening up to it. All the excreta of bourgeois culture flooded that market. Serious art vanished into little theatres, some of them no bigger than this room, little magazines, which mostly went unread; life-enhancing books disappeared from the shelves in public libraries to make room for the pot-boilers, or the pseudo cultural, or the pseudo scientific, or the endless stream of political memoirs—Churchill, MacMillan, Wilson, Shinwell, George Brown. In the formal education prescribed by the state, things were no better: you went a long way before you came across any serious criticism of the basic assumptions which underlie the role of work in the community: before you came across what Paul Goodman calls, in a kind of technical phrase, 'a critique of functionalist aesthetic'.

This of course would be the ultimate subversion.

The truth is that the prole exposed to all this bourgeois stimuli seemed less likely than ever to break his chains. Television was doing what the policeman and the teacher and the dole queue and the church had never completely succeeded in doing: the prole was coming round, not to fear the system, but to fall in love with it. TV was steering his thoughts, his emotions, his values. That other circus, parliament, had an exactly similar effect on the so-called revolutionaries who left Clydeside to become MPs in the thirties: Gallagher, Maxton, Shinwell, McGovern, etc. Formal education was not there to liberate the prole: it was there, as a conditioning process, to bind up his thinking faculties along with his physical.

William Morris defined art as 'that which is, or should be, done by the ordinary working man'. He wrote this: 'Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives... The hope of pleasure in the work itself... I think that to all living things there is a pleasure in the exercise of their energies, and that even beasts rejoice in their being lithe and swift and strong. But a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body... If we could work thus we would be men'.

Those sentiments were never taken as a serious proposition in Morris's day. The workman's skills represented financial profits for the boss class, nothing else. And to our 20th century ears they sound like a utopian pipe dream. The 19th century was bad, and everybody knows

just how bad it was, but compare some of the products of the 19th century with like objects manufactured today. In furniture, in cloth, in building, in simple every day objects like porcelain tea cups, wash stands, picture frames, cutlery, fireside poker, letter racks—all things which you would find in an ordinary working man's house—they have a finish which cannot be matched anywhere today. Men made these things, often in atrocious conditions and on starvation wages, men made these things and made them well, because it's man's instinct to achieve quality and wholeness.

Given the adverse conditions in which these things were made, imagine what these men could have done had they full control over their work.

It was the boss class, greedy for every greater profits, who drove art out of work and who drove work into areas where no art was possible. And it is not without significance that miners, doing the most degrading work of all, are the most fiercely workerist you'll find. They are miners, nothing else. Their total identity is the pit. And their languish and shrink, not only as individuals, but as whole communities, when that identity is lost. The conventional wisdom is that it is purely the economic collapse which demoralises such men. But was it not demoralising going down that pit in the first place? 'Crawling about like a snail in the mud,' as Joe Corrie put it was the beginning of their demoralisation. When the conquistadors put the Inca agricultural workers into the silver mines there were mass suicides. Of course the Inca people did not have the benefit of the Protestant work ethic nor the cunning irrationality of a trade union movement which would enable them to glory in their degradation.

I can hear the words of a very good Scottish poet as I say these things:

Caw cannie, ma freen, wi the myners,
Caw cannie wi tongue an wi pen,
Caw cannie wi grumphin an clackin:
They earn thur py lik men.

And TS Law goes on in that same poem to compare the rhythm of the miner's pick-axe howking out coal to the rhythm of a maker dinging out a poem. I'm quite certain the rhythm's the same but the miner produces profits not poems. There's rhythm in operating a cash register: there's no glory for the girls in Woolworths and Tescos. Men are unwilling to accept that the work they do diminishes them as men. They invest it with what ought to be there but isn't there—art, creativity, joy even.

Today people talk about shoddy workmanship. But there is no workmanship. For the most part workers have become, and at an ever increasing rate are becoming, as Marx predicted, nothing more than machine minders. This need not be a bad thing in areas where the work was only drudgery labour anyway, as say the mines, if, that is, the worker controlled the machine, but it's the machines that dictate the pace, the quality, the nature of the working environment, the scarcity, the surplus, the obsolescence.

I don't believe men change their instincts. It is obvious that the proletarian is spiritually deprived, because all positive, life-enhancing, socially useful avenues of self-expression are denied him, but this doesn't mean his basic instinctual needs in self-expression and self-fulfillment are gone from him. They are repressed, but there's plenty of evidence that they go on living.

The prole may have no art, but he's too shrewd to go for the pseudo in art, he leaves that to the non-proletarian members of the working class. Because of course the whole of the working class isn't proletarian. You identify the prole by the job he does or by the job he's been thrown out of. Many working class people have nothing whatever in common with proletarians either culturally or financially. The prole is by no means the least well off member of the working class.

If we were to consider the prole's plight in terms of economics and nothing else, and that informs the basic rhetoric of all leftists except the anarchists, we would be forced to admit, if we were being honest, that the prole might have more to lose in money terms than certain other so-called conservative or bourgeois members of society. It's not an easy notion for a lot of people on the left to live with, but the prole or at least an appreciable number of them are as tied up in the irrationality of capitalism as say any advertising agency. Witness the Trade Unions whose funds are heavily invested in capitalism.

But in this neo-slave society the validity of economics as a gauge of human freedom is an illusion. What matters is that freedom is gone, that the possibility of spiritual growth is gone, that the possibility of self expression is distorted, that art has been divorced from work, that hand has been divorced from brain, and that as a result man is no longer a man but a function, no longer a maker but a trained consumer.

I'm not going to offer any global solutions. It's easy to say this should be done, or that should be done. It may be as much as any of us can do to try and identify the problem aright. When you start asking the

right questions, it usually means the answer isn't far to seek. If you're not seeing the problem in its totality, or the right way round, you won't be asking the right questions and the solution you come up with will effect no radical change. Politicians and economists do this all the time. They like to think the problem is political or economic or legalistic. Committees of enquiry can operate at that level. The machine minder's alienation goes untouched.

The kind of militancy which is permitted by the state—militancy in pursuit of better wages and conditions—poses no real threat to capitalism. At the end of the day it is just another form of concurrence with the system: as voting is.

The crucial thing for the state is that proles stay proles. The crucial thing is that the proletarian workers do not attempt in large numbers to detach themselves from their role. At the first sign of any such move becoming possible the state takes immediate action to defend itself.

There was an interesting development in the Sixties, during the Paris students revolt, when the students set up a forum, or if you like a real university, within the university, and threw out a well-publicised invitation to the workers to abandon the automated production lines and take their places in their own university. The French government wasn't slow to see the danger. They stepped in with the same kind of violence as Jarewski brought down on the Polish universities. It was not only brutal physical violence: what followed was a total clamp-down on students activities, a weeding out of revolutionary organisations within the university, and the re-establishment of the old elitest ambience which renders academic work irrelevant to the social conditions we are at any given time living through.

No government likes things to be in a state of flux. They don't like open-ended situations. They like to be quite certain where all the roads are leading. Everything has to be reconnoitered, charted, rendered safe. Attempting in active co-operation with workers to devise their own curriculum, this went beyond what any state would permit.

Jean Paul Sartre wrote: 'The possibility of detaching oneself from a situation in order to take a point of view concerning it is precisely what we call freedom. No sort of materialism will ever explain this transcendence of a situation, followed by a turning back to it. The revolutionary philosophy must be a philosophy of transcendence.'

This is something of course which the prole is helpless to attempt.

He is exhorted on all sides not to transcend his situation but to identify with it: this is workerism. The prole is not geared to the destruction of his own class as a class. His situation may be ameliorated but not abolished. The idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat would only make sense if the proletariat acquired the power to will itself out of existence. I would much rather go for the Syndicalist idea of workers' control, but only because I feel sure if the prole had a free choice he would not do the work he had control over, and that he would have the freedom in an anarcho-syndicalist set-up to change the pattern and processes of production, so that work would no longer be alien to the best things that man aspires to. When work can reflect these things—brotherhood and mutual co-operation—the masses, in the words of Kropotkin, 'will have released their artistic and constructive genius which, at the present time, we see as the best guarantee of a still loftier evolution of our race.' And we who live in the last quarter of the 20th century may add that we also see it as the best guarantee for the survival of the race, since survival has become much more problematic than the hope of evolution.