

# On the Poverty of Student Life

considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy

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*First published in 1966 at the University of Strasbourg by students of the university and members of the Internationale Situationniste.*

*A few students elected to the student union printed 10,000 copies with university funds. The copies were distributed at the official ceremony marking the beginning of the academic year. The student union was promptly closed by court order.*

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We might very well say, and no one would disagree with us, that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the priest and the policeman. Naturally he is usually attacked from the wrong point of view, with specious reasons derived from the ruling ideology. He may be worth the contempt of a true revolutionary, yet a revolutionary critique of the student situation is currently taboo on the official Left. The licensed and impotent opponents of capitalism repress the obvious — that what is wrong with the students is also what is wrong with them. They convert their unconscious contempt into a blind enthusiasm. The radical intelligentsia (from *Les Temps Modernes* to *L'Express*) prostrates itself before the so-called “rise of the student” and the declining bureaucracies of the Left (from the “Communist” party to the Stalinist National Union of Students) bids noisily for his moral and material support.

There are reasons for this sudden enthusiasm, but they are all provided by the present form of capitalism, in its overdeveloped state. We shall use this pamphlet

for denunciation. We shall expose these reasons one by one, on the principle that the end of alienation is only reached by the straight and narrow path of alienation itself.

Up to now, studies of student life have ignored the essential issue. The surveys and analyses have all been psychological or sociological or economic: in other words, academic exercises, content with the false categories of one specialization or another. None of them can achieve what is most needed — a view of modern society as a whole. Fourier denounced their error long ago as the attempt to apply scientific laws to the basic assumptions of the science (“porter régulièrement sur les questions primordiales”). Everything is said about our society except what it is, and the nature of its two basic principles — the commodity and the spectacle. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, and the details consign the totality to oblivion.

Modern capitalism and its spectacle allot everyone a specific role in a general passivity. The student is no exception to the rule. He has a provisional part to play, a rehearsal for his final role as an element in market society as conservative as the rest. Being a student is a form of initiation. An initiation which echoes the rites of more primitive societies with bizarre precision. It goes on outside of history, cut off from social reality. The student leads a double life, poised between his present status and his future role. The two are absolutely separate, and the journey from one to the other is a mechanical event “in the future.” Meanwhile, he basks in a schizophrenic consciousness, withdrawing into his initiation group to hide from that future. Protected from history, the present is a mystic trance.

At least in consciousness, the student can exist apart from the official truths of “economic life.” But for very simple reasons: looked at economically, student life is a hard one. In our society of abundance,” he is still a pauper. 80% of students come from income groups well above the working class, yet 90% have less money than the meanest laborer. Student poverty is an anachronism, a throw-back from an earlier age of capitalism; it does not share in the new poverties of the spectacular societies; it has yet to attain the new poverty of the new proletariat. Nowadays the teenager shuffles off the moral prejudices and authority of the family to become part of the market even before he is adolescent: at fifteen he has all the delights of being directly exploited. In contrast the student covets his protracted infancy as an irresponsible and docile paradise. Adolescence and its crises may bring occasional brushes with his family, but in essence he is not troublesome: he agrees to be treated as a baby by the institutions which provide his education. (If ever they stop screwing his arse off, it’s only to come round and kick him in the balls.)

“There is no student problem.” Student passivity is only the most obvious symptom of a general state of affairs, for each sector of social life has been subdued by a similar imperialism.

Our social thinkers have a bad conscience about the student problem, but only because the real problem is the poverty and servitude of all. But we have different reasons to despise the student and all his works. What is unforgivable is not so much his actual misery but his complaisance in the face of the misery of others. For him there is only one real alienation: his own. He is a full-time and happy consumer of that commodity, hoping to arouse at least our pity, since he cannot claim our interest. By the logic of modern capitalism, most students can only become mere *petits cadres* (with the same function in neo-capitalism as the skilled worker had in the nineteenth-century economy). The student really knows how miserable will be that golden future which is supposed to make up for the shameful poverty of the present. In the face of that knowledge, he prefers to dote on the present and invent an imaginary prestige for himself. After all, there will be no magical compensation for present drabness: tomorrow will be like yesterday, lighting these fools the way to dusty death. Not unnaturally he takes refuge in an unreal present.

The student is a stoic slave: the more chains authority heaps upon him, the freer he is in phantasy. He shares with his new family, the University, a belief in a curious kind of autonomy. Real independence, apparently, lies in a direct subservience to the two most powerful systems of social control: the family and the State. He is their well-behaved and grateful child, and like the submissive child he is overeager to please. He celebrates all the values and mystifications of the system, devouring them with all the anxiety of the infant at the breast. Once, the old illusions had to be imposed on an aristocracy of labour; the *petits cadres*-to-be ingest them willingly under the guise of culture.

There are various forms of compensation for poverty. The total poverty of ancient societies produced the grandiose compensation of religion. The student's poverty by contrast is a marginal phenomenon, and he casts around for compensations among the most down-at-heel images of the ruling class. He is a bore who repairs the old jokes of an alienated culture. Even as an ideologist, he is always out of date. One and all, his latest enthusiasms were ridiculous thirty years ago.

Once upon a time the universities were respected; the student persists in the belief that he is lucky to be there. But he arrived too late. The bygone excellence of bourgeois culture (By this we mean the culture of a Hegel or of the *encyclopédistes*, rather than the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure.) has vanished. A mechanically produced specialist is now the goal of the "educational system." A modern economic system demands mass production of students who are not educated and have been rendered incapable of thinking. Hence the decline of the universities and the automatic nullity of the student once he enters its portals. The university has become a society for the propagation of ignorance; "high culture" has taken on the rhythm of the production line; without exception, university teachers are cretins, men who would get the bird from any audience of schoolboys. But all this

hardly matters: the important thing is to go on listening respectfully. In time, if critical thinking is repressed with enough conscientiousness, the student will come to partake of the wafer of knowledge, the professor will tell him the final truths of the world. Till then — a menopause of the spirit. As a matter of course the future revolutionary society will condemn the doings of lecture theatre and faculty as mere noise — socially undesirable. The student is already a very bad joke.

The student is blind to the obvious — that even his closed world is changing. The “crisis of the university” — that detail of a more general crisis of modern capitalism — is the latest fodder for the deaf-mute dialogue of the specialists. This “crisis” is simple to understand: the difficulties of a specialised sector which is adjusting (too late) to a general change in the relations of production. There was once a vision — if an ideological one — of a liberal bourgeois university. But as its social base disappeared, the vision became banality. In the age of free-trade capitalism, when the “liberal” state left it its marginal freedoms, the university could still think of itself as an independent power. Of course it was a pure and narrow product of that society’s needs — particularly the need to give the privileged minority an adequate general culture before they rejoined the ruling class (not that going up to university was straying very far from class confines). But the bitterness of the nostalgic don (No one dares any longer to speak in the name of nineteenth century liberalism; so they reminisce about the “free” and “popular” universities of the middle ages — that “democracy of “liberal”.) is understandable: better, after all, to be the bloodhound of the *haute bourgeoisie* than sheepdog to the world’s white-collars. Better to stand guard on privilege than harry the flock into their allotted factories and bureaux, according to the whims of the “planned economy”. The university is becoming, fairly smoothly, the honest broker of technocracy and its spectacle. In the process, the purists of the academic Right become a pitiful sideshow, purveying their “universal” cultural goods to a bewildered audience of specialists.

More serious, and thus more dangerous, are the modernists of the Left and the Students’ Union, with their talk of a “reform of University structure” and a “reinsertion of the University into social and economic life”, i.e., its adaptation to the needs of modern capitalism. The one-time suppliers of general culture to the ruling classes, though still guarding their old prestige, must be converted into the forcing-house of a new labor aristocracy. Far from contesting the historical process which subordinates one of the last relatively autonomous social groups to the demands of the market, the progressives complain of delays and inefficiency in its completion. They are the standard-bearers of the cybernetic university of the future ( which has already reared its ugly head in some unlikely quarters). And they are the enemy: the fight against the market, which is starting again in earnest, means the fight against its latest lackeys.

As for the student, this struggle is fought out entirely over his head, somewhere in the heavenly realm of his masters. The whole of his life is beyond his control, and for all he sees of the world he might as well be on another planet. His acute economic poverty condemns him to a paltry form of survival. But, being a complacent creature, he parades his very ordinary indigence as if it were an original lifestyle: self-indulgently, he affects to be a Bohemian. The Bohemian solution is hardly viable at the best of times, and the notion that it could be achieved without a complete and final break with the university milieu is quite ludicrous. But the student Bohemian (and every student likes to pretend that he is a Bohemian at heart) clings to his false and degraded version of individual revolt. He is so “eccentric” that he continues — thirty years after Reich’s excellent lessons — to entertain the most traditional forms of erotic behavior, reproducing at this level the general relations of class society. Where sex is concerned, we have learnt better tricks from elderly provincial ladies. His rent-a-crowd militancy for the latest good cause is an aspect of his real impotence.

The student’s old-fashioned poverty, however, does put him at a potential advantage — if only he could see it. He does have marginal freedoms, a small area of liberty which as yet escapes the totalitarian control of the spectacle. His flexible working-hours permit him adventure and experiment. But he is a sucker for punishment and freedom scares him to death: he feels safer in the straight-jacketed space-time of lecture hall and weekly “essay”. He is quite happy with this open prison organized for his “benefit”, and, though not constrained, as are most people, to separate work and leisure, he does so of his own accord — hypocritically proclaiming all the while his contempt for assiduity and grey men. He embraces every available contradiction and then mutters darkly about the “difficulties of communication” from the uterine warmth of his religious, artistic or political clique.

Driven by his freely-chosen depression, he submits himself to the subsidiary police force of psychiatrists set up by the avant-garde of repression. The university mental health clinics are run by the student mutual organization, which sees this institution as a grand victory for student unionism and social progress. Like the Aztecs who ran to greet Cortes’s sharpshooters, and then wondered what made the thunder and why men fell down, the students flock to the psycho-police stations with their “problems”.

The real poverty of his everyday life finds its immediate, phantastic compensation in the opium of cultural commodities. In the cultural spectacle he is allotted his habitual role of the dutiful disciple. Although he is close to the production-point, access to the Sanctuary of Thought is forbidden, and he is obliged to discover “modern culture” as an *admiring spectator*. Art is dead, but the student is necrophiliac. He peeks at the corpse in cine-clubs and theaters, buys its fish-fingers from the cultural supermarket. Consuming unreservedly, he is in his element: he is the living

proof of all the platitudes of American market research: a conspicuous consumer, complete with induced irrational preference for Brand X (Camus, for example), and irrational prejudice against Brand Y (Sartre, perhaps).

Impervious to real passions, he seeks titillation in the battles between his anaemic gods, the stars of a vacuous heaven: Althusser — Garaudy-Barthes — Picard — Lefebvre — Levi-Strauss — Halliday-deChardin — Brassens... and between their rival theologies, designed like all theologies to mask the real problems by creating false ones: humanism — existentialism — scientism — structuralism — cyberneticism — new criticism — dialectics-of-naturism — meta-philosophism...

He thinks he is avant-garde if he has seen the latest happening. He discovers “modernity” as fast as the market can produce its ersatz version of long outmoded (though once important) ideas; for him, every rehash is a cultural revolution. His principal concern is status, and he eagerly snaps up all the paperback editions of important and “difficult” texts with which mass culture has filled the bookstores. (If he had an atom of self-respect or lucidity, he would knock them off. But no: conspicuous consumers always pay!). Unfortunately, he cannot read, so he devours them with his gaze, and enjoys them vicariously through the gaze of his friends. He is an *other-directed voyeur*.

His favorite reading matter is the *kitsch* press, whose task it is to orchestrate the consumption of cultural nothing-boxes. Docile as ever, the student accepts its commercial *ukases* and makes them the only measuring-rod of his tastes. Typically, he is a compulsive reader of weeklies like *le Nouvel Observateur* and *l'Express* (whose nearest English equivalents are the posh *Sundays* and *New Society*). He generally feels that *le Monde* — whose style he finds somewhat difficult — is a truly objective newspaper. And it is with such guides that he hopes to gain an understanding of the modern world and become a political initiate!

In France more than anywhere else, the student is passively content to be politicized. In this sphere too, he readily accepts the same alienated, spectacular participation. Seizing upon all the tattered remnants of a Left which was annihilated more than *forty years ago* by “socialist” reformism and Stalinist counter-revolution, he is once more guilty of an amazing ignorance. The Right is well aware of the defeat of the workers’ movement, and so are the workers themselves, though more confusedly. But the students continue blithely to organize demonstrations which mobilize students and students only. This is political false consciousness in its virgin state, a fact which naturally makes the universities a happy hunting ground for the manipulators of the declining bureaucratic organizations. For them, it is child’s play to program the student’s political options. Occasionally there are deviationary tendencies and cries of “Independence!” but after a period of token resistance the dissidents are reincorporated into a *status quo* which they have never really radically opposed. The “Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires,” whose title is

a case of ideological falsification gone mad (they are neither young, nor communist, nor revolutionary), have with much brio and accompanying publicity defied the iron hand of the Party...but only to rally cheerily to the pontifical battle-cry, "Peace in Vietnam!"

The student prides himself on his opposition to the "archaic" Gaullist régime. But he justifies his criticism by appealing — without realizing it — to older and far worse crimes. His radicalism prolongs the life of the different currents of edulcorated Stalinism: Togliatti's, Garaudy's, Krushchev's, Mao's, etc. His youth is synonymous with appalling *naïveté*; and his attitudes are in reality far more archaic than the régime's — the Gaullists do after all understand modern society well enough to administer it.

But the student, sad to say, is not deterred by the odd anachronism. He feels obliged to have general ideas on everything, to unearth a coherent world-view capable of lending meaning to his need for activism and asexual promiscuity. As a result, he falls prey to the last doddering missionary efforts of the churches. He rushes with atavistic ardor to adore the putrescent carcass of God, and cherishes all the stinking detritus of prehistoric religions in the tender belief that they enrich him and his time. Along with their sexual rivals, those elderly provincial ladies, the students form the social category with the highest percentage of admitted adherents to these archaic cults. Everywhere else, the priests have been either beaten off or devoured, but university clerics shamelessly continue to bugger thousands of students in their spiritual shithouses.

We must add in all fairness that there do exist students of a tolerable intellectual level, who without difficulty dominate the controls designed to check the mediocre capacity demanded from the others. They do so for the simple reason that they have understood the system, and so despise it and know themselves to be its enemies. They are in the system for what they can get out of it — particularly grants. Exploiting the contradiction which, for the moment at least, ensures the maintenance of a small sector — "research" — still governed by a liberal-academic rather than a technocratic rationality, they calmly carry the germs of sedition to the highest level: their open contempt for the organization is the counterpart of a lucidity which enables them to outdo the system's lackeys, intellectually and otherwise. Such students cannot fail to become theorists of the coming revolutionary movement. For the moment, they make no secret of the fact that what they take so easily from the system shall be used for its overthrow.

The student, if he rebels at all, must first rebel against his studies, though the necessity of this initial move is felt less spontaneously by him than by the worker, who intuitively identifies his work with his total condition. At the same time, since the student is a product of modern society just like Godard or Coca-Cola, his extreme alienation can only be fought through the struggle against this whole society.

It is clear that the university can in no circumstances become the battlefield; the student, insofar as he defines himself as such, manufactures a pseudo-value which must become an obstacle to any clear consciousness of the reality of his dispossession. The best criticism of student life is the behavior of the rest of youth, who have already started to revolt. Their rebellion has become one of the *signs* of a fresh struggle against modern society.

After years of slumber and permanent counterrevolution, there are signs of a new period of struggle, with youth as the new carriers of revolutionary infection. But the society of the spectacle paints its own picture of itself and its enemies, imposes its own ideological categories on the world and its history. Fear is the very last response. For everything that happens is reassuringly part of the natural order of things. Real historical changes, which show that this society can be *superseded*, are reduced to the status of novelties, processed for mere consumption. The revolt of youth against an imposed and “given” way of life is the first sign of a total subversion. It is the prelude to a period of revolt — the revolt of those who can no longer *live* in our society. Faced with a danger, ideology and its daily machinery perform the usual inversion of reality. An historical process becomes a pseudo-category of some socio-natural science: the Idea of Youth.

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