

Richard Milner

Choosing

"I must choose between despair and energy—I choose the latter."

Keats.

When the Strike began many people were aware of new expressions of life on the campus. It happened at the L.S.E. and in various other British universities last year, and it always seems to characterise the successful assertion of autonomy, the expression of dissent. People find new hope and confidence; they regain a self-respect which has been battered down by years of half-hearted conformity to bourgeois common sense. One of the good things about the Strike, even if the initial fervour wanes, is that after such an event people and institutions are never quite the same. It has HAPPENED, and whether it is seen in the future as an isolated phenomenon in the history of Hartford University, or as the beginning of greater participation and commitment, I'm glad I was here at the time.

Perhaps one of the most damning indictments of the kind of conformist sensibility which our society has produced in us is the fact that such awe-inspiring events had to occur before there were general expressions of opposition on the campus. And what kind of society are we living in? We live in a capitalist society, a class society; no matter how unfashionable such terms have become in polite academic circles. It is a society in which some people are born into situations which provide them with the opportunity to gain power and prestige (through education, knowing the right people, acquiring the appropriate social manner) and others are not. Most people have to be content with as big a cut as is possible of that proportion of the profits which is paid out in wages, and as great a satisfaction as is possible of those personal needs and potentialities which are sanctioned by society. We live in an affluent society, but there are still glaring inequalities. In Britain, for example, two per cent of the population still own fifty-five per cent of all private wealth; ten per cent own eighty per cent. Inequalities in income are obvious, too—when income from property is added to earnings, the top one per cent of the British people receive about as much income as the bottom thirty per cent put together. We live in a highly-organized industrial society, and yet an increase in leisure is denied us; profits must be made, markets must be met, and when people have time on their hands they start to think. We live in a bureaucratic, mass-media society. We have an "in-built" tendency to conform to our parents' expectations of us anyway, owing to the fact that of all creatures we have to be protected longest before we are capable of breaking away from, and surviving without, the family group. On top of this, in our society, the tendency to regress to an acceptance of authoritarianism is reinforced by advertising, the presentation of news, and the mass media generally pervaded as it is by the ideology of those in power.

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What are the results? Most people seem content to accept their situation, to make the best of what they have, to aspire to a better life for themselves and for the bottom thirty per cent, if at all, within the context of a party politics which allows no real choice of an alternative to the structure of society as it now exists. There's a feeling that things are as they are because "That's life...that's the way things are and there's nothing you can do about it." The individual feels impotent to freely direct his life or to influence the society in which he lives: he feels

responsible for and yet unable to change the political decisions of his government. A man soaks himself in petrol and burns to death on the steps of the Pentagon. Buddhist monks burn in Saigon. Thousands demonstrate, the majority acquiesces. The war goes on. The arms industry thrives. More is spent on "defence" than on education. More is spent on advertising than on education. In Britain, immigrants are used as a scapegoat for our economic crisis. If there aren't any immigrants, it's "the laziness of the working class". Fires are lit in the ghettos of America. Art becomes a topic for polite conversation over coffee, a means of exhibiting good taste and status, a form of decoration. "Guernica" looks great on the dining room wall; how do you like the Van Gogh in the hall? University becomes the way-in to acceptance and conformity. We don't question LIFE: we acquire "the right qualification for the right job."

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What are the palliatives? Some people rely on the ineffable love of a god who promises a future salvation and recompense to "the wretched of the earth"—so long as they behave themselves while they are on it. Others prostrate themselves before Nature; others see the world as some massive "field-system", some stage on which people merely play their parts whether good or evil—presumably to the amused delight of some extra-terrestrial spectator. One does not imagine that the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki found much comfort in such theories; or that a man dying of napalm burns does. Many people cannot afford such luxuries.

There is, however, another response to the situation; and the origins of this response can be traced from Romanticism, through existentialism, to the present day. A possible starting point in considering this response is the fact of death. With the decline of metaphysics in the late eighteenth century and the rapid increase in scientific knowledge and reasoning, man was faced, in a sense, with the imminence of his own death as a fact which neither faith nor reasoning could make more acceptable. Two

differences might be noted here between men and animals. The first is that men, unlike animals, are aware of the inevitability of their own deaths. The awareness is often—perhaps always—an abstract awareness. We find it hard to feel that our bodies must die; and yet certain terrible events recur in our lives—the death of a loved one or of a person with whom we identify—that remind us of the imminence of our own deaths. Perhaps, if we were fully human, it would be true that every man's death would diminish us. That would be a greater burden of reality than most of us could bear. A second difference between men and animals is that the former are able—perhaps partly as a response to their awareness of death as the inevitable end to their lives—to develop, by means of their own creative reasoning and imagination, a "project" for their lives. Men have the potential to develop an "ontological interest", a concern for their own being and

the problems which it entails. Man is able to see himself as the "hero" in the drama of his own involvement with the personal and social life around him. One of the most difficult tasks to be faced is to hold together in oneself both the capacity to see oneself as the hero in an abstract scheme and the capacity to appreciate sensuous forms. The capacity to form a "project" for one's life, and an awareness of death, are closely linked. If we have nothing but one life, if there is nothing after death, are closely linked. If we have nothing but this one life, if there is nothing after death, that might be a good reason for the desire to make this one life as meaningful as possible.

Dostoevsky wrote that "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted." And yet it seems that there is some finally-indefinable unity between men, and some possible reasons for it can be indicated. It is true that there is a sense in which we are forever alone. We are unique individuals, and this is a source of both exhilaration and terror. There is also a sense in which we are inextricably connected with other people. We have no personality, no "self", unless we communicate. We develop with and through other people, both emotionally and physically. To be totally unable to communicate is to be insane: the ultimate in aloneness is death.

We are involved in mankind, and there is a sense in which we all share the same "fate"—since we are all ultimately alone, since we all die. And we can imagine the suffering and happiness of others. Our imagination permits us to have some idea of how other people feel.

If we desire to form a "project" for our lives to develop our own unique potential to be fully human and fully aware of our unity with mankind, we very soon realise the blunting effect of our society. The potential to develop a fully human and vital personality will only be fulfilled to the extent that it does not clash with the accepted modes of behavior. Society makes the "rules". What the society is and what the rules are depends on the social and economic set-up. Some rules are enforced openly by the law. I am not suggesting that all rules are bad, or that rules are unnecessary, but it is important to see that the law operates finally in the interests of maintaining the existing social and economic arrangements. The law thus attempts to contain, or preferably to suppress, the sources of change which threaten the basis of society as it exists now. Some of the "rules", especially those which pertain to personal morality, are reinforced by the religion of the society. These are enforced both by the law and by the feelings of guilt and inadequacy experienced by believers who transgress. The way in which the need for security and affection is satisfied is dictated by society. The expression of feelings of tenderness and affection may be inhibited by a competitive society which stresses the striving of the individual and competition rather than cooperation. The need for sex may only be satisfied in certain "acceptable" or "legitimate" ways. The desire to explore is sanctioned (and indeed encouraged if it contributes to the bargaining power of the society), so long as it does not lead to the exploration of, and the attempt to alter, the basis of the existing order. Man is being crucified on a cross of gold in more senses than one.



If we have nothing but this one after death, that might be a goal to make this one life as meaningful as possible.



From the above it may be possible to arrive at the following conclusions...We are born neither "good" nor "bad". There is no fixed "human nature". There are no "absolutes". Society is in a state of constant flux, and so are individuals. We have to choose between despair and energy in the making of our lives and the shaping of our society. We either acquiesce and allow our natures to be created for us, or we choose to use our reason, to win our freedom, to create ourselves as far as is possible. "What is the meaning of life?" is a meaningless question. Life has no meaning other than that which men create in it. The only "absolute" truth is one's immediate sense of one's self.