

The Degeneration of the Modern American Worker

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A spectre is haunting the American Left. The spectre represents an honest conversation about the degeneration of the American Worker. Why might the American Worker be so disillusioned? What is the kind of significant exploitation the modern American Worker experiences in the First-World, when there is so much exploitation from the American ruling-class on distant shores? Can the American proletariat even be organized into a revolutionary mass? What kind of stake in such a mass do they not see?

This is indicative of an American revolutionary left in crisis. Some answer these questions with no optimism whatsoever, and I applaud such honesty. The best answers account for 200 years of industrial Capitalism, its progression into an advanced global capitalism and related phenomena such as globalization and imperialism, decades of McCarthyism and COINTEL-PRO, and countless other variables that have degenerated the identity of the “worker” in today’s society.

The Exploitation of the Modern American Worker

What kind of exploitation does the modern American worker face? Some would say not enough to identify as a part of the international working class struggle, but I would encourage them to take a closer examination at poverty and other marginalizations in America.

Light industry, Retail, Restaurant, and Service workers and State workers make up what people view as the American working class. We’ve become increasingly successful at importing our exploitation from the Third World. This pacifies and keeps the working American ignorant of exploitation. This is all the manifestation of the Imperialist conquest.

Between us and the Boss (C.E.O.s and Bureaucrats) lies an even more difficult mass to navigate, the management sub-class. Here you have worker’s increasingly indoctrinated by the culture of wealth. They serve their living salary and wage. They are taught and trained to not sympathize with the people they give the unlivable wage to. Above all, they are taught to alienate the worker from their class.

The mainstream unions that used to serve the worker, that used to agitate for our political gains, now unquestionably serve the status quo. They’ve been built into the Political Industrial Complex, being a part of the matrix of capital relations that exists to make a futile attempt to reconcile the antagonisms of a class society. The worst of these have frequently been on the wrong side of history in the previous periods in labour history. Today, big organized-labour (our beloved crony-unions) consistently fail the working class, and rarely are thought of as something to further revolutionary cause.

So how do we organize a mass that is so bought off, pacified, and generally counter-revolutionary? My answer is we need to start at the bottom, the *very bottom*. In the lower-class of America, one can paint a picture of the unemployed, the undocumented, the diseased, the homeless and the lowest wage-workers. The exploitation does not begin and end with the factory worker, we find a different kind of disempowerment with those ostracized from production. To not extend the same solidarity to those unable to harness production in the first place is an obviously grave error.

The mainstream unions, quite intentionally, neglects this lumpen-proletarian mass. Giving them no voice, the AFL-CIO recently responded to the wave of corporations cutting their full-time employee base, as an opportunity to attack socialized healthcare. While a critique and

an honest conversation about health-care amongst worker organizations is warranted, there is no long-term strategy in this, because there's largely no long-term strategy for the mainstream union in general. They are largely bought off as well, and they accept the answer we are given by the Capitalists: the future for the American Worker is not worth insuring.

The statistics on poverty and income disparity don't really show evidence that the American worker is without hardship. We cannot act as if we've been bought off by the allure of a living wage either, because minimum wage in this country is hardly livable anymore. What is standing in-between the worker and their class?

The Spectacle of the Middle-Class

This might seem like an odd place to talk about Debord, but I can find no more suitable theorist to talk about this phenomenon of the "middle-class" in America. Debord speaks of "the Spectacle" as being a spontaneous "capital accumulated to the point at which it becomes an image", not an image as we might think at first, but rather "a relationship mediating communication and life through the mediation of images". The "Spectacle" is a unique collection of commodified and alienated subjects, that probably can't be described to justice here, I recommend this.

It goes without saying that few Americans want to be associated with either the rich or poor. The middle-class serves as a manifestation of the "spectacle" in this sense. The cost for gaining membership in this middle-class is total alienation, and a lifestyle of complete subservience to capital (different from the involuntary submission working class people experience, I make no appeal to a "drop out" from capitalism). People will sell their souls for comfort and convenience under Capitalism.

The article from the Atlantic above touches on some interesting points one might not expect of them:

"Not finding popular depictions of wealth and poverty similar to our own lived experiences, we determine we must be whatever's left over. Picking "middle class" is easy enough to do because, again, the language doesn't present much to go on in terms of what this label describes."

Asking for a definition of middle-class is like asking for someone to explain quantum physics. If you even get an answer, it will most likely be come arbitrary number-game, somehow denoting an unstable grey area where we have managed to alienate ourselves from both the haves and have-nots.

Obviously, anyone fundamentally socialist has come to the logical conclusion that there can only be one of two relationships to capital, and therefore two irreconcilably antagonistic classes. The state and monopolized finance capitalism (banks) serve as tools for the ruling class to attempt reconcile these antagonisms. The middle-class is the collection of images and ideals that serve as a reconciled and alienated mass.

National Identity: The Cancer of Class-Consciousness

In place of a strong class consciousness, we find a nearly ubiquitous national identity. This is quite possibly the most difficult thing to organize in the face of. I can think of no greater purpose

for this national identity to serve that imperialism. We have to have a strong national identity to invoke the masses to build a military hegemony over the Third-World to force them to submit to our wealth.

So we can see class-consciousness as a threat to the American Nationalism, which goes unspoken and unquestioned, in contrast to what is “nationalist” elsewhere. We frequently hear the word “Patriotic” in place of “Nationalistic”. If you think having a conversation with someone in America about class, try having a conversation with them about *internationalism*. Political international solidarity in America is frequently seen as the responsibility of diplomats and foreign affairs committees.

To be class-conscious is to see yourself as part of a global system beyond our borders, and at great threat to the national identity, as a part of a global struggle. Much like the middle class, the national identity, regardless of the demographics of its occupants, is a white, male and straight identity. Any one of any other identity must sell and sacrifice their culture to assimilate. We might use images of assimilation to show the progressiveness of middle-class America, but this is about preservation of the American hegemony. There’s a hierarchy of identities in America, and placing anything above “American” is seen as one of the worst forms of betrayal.

The Management Class and Bullshit Jobs

What do we do about the goons of capitalism? Is it the relationship of the manager to capital? We have frequently designated “the boss” as our enemy in the workplace, but what about the hordes of bosses in between the American Worker and his exploiter, the owner?

The IWW explicitly excludes the Employer/Manager class from the working class (and therefore their membership). The same lines in the sand are drawn by most Anarchists.

“...But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world’s population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the “service” sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.”

– David Graeber in “The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs“

I theorize much of this sector, the “bullshit jobs”, which I also would say is loosely synonymous with “bullshit management”, are unable to be organized in the current climate of America. We find a difficult sea of ambiguity when trying to analyze their relationship to capital, but it can be easily noted that these folks have a stake in perpetuating exploitation. They also have no stake in ending imperialism, they have been given a more livable wage from the Third-World super-profits and stand to profit from it. *This is not the mass to advance Anarchism in America*, or any other form of revolutionary socialism.

Schisms in the American Left: Post-workerism and Third-Worldism

Smacks to the face of American wage-slaves don't just come from the mouth of Rick Santorum, a rising and noticeable trend is showing that the American Left has some internalized issues to deal with as well. Mostly, they are honest and fair-critiques, but they fail to see that it is the lack of class consciousness and degeneration at cause for this. Some even say unorganized American worker as still being proletarian, which some rather puzzling deviation from any classical revolutionary socialist theory that I know of.

The party tenets of the late mostly American Maoist Internationalist Movement (I don't recommend this site, it's grossly outdated, looks horrible, and the party is defunct as it is) explicitly define American and other First World wage-workers as a petit-bourgeois "labour aristocracy", bought off by capital and luxuries. While I appreciate the honest critique, it strikes me as mystical and unscientific. You cannot come to a dialectical class analysis about the American proletariat without accounting that capital still accumulates within the imperialist First-World nations themselves. While I think the identity of the "worker" in America has degenerated to a considerable degree, I think this is a great error to revise the science of class analysis, and the significance of class distinctions being made by one's relationship to production. That is the science on which revolutionary communist movements are based on.

Do I feel that super-profits from Imperialism have an effect on the degeneration of the American proletariat's class consciousness? Absolutely. I uphold the anti-imperialist theories espoused by most Maoists as sound. However, I don't enjoy people espousing class-analysis in which they make assumptive claims as to what someone's *actual relationship to production and capital*, and revising this as the entire basis for class-analysis.

Regardless, enough poking fun at the darker and confused corners of Leninist micro-parties (MIM's "Third-Worldism" is actually a guilty pleasure of mine). A painfully vocal current within Anarchism makes atrocious claims of "post-workerism", whose analysis is little more than a polemical diatribe, washed up with mystical post-modernism and life-stylist hogwash. Not to make blanket statements, but this new "post-leftist" trend within Anarchism is a mess. People believing we're ready to "move past" things like identity and privilege politics is a dangerous first-world delusion in and of itself. The best of these claim an ideological line from Insurrectionist Anarchist Communist Luigi Galleani. The worse elements of these believe we are capable of revolution through lifestyle, and the absolute worst are those who want to devolve to a time in which we were without language and toilet paper.

One of the biggest undertones (largely unspoken) within Post-Left Anarchism is an mystical (more so than MIM/TW) undertone of *austerity and eugenicism*. Why are Post-Leftists austericrats and eugenicists? They are still anti-capitalist, and often inherently (and admittedly) leftist because Anarchism inherently is as well. The problem is they lack a revolutionary mechanism that includes those who depend on social safety nets to survive. They fail to secure a future for societies most marginalized. This is just the tip of the iceberg, and the full analysis won't be found here. Many people will accuse me of not understanding post-leftism. I have quite the understanding of it as an infantile disorder. Prepare for me to elaborate on this in the future, because I want to do it justice.

So in conclusion, I actually praise and appreciate these natural responses (Post-left Anarchism and MIM/TW) to imperialism and the degeneration of the American (and subsequently all First-World) working-class. The critiques have merit, but I feel they cross the line into narcissism and accidental revisionism of orthodox class-analysis (the post-lefties are a bit more honest about this). There can be no revolution while we *are minimizing our own stake in it*.

The Cult of Incorporation and Bullshit Jobs

Part of this phenomenon is the incorporation of the American economy. As capital accumulates, we find a new relationship between the corporation and the worker. The imperialist super-profits from Third-World exploitation have brought a new staple to the American economy, “shit jobs.” (Not to be confused with the “bullshit management” referenced to earlier)

We find all kinds of alienation at work in the modern retail and food corporation. I can barely describe the horrors of the horribly shot union-busting videos for some that I’ve worked for. You’re told that there is no need for a union because all the laws historically won by unions are enforced diligently and faithfully, by the corporation. I found this (and many other things) to be grossly untrue. You’re also told a union is not necessary, as you are already a part of a “united workplace”. This is where we find a relevancy of *the cult of incorporation*.

In the modern cultural capitalism, we find more and more corporations trying to humanize their exploitation. I can say a great deal of this can be seen through places like Starbucks and Whole-foods. For example, Starbucks is the worlds largest supplier of “Fair Trade” Coffee, but even when you realize this, only 10% of the coffee sold there is actually fair-trade certified. This number has actually declined in recent years. The idea is to merge charity and consumerism, buying your product and selling your soul in the same transaction.

These “Progressive Corporations” quite often have their own list of hypocrisies, which alienate themselves from their base. From their days as a young cooperative in Austin, Whole Foods as consistently moved in a direction away from that. Whole-foods is not unique to the near draconian union-busting tactics used by these corporations. They also have shown support and lobbied for the racist and classist “Right to Work” laws. You find very little difference between these corporations and Wal-Mart, when they apply the same techniques waging a war of alienation on their workers and lobbying against their interests.

So it can be seen that much of the working class wage jobs is simply mitigating the path of capital from the Third-World exploitation. We are producers of very little but convenience. We can see this as the root of all degeneration in modern America. We’ve become disempowered, many of us lacking skills more specialized than convenient access to the cheap labor of countries we can’t pronounce. This is a phenomenon of cultural capitalism where we have so much alienation that we no longer need skills or education. We demand only convenience.

Socializing Struggle: Invoking Class-Consciousness in the America Masses

Upon conclusion, one cannot help but come to some of the most pessimistic conclusions about the American proletariat (or lack thereof). We find ourselves living side by side with a mass that

cannot, despite their own exploitation, find their own stake in class-struggle. We wonder if the advancement of capitalism has reached a point that demands new strategy.

Although we should always have our attention focused on the international struggle, we need to develop American specific strategy. The classical tactics of syndicalism begin to look antiquated, and there's very little I can offer the frustrated Wal-Mart worker with "well, why don't you just seize the production?"

At the same time, I can't help but think the most potentially revolutionary mass in the US is the most visible ones, the lowest wage workers offering service and convenience, and those who can barely hold on to that and are even kept at bay from *that* level of production. We need the folks who hate their jobs.

Moving forward with strategy, I feel production (which is more commonly distribution of Third World production) in America is unseizable, even with the organization of the masses. We find so much uselessness without our common capital relations. We have brand images (like Wal-Mart) that aren't just going to go away. When our job is to sell a relationship between the First and Third World, what production can be left to seize? We are not dealing with tangible industrial factory production of yesteryear.

No one calls for the "end" of a corporation, and we can find boycotts in this day and age only agitates the reactionaries to buy more. Perhaps the strategies being of the most use are those which directly attack what *is* being produced by these workers, the international imperialist relationship. This means halting the distribution and importing of capital rooting in Third World exploitation. We can see this in the very strategic (and radical) shutting down of ports and other pivotal sources of commerce, in recent years when Anarchists and Communists have taken to the streets.

So instead of using this antiquated syndicalist strategy (and I say that as one myself) of focusing on the production that we no longer have, we find a new strategy, if you're not engaging in a direct struggle (IE resisting wage-theft, evictions, etc.) then the radical elements of the labour and tenant organizations should focus on anti-imperialism. This seems obvious, but you don't find many Anarchists who understand Worldist notions and what it means to be anti-imperialist, and what that analysis means for American Anarchists.

Let's quit pretending we're still in 1920's Chicago, let's be a little more honest about the modern condition of American workers, and develop syndicalism into a worker's movement that is aware it cannot seize production and liberate American workers without overthrowing imperialism first. Towards an Anti-Imperialist Syndicalism!

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