

of sexual poverty

The contemporary struggles of the proletariat against capitalism have not been confined to the arena of production and contempt for existing conditions has long ceased to be expressed in purely economic or political terms. The signs of revolt which are apparent today are as much *social* in character as anything else, and as a consequence, the theoretical critique of daily life in bourgeois society, which began with Marx's analysis of alienated labor, must be expanded to incorporate the new forms of its *practical* expression. Covert opposition to spectacular life has become *visible*, not only at the point of production, but throughout every facet of quotidian reality. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this rebellion has been the widespread rejection of the most basic structures of bourgeois society, the family, marriage, morality, etc.; the collapse of these particular forms has been part of a general revolt against conventional definitions of 'acceptable' sexuality. In a larger sense, this *devaluation* of bourgeois society is implicitly a refusal of the conditions of survival it enforces. At the same time, however, this opposition — because of its limited nature — does not pose an immediate threat to class-society.

SPECTACLE MEETS COUNTER--SPECTACLE



Sometime scholar and full-time radical, Gloria Root is an archetypal child of the rock age: always on the move, always ready to challenge authority—and always eager to have a good time. As one means of fulfilling these needs, Gloria showers and dresses, then heads for a massive demonstration against the war.

WORKMATE OF THE MONTH

A socially imposed norm of permissible sexual behavior has long been at the cornerstone of hierarchical society. Traditionally, the repressive character of bourgeois society has been measured, not only by its use of force against the proletariat, but in its suppression of overt sexuality. For centuries, the most successful capitalist countries have utilized variants of ascetic morality as an effective mechanism of social regulation; more recently, the bureaucratic states of Russia, China etc., have employed similar moral ideologies to the same effect. Today, however, the most advanced forms of spectacular society have aban-



French watch ad: Time passes

done such blatant methods of control over their inhabitants. In these cases, the spectacle has even gone so far as to actively promote the decomposition of its former defenses — morality and the family are now discarded as antiquated social features. The sexuality once confined to the periphery of bourgeois society is now tolerated — that which was openly and defiantly expressed only by those “on the outside”, blacks, bohemians, etc., has become part of spectacular culture as a whole.

The former taboos of bourgeois society have disappeared in the face of new standards of moral conduct. Past behavioral paragons (chastity, monogamy, etc.), which were always little more than myth, have been replaced with the modern ‘adventures’ of infidelity and sexual intrigue. From the office buildings to the suburbs, an ‘openness’ has been proclaimed in sexual affairs; the demands which were radical 30 years ago (sex education, birth control, etc.) are now accepted services of public schools and institutions. Even the radical libertinism of Sade now returns as a farce in the contemporary rituals of “sexual freedom” — that which proved so scandalous in the past is now nothing more than a stimulant to enliven routine existence. The current explicitness has even reached the conventional media; American housewives can now ‘participate’ in radio “talk shows” where sexual activity, adultery, etc., form the sole topics of conversation.

Behind the much-discussed era of “sexual freedom”, however, lies an extension of sexual *domination*. In making sexuality public, the spectacle only conceals its real *absence*. Capitalism continues to generalize an image of sexuality which, however removed from puritanism, remains only that — an *image*, a surrogate for real experience. The “new” sexuality, like the old, has become a weapon in the class-struggle, not only in relations between bosses and employees, but throughout the relations of everyday life. The spectacle’s pornographic use of sexuality is only incidentally revealed in the cheap “sex” films, magazines, etc., and the suggestive advertising in which alluring men and women serve as an enticement to the world of the consumer. The

banalization of life accomplished by capitalism has reached the point where sexuality itself has become a quantifiable article. The reality principle imposed by capitalism upon sexual pleasure is that of commodity reality; the marketplace of sexuality has been added to the modern economy, not merely as a commodity, but as one which sells others. The voyeurism present in every aspect of the spectacle now finds its fulfillment in sexual consumption.

The spectacular accumulation of sexuality is only an accumulation of misery and the reification of erotic experience has produced its complement in the form of a rampant sexual nihilism. Here, all pleasure is absent — the freedom which modern capitalism affords everyone is the freedom to meet, fuck, and remain as an object. This situation, however, does not constitute some mysterious "repressive desublimation" (Marcuse) in which alienation is made tolerable through sexual release. Spectacular sexuality in no way compensates for the poverty of spectacular life — sexual alienation is another moment of a total alienation and a recognition of sexual oppression has already become apparent among large sectors of the proletariat.



A critique of both the old and "new" sexuality of bourgeois society has been developed by the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements. In refusing the sexual roles demanded by capitalism, these movements have uncovered the truth of reified sexuality — in bourgeois society, personal relationships are determined by social relationships. But while exposing the hierarchy and social dimensions of present sexual relations, these movements have failed to develop a critique of spectacular domination as a whole. Even in terms of sexuality, their critique is limited and does not take into account the roles demanded of others (men, 'straights'); more important, however, are the various mystifications concerning the 'essential' social contradiction posed by sexual differences. From this false division, Women's Liberation and the like construct separatist ideologies in which the partial critique of daily life generated by these movements becomes subsumed under the ultimately reformist aims of "sexual equality".



"If one compares the immensity of our desires with our limited means of satisfying them, it seems that God has acted unwisely in endowing us with passions so eager for pleasure, passions that seem created to torment us by exciting a thousand desires, nine-tenths of which we cannot satisfy so long as the civilized order lasts." —Charles Fourier, *Theory of the Four Movements*, 1808.

Where Women's Liberation and others leave off is precisely the starting point for a radical critique of the social implications of sexual behavior. It is alienation in its *totality*, and not in its purely sexual aspects, that must be abolished by the proletariat; the refusal of a particular constraint (marriage, housework) has meaning only if it is part of a refusal of *all* constraints. A century before the earliest critiques of bourgeois sexuality, Fourier demonstrated that a qualitative change in sexual relations could only take place in a radically different social context. All 'radical' experiments in living which take place *in abstracto* are condemned to failure: the communes of the New Left and the "counter-culture" are witness to the illusory nature of such a revolt. Here, spectacular sexuality is merely reproduced on a 'hip'

level: from the cheap voyeurism of hippie comic books to the 'families' of Stalinist sects, all the old values are reinforced. These archaisms are also reflected in the various 'radical' ideologies of sexuality; the New Leftist Reimut Reiche seeks to reestablish 'genital primacy' and the family, while the interpretations of 'polymorphous perversity' by the mystic professor, Norman O. Brown, represent a conscious atavism in which myth and ritual will supplant reification.

Against both the spectacle and counter-spectacle of sexuality, it is necessary to assert the free will of the individual — a radical power which does not yet exist and which *cannot*, in fact, exist separately from collective revolutionary action. To oppose the desires of the individual against the prisons of daily life in bourgeois society is not simply to oppose radical sexuality to that of the spectacle, however — the ideology of "sexual freedom" has proved easily recuperable (see the Sexual Freedom League for example). There can be no talk of sexual freedom except within the framework of a larger social freedom. The perception that these two issues are inseparably joined is that of Reich, whose theories, despite their shortcomings, remain more radical than those of the 'modern' ideologues. However naive its assumptions may have been (confusion on Lenin, etc), Reich's Sex-Pol movement in the 1920's represents one of the first attempts to develop a radical opposition to bourgeois society that would be based on the terrain of everyday life. Unlike either the clinical or 'radical' psychologists of today, Reich was not concerned with either analysis or sexuality in themselves; Reich's analysis led him to concretely link rebellion against bourgeois sexuality with the class-struggle as a whole.

Reich's vision of a 'Sexual Revolution' is today only part of the revolutionary project which faces the proletariat. Sexual affirmation is one aspect of a total affirmation. The search for *authentic* life and communication which, however mystified, lies at the root of all sexual experience will only be satisfied through the transformation of all social relations. Revolutionary passion embraces all other desires — the cells in which we are all trapped will only be destroyed in the abolition of the spectacle in its entirety.



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Lust for Life

**pobox 22466
milwaukie, or 97223 usa
<rasputin@teleport.com>**