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# ON LUMPEN IDEOLOGY

BY

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*by Eldridge Cleaver*

In reality, time is an unbroken span of matter in motion, of movement and interaction. Objectively, the universe is timeless, and time is a category created by the relationship between form and motion. When we isolate any portion of matter in motion, for purposes of analysis, our efforts thereby encounter the primary disaster of inquiry, because a part has been substituted for the whole. And, as human beings, since none of us knows everything and all of us know something, I would argue that this partial understanding is the root of all evil. Here we are, each of us standing there with our separate realities, collectively looking like the pieces of a chinese puzzle.

When it comes to studying and analyzing social, political, and economic problems, the situation created by our partial views of reality plunge us into a most unfortunate crisis. And since the discussion of social, political, and economic problems is a partisan arena, the special pleading and distortions intended to deceive keep us bogged down in a morass of confusion which renders many problems impossible to solve. In the first place, in order for people to move, together, united in a common design, they have to agree, they have to understand, and they must share a point of view. This would be a difficult enough task if our only problems were those of fitting together our pieces of the puzzle. But when we also have to deal with treachery and deception we end up driven by the whip, stumbling blindly, like oxen, pulling somebody's wagon, fighting, dying, and working for goals we neither understand nor share. Sometimes we call this fate, or bad luck, or we just say that it's fucked up. Yes, it's fucked up. Partly because the human condition is fucked up from the go, like a herd of monkeys rustling through the leaves, and partly because there are people who are deliberately keeping the shit fucked up.

There are periods in history, however, when people have gotten their heads together on what's happening. Enough of them understand clearly enough to unite with each other in the rejection of the lies, the treacherous distortions, and deceptive fabrications, enough so that they are able to unite, build some machinery, and move to solve some of the social, political, and economic problems that are oppressing them. The last time this was done on a world scale was signalled by the gigantic achievement in analysis and synthesis of Karl Marx.

Drawing upon a vast amount of the storehouse of human knowledge, i.e., the information on the world centralized in the universities and libraries and museums of Europe, Marx was able to present a definition and picture of reality that could serve as a broad symbol for dealing rationally and programmatically with a world

in chaos. Marx was interested in providing what he saw as the majority of humanity with a tool of understanding that would enable them to effectively combat and ultimately transform the capitalist system which had grown up and was then in control of the world. Starting in 1849, with the publication of the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO, in collaboration with Frederick Engels, Marx continued to develop, expand, and refine his analysis until, some 30 years later, he brought it to full flower in his epochal book, DAS KAPITAL.

Marx's vision of capitalist society became the rallying point of the dispossessed people both inside the capitalist countries themselves and by the people in other parts of the world who were shackled in colonial bondage by the capitalist countries as they reached out to encompass the world in their system. Marx brilliantly described the monstrous concentration of the ownership of the means of production into the hands of the ruling bourgeois class, with the majority of humanity, the proletariat class, ground underfoot by the capitalists in their mad rush for profits, and chained by an iron law in slavery to wages.

Today, a full century after the time of Karl Marx, we find a very curious situation upon our hands. Heroic struggle has been waged against capitalism and the bourgeoisie, and the dispossessed people of the world have made great gains in their efforts to regain control of their lives and destiny, and to live a full and abundant, independent and free life. A number of people, numerically amounting to a huge hunk of humanity, and geographically spanning a vast area of the globe, have completely uprooted and rejected the capitalist system, building instead, new social, political, and economic systems, patterned, vaguely, along the lines laid down by Karl Marx in his searching analysis of history, his present reality, and the probable future evolution of civilization. The socialist countries of the world are the children of Karl Marx, and they have grown gigantic and powerful, conglomerated into Superpowers, able to rival and stand off the whole of the capitalist world. And yet, we are not free. We are still oppressed. Indeed, we see clearly that even inside the socialist countries themselves the people are oppressed and subjected to totalitarian elite dictatorships that use state terror and police power to maintain their rule. At the same time, the level of oppression inside the capitalist countries has reached a point of desperate ruthlessness that has given rise to a social, political, and economic depravity unparalleled in the history of the world.

The fact is that, today, the vast majority of the people of the world are still oppressed, some inside the capitalist countries, some inside the socialist countries, and others inside the underdeveloped Third World, or formerly colonized areas, now transformed into states and nations, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In all of these areas, the oppressed people have one thing in common, not only does Marxism not ultimately help them either in understanding or dealing with their plight, but Marxism, in the form of socialist states and communist parties, has entered the camp of the enemy and joined with the enemy in the common task of repressing and blocking revolutionary forces in the world. That is a mindblower: the capitalists and the Socialist/Communists have gotten together, objectively if not subjectively, merged their pieces of the puzzle together to form a superpower perspective, and they are looking down, and askance, at us.

And who are we? Who is this 'us', still oppressed and longing to be free? Who

are we that neither capitalism, socialism, nor third worldism provides for? Yes, we have an identity problem – or better yet, an identity crisis. We have no trouble in not identifying with capitalism, our old enemy, or in condemning, to death, the bourgeoisie. But we thought that Socialism was our future and represented what we were fighting for, and if we are not proletarians, what are we, what's left? At this point, we know that we stand in a cross. We know damned well that we are not fighting to establish a society that will produce more Breshnevs, Chou en-lais, Titos, Castros, Jomos, Mobutos, Satos, etc.! Yet, we have stood and watched, witnessed with our own eyes, the proletarian Working Class taking the long march into the system, becoming Socialist States, or Super Labor Unions, if still trapped within a capitalist state, and in both cases becoming, rapidly, foul, reactionary, and fanged. It was like field slaves watching yard slaves being lifted up and taken in by the master and transformed into House Niggers. And we say, truly, that the Working Class Proletarians are the House Niggers of Capitalism So we had to back off, and go back, not to the beginning but at least to the roots.

## The Concentration and Centralization of Technology

At the beginning of the period of European colonialist expansion, the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, when the nations of Europe were pouring all over the globe and committing the form of invasion and robbery called exploration and trade, the disparity between Europe and the rest of the world was not as great, relatively speaking, as that which exists today. North America, encompassing what is now the United States and Canada, was the preserve of the Red Man. The U.S. and Canada, as the glittering extension of European civilization, did not exist, considerably reducing the proportions, in all spheres, of the base from which the European invaders and manhunters came. There were societies all over the world that did not look with envy towards Europe. Indeed, it had been the Europeans themselves, looking out from the bleak rock of their peninsula, who were filled with envy and lust as they were looking out and tempted into banditry by the glitter of what they saw.

For hundreds of years, the spoils of the most barbarous, piratical, looting and pillage in the history of the world pumped such a concentration of wealth and technology into Europe that Europe as a whole was transformed into a new type of society, firmly established upon a qualitatively new technology. Bounded in the West by the Atlantic Ocean, in the North by the snow, Europe had been, for centuries, held in check by the pinzers of Islam in the South and the descendants of Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun in the East. But with the concentration and centralization of wealth and technology in Europe, a naked power was produced that was used to conquer and subdue the rest of the world. We all know the story of the Europeans seeing the Chinese using gunpowder in their festive celebrations, latching onto that toy and turning it into weapons which were then used against the Chinese, crushing them down into centuries of slavery and exploitation. What

Peking, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, East/West Germany. Rhetoric is shot at us like bullets. They try to explain to us who we are, but we know that we are not whom they say we are. If everything was alright, if everything was as rosy as they say it is, there would be no problem, and we would not be in prison. But here we are, locked up in Gore Prison in Dakar, Senegal. The President of our country is a fascist dictator, a puppet of France, spouting socialist rhetoric. We are hunted everywhere. Nowhere is our party in power. Indeed, we don't even have a party. Hunted in Paris, Berlin, New York, London, Tokyo, Moscow, and Peking, we are no less hunted in the other capitals of the world. We are also hunted by Labor Unions and Communist Parties. Marx said that we were the scum layer of society. That's what he called the blood and shit down into which we were crushed. As if we had never been respectable once. We retaliate. We take a revolutionary position against every organized structure that exists in the world today. We do not support the present order of the world. And we keep reaching out for more. Even if we forget everything else we will never forget that the revolution is for more and not less. Thus, in constantly reaching out, we keep them constantly busy trying to deal with our hands. As soon as they think that they have us all tied down, with a new program, we shift our position and reach out for something else. Because we realize that no problem will be solved until we get it all. We know that we are involved in a struggle for the physical control of the machines, of the robots, to physically have them out of the hands of the bourgeoisie, and the working class, because as long as we are cut off we will be slaves.

And we are no longer seeking a job. We know that the system can be reorganized to reinvest us with our human heritage. Instinctively, we know this, so will never be satisfied until these arrangements are made.

**Lumpen Consciousness and Lumpen Revolution**

One of the big mistakes made in the past by comrades who attempted to apply Lumpen Ideology, this writer included, was to make a narrow interpretation as to who were members of the Lumpen. I think this was because we have been so influenced and intoxicated by the brilliance of Marx that we failed to recognize and acknowledge his limitations. Even though we did not like the disparaging, snobbish way that he looked down upon the lumpen, characterizing them as the scum layer of society, we still accepted his over-all system of categories and thought of the so-called criminal element, hustlers, pumps, etc., as composing the Lumpen. As to the rest of society, we accepted Marx's division into the bourgeoisie and proletariat. We looked upon the proletariat as being synonymous with the Working Class, and accepted without questioning the Marxist assertion that all those who were not bourgeoisie were proletarians or members of the Working

Class. This is a fundamental error. The reason we make this error is because we failed to define, accurately, and in a broad enough sense, just what is the Lumpen relationship to the means of production. Once we get this definition clear in our mind, then we can move beyond the limitations of Marx, recognizing that, in the final analysis, his categories were arbitrary and that they no longer serve us in our struggles.

On the opening page of the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO, Marx and Engels give the classic definition of the bourgeoisie and proletariat:

By bourgeoisie is meant the class of Modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live.

During the days when everybody was looking for a job, when jobs were more plentiful than they are now and have been for a long time, it is easy to see how people could accept Marx's definition of the proletariat. Unemployment was viewed as unnatural and temporary. Politicians promised full-employment. Capitalists said that after the economy picked up from its slump there would be work for everybody. Soon there would be a chicken in every pot. But this never happened. What did happen was that more and more people found themselves unemployed, permanently out of work. At the same time, the economic system was becoming so modernized through electronic controls that complete job categories were eliminated. Objectively, this should be viewed as a good thing, because human beings have been struggling all down through the ages to emancipate themselves from the drudgery of work. The more that work can be done by machines, freeing human beings, the better. But in the context of a capitalist system, the advance of technology becomes a tragedy to the workers who are displaced by machines. Thus the stories of workers smashing machines or greeting a brilliant technological advancement with hostility and opposition. To this very day, Labor Unions still fight the introduction of new machinery and technology to the productive process precisely because their members are displaced and thrown back onto the heap of unemployed or permanently lumpenized.

So that it is clear that the basic condition of the dispossessed people, those who are cut off from technology, is not the proletarian condition described by Marx, but the Lumpen condition. The proletarian condition is that of those who have lifted themselves out of the Lumpen condition. When workers become permanently unemployed, displaced by the streamlining of production, they revert back to their basic Lumpen condition.

Once upon a time, when there were jobs to fight for, the Lumpen fought for jobs, for better working conditions, etc. Gradually, they won concessions from the capitalists. But later on, and even more so today, the Lumpen realized that there are no jobs to fight for. Ideologically confused, perceiving their true situation unclearly, the Lumpen has been sidetracked. But still the Lumpen posed a constant threat to the capitalist system, by their demands of the poor. They demanded to be let in on Consumption even if they were blocked out of Production

\*On The Ideology of The Black Panther Party, by Eldridge Cleaver

by the absence of jobs or even future prospects on jobs. To cool out this situation, the capitalists responded with the dole — the system of relief. From the point of view of the Lumpen, the dole plays the same function as a job — it allows them to get in on Consumption. But the dole, the system of welfare and relief, can never really deal with the situation, nor is it intended to. Relief is only a stop-gap measure resorted to by the capitalists to cool people out and buy themselves some more time, by dividing the Lumpen, by buying some of them off, thus postponing the showdown between the Lumpen and the capitalist system of production and consumption.

It is in this regard that Marxism has had disastrous effects upon the revolutionary movement. Marx, misunderstanding the basic condition of oppression, identified the proletariat, the working class, as the most revolutionary element of society. So that for generations, revolutionaries have been trying to bring about the revolution by relating religiously to the working class. This has gone on until today, to the point where it is now absurd, if not insane. In reality, the Working Class has become as much a part of the system that has to be destroyed as the capitalists themselves. They are the second line of resistance, after the cops.

The real revolutionary element of our era is the Lumpen, understood in its broader sense. What is lacking is a Lumpen consciousness, consciousness of the basic condition of oppression being the Lumpen condition and not the proletarian condition. In order for the revolutionary movement to progress, the Lumpen must become conscious of themselves as the vast majority, and the false proletarian, working class consciousness must be negated.

Lumpen consciousness is more advanced than the job-seeking, fringe-benefit consciousness of the AFL/CIO/Communist Party/Working Class accommodationist movement. The basic demand of the Lumpen, to be cut in on Consumption in spite of being blocked out of Production is the ultimate revolutionary demand. What is wrong with the way that this basic Lumpen demand has been set forth in the past is that it has come out as a sort of begging, ashamed of itself, and it has accepted the dole. The dole of the system of relief is nothing but a sham substitute for equal distribution of the wealth of society. Brainwashed with the proletarian consciousness of the working class, the Lumpen has been made to feel that it does not have any rights; that the Lumpen are just unfortunate in that they cannot land a job, unfortunate because they are unskilled and unqualified to fit into the modern, science-based labor force. In reality, all of this, which is the basic preoccupation of the proletarian, working class consciousness, is beside the point.

The point is that the Lumpen, humanity itself, has been robbed of its social heritage by the concentration and centralization of technology. The holding of the means of production as private property is illegitimate because it certifies the usurpation of technology and its concentration and centralization in the hands of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie. Once the Lumpen understand this, that technology belongs to the people, that our modern technology is the heritage of all humanity, then they will move to expropriate the expropriators, to abolish the usurpation, and take control of the machines, technology, into their own hands.

All demands for relief programs, welfare programs, survival programs, are nothing but reformist, sell-out, half-stepping adjustments to a system that needs to be replaced. The only satisfactory, revolutionary demand is for the restoration of the hegemony of the people over technology and equality in distribution and consumption. The point is not equality in Production, which is the Marxist view and basic error, but equality in distribution and consumption. We look forward to the day when all work can be done by technological advances, which will be a good thing. But this doesn't mean that we should be blocked out of Consumption.

The basic task confronting revolutionaries today is to further define the Lumpen condition, to refine Lumpen Ideology, spread Lumpen consciousness, and lead the struggle, through righteous practice, to seize physical control of the machines, of technology, and destroy, forever, hegemony of the usurpers over the social heritage of humanity.