

SOCIETY

So-ci-e-ty n. from L. socius, companion. 1. an organized aggregate of interrelated individuals and groups. 2. totalizing racket, advancing at the expense of the individual, nature and human solidarity.

Society everywhere is now driven by the treadmill of work and consumption. This harnessed movement, so very far from a state of companionship, does not take place without agony and disaffection. Having more never compensates for being less, as witness rampant addiction to drugs, work, exercise, sex, etc. Virtually anything can be and is overused in the desire for satisfaction in a society whose hallmark is denial of satisfaction. But such excess at least gives evidence of the hunger for fulfillment, that is, an immense dissatisfaction with what is before us.

Hucksters purvey every kind of dodge, for example. New Age panaceas, disgusting materialistic mysticism on a mass scale: sickly and self-absorbed, apparently incapable of looking at any part of reality with courage or honesty. For New Age practitioners, psychology is nothing short of an ideology and society is irrelevant.

Meanwhile, Bush, surveying "generations born numbly into despair," was predictably loathsome enough to blame the victimized by citing their "moral emptiness." The depth of immiseration might best be summed up by the federal survey of high schoolers released 9/19/91, which found that 27 percent of them "thought seriously" about suicide in the preceding year.

It could be that the social, with its growing testimony to alienation-mass depression, the refusal of literacy, the rise of panic disorders, etc.-may finally be registering politically. Such phenomena as continually declining voter turnout and deep distrust of government led the Kettering Foundation in June '91 to conclude that "the legitimacy of our political institutions is more at issue than our leaders imagine," and an October study of three states (as reported by columnist Tom Wicker, 10/14/91) to discern "a dangerously broad gulf between the governors and the governed."

The longing for nonmutilated life and a nonmutilated world in which to live it collides with one chilling fact: underlying the progress of modern society is

capital's insatiable need for growth and expansion. The collapse of state capitalism in Eastern Europe and the USSR leaves only the 'triumphant' regular variety, in command but now confronted insistently with far more basic contradictions than the ones it allegedly overcame in its pseudo-struggle with 'socialism'. Of course, Soviet industrialism was not qualitatively different from any other variant of capitalism, and far more importantly, no system of production (division of labor, domination of nature, and work-and-pay slavery in more or less equal doses) can allow for either human happiness or ecological survival.

We can now see an approaching vista of all the world as a toxic, ozone-less deadness. Where once most people looked to technology as a promise, now we know for certain that it will kill us. Computerization, with its congealed tedium and concealed poisons, expresses the trajectory of society, engineered sleekly away from sensuous existence and finding its current apotheosis in Virtual Reality.

The escapism of VR is not the issue, for which of us could get by without escapes? Likewise, it is not so much a diversion from consciousness as it is itself a consciousness of complete estrangement from the natural world. Virtual Reality testifies to a deep pathology, reminiscent of the Baroque canvases of Rubens that depict armored knights mingling with but separated from naked women. Here the 'alternative' technojunkies of Whole Earth Review, pioneer promoters of VR, show their true colors. A fetish of 'tools', and a total lack of interest in critique of society's direction, lead to glorification of the artificial paradise of VR.

The consumerist void of high tech simulation and manipulation owes its dominance to two increasing tendencies in society, specialization of labor and the isolation of individuals. From this context emerges the most terrifying aspect of evil: it tends to be committed by people who are not particularly evil. Society, which in no way could survive a conscious inspection is arranged to prevent that very inspection.

The dominant, oppressive ideas do not permeate the whole of society, rather their success is assured by the fragmented nature of opposition to them. Meanwhile, what society dreads most are precisely the lies it suspects it is built upon. This

dread or avoidance is obviously not the same as beginning to subject a deadening force of circumstances to the force of events.

Adorno noted in the '60s that society is growing more and more entrapping and disabling. He predicted that eventually talk of causation within society would become meaningless: society itself is the cause. The struggle toward a society-if it could still be called that-of the face-to-face, in and of the natural world, must be based on an understanding of society today as a monolithic, all-encompassing death march.