

Working “Within the System”

CrimethInc. Special Report

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If you beat them at their own game, you've lost.

So... you're in a band, with a really important message, and you want to get it out to as many people as possible — so you're trying to get really popular and sell lots and lots of records. Or perhaps you're a political activist and you think that it's necessary to use the mainstream media to educate people about certain issues. It seems to make sense that you should use these methods to reach people, because otherwise, who will notice you? Yes, you realize that you're making compromises with the very system you're trying to fight, but it'll be worth it in the end... and we all have to make compromises, don't we? It's worth considering whether we really do after all, just as it's worth questioning whether getting ahead in their system of cutthroat competition and mass-marketing can ever really help us change the world. What would happen if we stopped compromising, stopped playing their game altogether and concentrated all our efforts on creating channels of our own for spreading ideas in new ways?

The Revolution Cannot Be Televised

Of course they want you on their television show, radio program, rock festival, major label. They don't care whether they're selling mouthwash or anarchist revolution as long as they can keep people watching and buying. They know that sooner or later people are bound to get bored and fed up with the mindless, passionless drivel that they normally have to offer, and they count on you to keep new ideas and styles coming for them to exploit; without that, they'd have nothing new to sell people. They know if they can find ways to sell your own expressions of outrage back to you, to cash in on the very frustration that their system creates, they've got you beat. They know that no message you could spread through their channels could be more powerful than the message that your use of their medium itself sends: stay tuned. No awareness you could possibly raise through television or CDs sold in shopping malls is more important than the awareness of the power of individuals to act for themselves. Television watching and supermarket shopping keep people passive, watching things that they can never take part in and people they can never meet, buying what is marketed to them by corporations rather than making their own music, their own ideas, their own lives. To motivate people to act for themselves, you have to contact them more directly.

The Values of Mass Production

We're taught to think of our success in terms of numbers, aren't we? If touching one person's life is a good thing, then touching one thousand people's lives must be a great thing. It's easy to see where we learned to think this way: our whole society revolves around mass production. The more units we can move, the more customers we can serve, the more votes we can get, the more money and stuff we have, the better, right?

But maybe it's not possible to touch a thousand people as deeply or as powerfully as one person or ten people. And maybe it's not really so revolutionary after all to have one person or group telling everybody else what's right. Wouldn't it be better to try a decentralized approach where everyone works closely with those around them, instead of a few people leading an anonymous mass? Do you, or your band, or your label have to save the world all by yourselves? Why don't

you trust anyone else to do it with you? (And have you noticed how much you have to stomp all over everyone else to get that success you plan to use to spread your message?)

One political band playing a show to nine hundred people can recite revolutionary slogans for everyone present to stand and listen to, but they remain out of arm's reach of most of the people there, up on a pedestal as "musicians," "artists," "heroes." On the other hand, one band playing an equally impassioned show to forty people, in a more intimate setting, can interact on a personal level with everyone there, and make it clear that everyone is capable of doing what they do. Thus they have the potential to spark four more bands (or similar revolutionary projects), increasing their impact exponentially. The same goes for record labels, for writers, for speakers and artists, and of course for "leaders" of any kind.

Working Within the System

Most of us don't get much pleasure out of the things we have to do to work inside the system. We'd rather be reading books on our own than writing assigned papers for school, rather be using our skills, energy, and time to work on projects of our own choice than selling ourselves to employers. But we feel like we have to work for them, whether we like it or not. It never occurs to us how much more fun, and perhaps more effective, it could be to take our labor out of their hands and do something else with it. Sure it would be hard at first, but nothing could be harder than to have to put up with this bullshit for the rest of our lives, right? Better we dedicate ourselves to replacing it than just dealing with it.

But, you protest, you're still going to be fighting the status quo, you're going to change things from the inside, right? That's what they tell you, at least. Of course the system has "appropriate procedures" for people with grievances to go through to try to make things better; that's the safety valve to release pressure when people get too worked up. Do you think the powers that be would really let anyone use their own laws and methods to depose them? If this system provided opportunities for real change, people would have taken advantage of them a long time ago. Countless generations have set out convinced that they would succeed where other had failed — that's where lawyers and reporters come from, you know. They're the cynical corpses of idealistic young men and women who thought the system could be reformed.

Besides, can you trust yourself to work "within the system" for the right reasons? We're all programmed to want "success," to measure ourselves by wealth and social status, whether we like it or not. Could it be that you want to become a journalist or professor of political science or rock star because you can't bring yourself to consider any other options seriously, because you're afraid to try cutting to the safety line that ties you to the security of a mainstream lifestyle? And how can you be sure that it isn't that dark corner of your heart pushing you to seek success, the part that loves the attention and feelings of greatness your popularity and social standing bring? Sure it feels great to be able to tell your parents what your goals are and have them applaud your decisions... but is that any way to decide how to go about changing the world? Let's listen to our hearts, trust our instincts, and refuse to participate in anything that bores or outrages us. We need to nourish our idealism and our willingness to take risks, not work out new ways to integrate our frustration and our desperation for change back into the society that engendered them. Remember, every day we spend "using the system" is another day longer we'll have to wait until new networks and better ways of life replace the old ones.

How do we get out of here?

Yes, it often seems like there's no alternative to working "within the system" if we want to get things done and not keep our ideas quarantined within the narrow confines of the underground. But why keep the underground quarantined to narrow confines? Surely if we put all our energy into expanding the spaces in which we can interact as free, equal human beings, rather than trying to repair the burning machinery of this doomed society, we could make at least as much of an impact. Imagine what we could achieve if we kept all our potential in our own hands, and refused to waste it ever again working for their system for even a minute. There's no excuse to let even a fraction of our lives go by doing things we don't love, or to let any of our talents and efforts serve to prop up a world order we oppose. Instead, let's fight so hard, and live so hard, that others inside the cages of mainstream life can see us and are inspired to join us in our complete rejection of the old world and all its bullshit. And let's make our communities something greater than they are; let's make them more open and more capable of offering life-support, so that others really will be able to join us.

The system we live under offers only losers' games: economic competition instead of cooperation, popularity contests in place of community, the struggle to measure up to social norms instead of the pursuit individual dreams. The reason we're working towards something better in the first place is that everyone loses in these games — so why play them? It's up to us to create new games, more joyful, exciting games to replace the old ones. Let's not try to beat them at their games, but make them join us in ours!

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