

UNIVERSITY & SOCIETY a time

In this, the first publication of John Shingler's cogent analysis of liberal society, the commitment of youth to ceaselessly challenge the society in which they live is reinforced. He is one of the few faculty members of Canada's University community who openly stands against middle-class ethics.

Mr. Shingler is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at McGill University in Montreal. He first presented this particular viewpoint of our social and educational system in Winnipeg. The occasion was the eleventh National Seminar of the Canadian Union of Students.

The morning that this article appeared, John Shingler became the man everyone wanted to speak to. And speak he did.

Until that morning the conviction of most students was that both the university and the social system were in need of great reform. But now they realized that the need for action was immediate, that their efforts must be cohesive and concentrated through a bold stroke attack against our present educational and social values.

There comes a time, in the life of every man in every generation, when he is finally compelled by the exigency of his condition to question the basis and assumptions, the implications and the possibilities of his life, his belief, his actions and his future. That time has now come for men and women of this generation, not simply in Canada, but in all the industrial societies of the North Atlantic world. The questions we must ask ourselves are:

What is the character and the quality of our society?

What do we do with our lives?

What alternatives do we have?

The answers are grim. Our society and the society like it, are a drab and dreary monotonous grey. They waste our potential and they crush our spirit. They deny us the possibility of our self-realization as human beings.

One third of mankind is trapped in societies of industrial slavery where a false productivity, manipulated wants and a subtly repressive indoctrination create an army of will-less workers in the factories and the mines, the shops and the offices. Minds are distorted by a sustained and totalitarian assault upon the sense, in public and private, through ceaseless commands, blandishments and exhortations to buy, to consume and to produce. Faceless grey men obey the injunctions of the structural imperative and the functional specific, the coldly impersonal, unrelenting and merciless Laws of Nature which are man's own creation in the technological society. Men, women and children eke out an ever-extended existence, the only purpose of which becomes eventually to defeat time and death through an unconscious self-immolation. Perhaps we should raise a statue to the desperate hero of our age. The Unknown Bus Driver or to the unsung soldier of our army of production. The Unknown Assembly Line worker; or to our hidden Priest, The Unknown Jingle Writer.

It is in this same world that the governments of emasculated masses spend hundreds of billions of dollars on the material of control: armaments, in the form of guns, bombs, bullets, gasses, germs, missiles, as well as tanks, ships, and planes; trained specialists in violence, destruction and death, the soldiers and the police; and propaganda, the never ending incitement of the people by their governments to sustain their own servitude. These governments, our governments, the governments of mankind, now have it in their power to burn and to bury, to destroy and to desecrate all of mankind many times over, they assure us.

At the same time the corporations who define our environment, and by extension ourselves, defile, destroy and desecrate our natural habitat while they poison our minds and our bodies. Mankind is literally in imminent danger of mastering Nature into a desert.

Two thirds of mankind endure short lives of hunger, disease and ignorance, trapped in a vicious circle of suffering, want and frustration. While the gap between the rich and the poor of the globe grows wider, the entire population of mankind is increasing at a rate which will ultimately impel us to question the permissibility of any increase at all. The Third World is compelled to take up arms to achieve self-determination; to wrest control of its own destiny from the grip of international imperialism, to define itself and hence to liberate itself.

It is in the context of these conditions—the universal repression of many by national state bureaucracies, the enslavement of man to the structural imperatives of an abused technology, the despoliation of man's natural environment through the rapacious short-sightedness of corporate power, the perversion of man by state-controlled educational systems, the exploitation of man in both the industrial societies and the Third World, the deprivation and suffering of man in hunger, disease and ignorance, found side by side with his humiliation and alienation throughout the world — it is in the face of this situation in all its stark horror and cruel absurdity, that we ask:

What can our society be?

What can we do with our lives?

What alternatives can we create?

The answer must be that we are confronted with an appalling paradox—a supreme irony—in that on the one hand there exists the reality of suppression, deprivation, scarcity and suffering, while on the other there is the possibility of material plenty, spiritual recreation, human liberation and self-realization, and communitarian harmony. The compelling and inevitable task of this generation must, ineluctably, be the transformation of itself and its world.

We must seek to develop our own capacity, and the capacity of others to envisage, and thus to will, a world:

in which work ceases to be drudgery and becomes instead a joyful participation in and contribution to the life of all so much so that the awful distinction between work and leisure becomes incomprehensible and recreation ceases to be a synonym for psychotic masturbation; in which the psychiatry of adjustment and manipulation is abandoned, the statistical definition of normalcy and deviance gives way to fundamental human values and where obsessive concern with sterile conformity is replaced by the self-love and self-respect of each individual in all his glorious egocentricity; in which the university becomes a community where learning is secondary to wisdom, knowledge to love, and cleverness to honesty — so that education, as a word and a practice, ceases to be sterile socialization and becomes a continuing process to self-renewal and self-development as the individual acquires knowledge of his environment and transforms himself.

Our immediate goal should be the transformation of the university, in the context of a generational assault upon the imperfect world to which we are the heirs. The reformation of the university, however, can be and must be seen to be possible only in the context of the revolutionary transformation of our society, its ethos, its mores, its institutions, its practices and its policies. Whether the transformation of the university is a precondition for the transformation of society or vice-versa, is a moot point. The resolution of this as an intellectual problem, however, can occur only in the context of social reality. The verbal debate could last forever—it is the active, wilful attempt alone which will tell us the nature of the dynamic relationship between university and society. It is on this basis that I suggest we act where we have a constituency—that is to say, where we have both power, defined as angry and significant people, and issues, defined as the need for transformation in terms of participation and product.

The contemporary university is not a community of scholars. It is a factory, the function of which is the production of information and personnel, for deployment in the appropriate lacunae and interstices of the technological society. On this one side the university is locked into the national education system. It is from here that it receives its raw material in the form of colonized minds. On the other side the university is harnessed to the productive system. It is to this machine that it deploys the finished product in the form of administrators, managers and apologists, all of whom at the same time act as consumers. The primary harnessing of the university derives from its dependency upon either governmental bureaucracies or prosperous alumni, (both supporters of the orthodoxy), for funds and facilities. This relationship of subordination is reinforced to the point of blurring this distinction, by the traffic of faculty and bureaucrats between the university and the other corporations.

A central function of the university today is the processing and packaging of personnel. For analytic purposes we may break down this function into the following categories:

SOCIALIZATION

By compartmentalizing knowledge, necessarily

so in term of the demand for skilled specialists and experts, eschewing values and commitment to an ethic, by mocking the idea of wisdom and love (the use of which words should bring a flush of embarrassment to my ingenuous cheek) and decrying the possibility of an ultimate truth, the university successfully inculcates the notion of an ineluctable and incomprehensible social process, which, with appropriate tinkering can work to the benefit of all. In so doing it attains its unstated goal of mystifying social relations to a point at which the desired subservience on the part of those receiving their education is finally achieved. All is well in the best of all possible worlds, and if it is not, a committee can be set up to investigate into and report on the situation six months hence. Meanwhile the world around us, and we with it, all in the hands of blind bureaucrats, goes to hell in a hand-basket.

RITE DE PASSAGE

A University degree can, as long as one has the necessary characteristics, provide one with the key to a well-paying job in the corporate structure. The fact that one holds a university degree is received as a signal that one conforms. This perception of the fact is a correct one — by and large. Most university graduates with a primary degree have been on the treadmill for eighteen years — since the age of five. The products of the professional and graduate schools have been at it even longer — some at long as twenty-five years. During this period they have written more examinations, read more garbage, and listened to more banalities than candidates for the elite posts in the imperial administration of Mandarin China. They wear short hair, stiff, white collars and pipes. They are affable and nod either sagely or sleepily. They seldom think and they never challenge. They have come out of a colonial system at an age when the average citizen of the Roman Empire had already died and they are such good natives that the only fantasy alternative that their mind can embrace is the gatefold of Playboy magazine, which provides plastic sex for plastic people.

RECRUITMENT AND ELIMINATION

The university then, recruits and eliminates. The clever, the unscrupulous, the schizophrenic and

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