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THE CULTURE OF CONFORMISM

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To my nieces,
Erin, Maggie, and Maureen

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Et personne ne se révolte.
Pourquoi? C'est incompréhensible.
—MOHAMMED DIB, *La grande maison*

The Culture of Conformism

INTRODUCTION

Social Stratification and the New Conformism

Social critics and dissidents in the United States and elsewhere are perennially baffled by the pervasiveness and tenacity of social consent—not only the acquiescence of ordinary people in an unequal social and economic system but their positive support of and contribution to the maintenance and extension of that system. Why do so many people readily accept and even further a system that seems so unjust to many of us, and so unfair to the very people who support it? The answer is difficult, for the factors contributing to consent are complex. There is no one thing that explains conformity. People acquiesce in a current system—whatever it might be: feudal, capitalist, socialist, democratic, authoritarian, or whatever—due to a broad range of forces, beliefs, desires. Some of these are blatant; some are subtle, but mutually reinforcing and with great cumulative effect. Classical political science, especially historical materialism, has isolated many of these factors. Still, the prevalence of conformity remains troublesome—practically as well as intellectually.

Indeed, the problem is perhaps more pressing now than ever, for after the great upheavals of the 1960s, the United States has not witnessed a further expansion of robust individual liberty and collective equality. Rather, here and throughout much of the world, there has been an apparent retreat into forms of economic thought reminiscent of the period before the Great Depression and forms of social practice that many believed were left behind in the 1950s.

Of course, the most obvious response to the puzzle of social consent is simply to reverse the question: Why should people revolt? Life is good.

Things are going well. There is food, clothing, and shelter in abundance. People are prosperous and content. What could possibly motivate us to dissent?

The problem with this response is largely a matter of one word: *us*. Certainly, some people are doing quite well, and their consent to the current system is unproblematic. But are all or most people doing that well, so well that acquiescence in the current system is readily explained by their economic, social, and political flourishing? Consider the economy. Though economic data are never unequivocal, though they are invariably open to differing interpretations, they point to some serious problems with this rosy picture. According to Congressional Budget Office data, as analyzed by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 20 percent of U.S. households receive over 50 percent of the national income (Johnston 1999, 16) and average almost four times the mean income of the remaining 80 percent (Bureau of the Census 1998). Moreover, as the effects of this are cumulative, these households control a still higher percentage of the national wealth. Drawing on the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, "a widely cited continuous survey of household finances" (Bradsher 1996, 32), Keith Bradsher reports that by the mid-1990s, the richest 10 percent of the population held over two-thirds of the nation's wealth and had an average net worth of nearly $1.5 million. The poorest 20 percent had a negative net worth (that is, debts exceeding assets) of over $7,000 (31). In contrast, consider an egalitarian system wherein any 20 percent of the population would have 20 percent of the wealth.

By this standard, 80 percent of the population in the United States is currently receiving less than its equitable share of the national wealth.

In the current system, Bradsher continues, the "bottom" 60 percent has less than 6.5 percent of the country's wealth (31); it would, of course, have almost ten times that amount in an egalitarian system. By comparison, according to Isaac Shapiro and Robert Greenstein's 1999 analysis, the top 1 percent owns 40 percent of the wealth—over six times that owned by the bottom 60 percent of the population, and two and a half times that owned by the bottom 80 percent. Returning to the University of Michigan study, it is clear that even those in the 75–89 percentile range have slightly less wealth than they would given an equitable distribution, their actual share summing to less than 12 percent (Bradsher 1996, 31; it would, obviously, be 15 percent given equitable distribution). This indicates that the "breakeven" range—occupied by those people whose current share of wealth is roughly what it would be in an egalitarian system—falls only in the second decile. Put differently, an equitable distribution of the country's wealth would greatly harm 10 percent of the population, leave another 10 percent relatively unaffected, and overwhelmingly benefit the remaining 80 percent. Unsurprisingly, it turns out that around 80 percent of the U.S. population "regard the economic system as 'inherently unfair' and the government 'run for the benefit of the few and the special interests, not the people' " (Chomsky 1995, 113).

Needless to say, the problem is not unique to the United States. The situation is only worse internationally. For example, UN Human Development Reports show that more than half the world's population has an income of less than $750 per annum (Crossette 1996, A3), and 1.3 billion people survive on half that, or less than $1 per day (Bleifuss 1999, 1). Correlatively, 358 ultrawealthy individuals "control assets greater than the combined annual incomes of countries with 45 percent of the world's people" (Crossette 1996). Referring to the 1999 UN Human Development Report (Jolly et al. 1999), Bleifuss (1999) points out that "the combined wealth of computer wizard Bill Gates ($90 billion), financier Warren Buffett ($36 billion) and Wal-Mart heir S. Robson Walton ($15 billion) totaled more than the combined gross national product of the world's 43 least-developed countries, which have 600 million citizens." In keeping with this, the report explains, "the fifth of the world's people living in the highest-income countries" had "86% of world GDP" (Gross Domestic Product), leaving 14 percent for the remaining four-fifths (Jolly et al. 1999, 3).

Returning to the United States, we find that the consequences of these inequalities are often devastating, sheer deprivation extending to basic human necessities for significant portions of the population. An editorial in the *Nation* observes that "according to the Census Bureau, one-quarter of all *full-time* workers make less than $17,000, which is $4,200 less than they need to 'afford' a typical two-bedroom unit" (Naked Cities 1997, 3). Meanwhile, "homeowners' deductions for mortgage interest and property taxes and capital gains exemptions for the sale of houses (most of which subsidies go to families making more than $75,000 a year) cost the government $100 billion in taxes—five times what it spends on low-income housing" (4). The resultant homelessness is hardly compensated by government programs; almost one-quarter of "requests for shelter . . . by families with children" are "turned down because of lack of capacity" (3). As Juliet Schor (1991) points out, "According to a 1989 Gallup Poll, 13 percent of those surveyed reported that there were times during the last year when they did not have enough money to buy food. Higher proportions (17 percent and 21 percent) did not have enough income for clothes and medical care. . . . And because the poll reaches only those with homes (and telephones), these numbers are understated" (114). Note that the economic improvement of the late 1990s only returned people to 1989 levels (see Bureau of the Census 1998, v; the Gallup Poll did not repeat this survey). In the somewhat worse conditions of 1992, the poll reported that 48 percent of the respondents were worried that they would "not be able to pay medical or health-care costs" in the next year (Gallup 1992, 14). The Census Bureau report "*Extended Measures of Well-Being: Meeting Basic Needs*," asserted that "in 1995, approximately 49 million people—about 1 person in 5—lived in a household that had . . . difficulty meeting basic needs," such as food (Bureau of the Census 1999, 1).

At least for the poorest segment of the population, the situation is likely to worsen, due to so-called welfare reform and the increasing economic polarization of society (on some results of welfare reform, see Primus et al. 1999; and Parrott 1998). A survey conducted by the National Governors' Association found that almost half the people "who left the welfare rolls did not have a job"; the majority of those who do get a job receive less than $7 per hour, "not enough to raise a family out of poverty" (Houppert 1999, 17). Before welfare reform, *Meeting Basic Needs* reports that "when asked about help they would receive" if in need, over 77 percent "said help would be available from some source" (Bureau of the Census 1999, 7). Yet, when people actually "experienced financial troubles, only 17.2% did receive help" (7). Much of that help was from governmental agencies or programs now being restricted, phased out, or defunded (8).

The situation is worsened by the disparities themselves. Recent studies indicate that inequality has direct and deleterious consequences for health, beyond the impact of deprivation alone. For example, average life expectancy appears to decrease as income distribution becomes more unequal. Indeed, drawing on data from the World Bank and elsewhere, Richard Wilkinson (1990), of the Trafford Centre for Medical Research at the University of Sussex, has argued that "income distribution is . . . probably the best single predictor of longevity among developed nations" (391; see also Hay 1995, 159 n. 59). Indeed, "equity is the key to the health of the nation as a whole" (408).

Part of this economic inequality results from the underemployment and unemployment, both of which have continuously been much higher than would occur given temporary shifts in labor. Even in periods of economic expansion, the number of unemployed, discouraged, and underemployed workers rarely drops below one in ten (for recent U.S. figures, totaling about 11 percent, see Jolly et al. 1999, 215)—and this is based on official calculations, which almost certainly underestimate the situation. Needless to say, these figures increase, sometimes dramatically, during periods of economic contraction. Unemployment is particularly devastating, even beyond straightforward economic need. As Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (1983) have pointed out, citing a Johns Hopkins University study among others, "Each percentage point increase in the unemployment rate is for example associated with 318 additional suicides, a 2 percent increase in the mortality rate, a 5–6 percent increase in homicides, a 5 percent rise in imprisonments, a 3–4 percent increase in first admissions to mental hospitals, and a 5–6 percent increase in infant mortality rates" (29).

The effects of inequity do not stop there. Economic stratification depresses the quality of life for all people in our society, not only those who are poor or unemployed. First, it appears to reduce the entire stock of wealth in a society. The pie is not just divided unfairly; it is smaller, and thus there is less available for fair or unfair distribution.

Of course, this runs contrary to received economic wisdom. Indeed, the obvious response to our quandary about the distribution of wealth is that inequality fosters excellence, which in turn produces economic growth, resulting in more wealth for everyone. In this trickle-down view, equitable distribution would result in less wealth even for the poor. But precisely the opposite appears to be the case. Robert Frank (1999), Goldwin Smith Professor of Economics, Ethics, and Public Policy at Cornell University, points out that a "burgeoning empirical literature has found a negative correlation between . . . income inequality and economic growth in cross-national data." For instance, one study found that "national income rates in 65 countries were negatively related to the share of national income going to the . . . top 20 percent of earners," while "larger shares for low- and middle-income groups were associated with higher rates of growth"

(243). In short, research suggests that *more* inequality means *less* growth, while *less* inequality means *more* growth, thus more total wealth for all.

Needless to say, the deleterious consequences of inequality are not confined to economics but broadly affect the quality of life, even, in some cases, for the wealthy. Consider crime—a constant cause of fear and inhibition throughout the country as well as across social classes. The award-winning criminologist Elliott Currie (1998) notes that "despite a recent downturn in the crime rate," the United States remains "the most violent advanced industrial society on earth," and "Americans continue to put violent crime at the top of their list of concerns" (3). The threat is related directly to the economic stratification just mentioned. Drawing on a wide range of national and international studies by researchers at Cambridge University, the University of Toronto, the University of California, and elsewhere (124–30), Currie argues that "the links between extreme deprivation, delinquency, and violence . . . are strong, consistent, and compelling" (131).

In fact, crime is not simply a matter of absolute economic well being ("extreme deprivation") but stratification itself. Basing his analysis on a historical study of England and North America over the last three centuries, Douglas Hay (1995) contends that crime rates are closely related to economic inequality. As a general rule, more inequality means more crime; less inequality means less crime. Hay traces a history of shifting crime rates and economic conditions from 1500 to the present, making a strong case that they are directly correlated (147–51, 157). A more technical study, published by the World Bank, reaches the same conclusion, using "information from the United Nations World Crime Surveys" on "crime rates for a large sample of countries for the period 1970–1994." Put simply, the "results show that increases in income inequality raise crime rates" (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza 1998, vii). The study's authors go on to urge "redistributive policies," and "equalizing training and earning opportunities across persons" (31). The various academic studies cited by Currie (124–34) lead to these conclusions as well.

Unsurprisingly in this context, the U.S. incarceration rate is staggering. In 1996, J. W. Mason reported that 1.5 million people were in prison, and "millions more" were "on probation and parole" (34). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (n.d.) puts the figure at 5.3 million convicted offenders under the jurisdiction of corrections agencies that year. Research from a few years earlier shows that "local law enforcement authorities kept more than 50 million criminal histories on file"—a number that has no doubt increased since that time (Mason, 34). According to Mason, "one in five Americans is officially a criminal" (34).

Economic inequality is politically disempowering as well. It is no exaggeration to say that the governmental structure in the United States and the individuals who have positions within it largely serve the interests of the opulent few. The most obvious way in which this occurs is through campaign financing and the funding of ballot initiatives. Robert McChesney (1999) observes that the reduction of representative democracy to a game manipulated by paid advertising—and thus, by those wealthy enough to pay for advertising—advanced significantly through commercial television, beginning in the 1950s (261). By the early 1970s, the results were clear, leading to the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 and its amendment in 1974 (which was partially overturned by a 1976 Supreme Court decision; see Mann forthcoming). These efforts had little positive impact. According to Cohen and Rogers (1983), "In 1978, the bigger spender in campaigns for either the House or Senate was the winner more than 80 percent of the time" (34). Corporations won a comparable percentage of ballot initiatives "in which their spending significantly exceeded the spending of their opponents" (35).

The trend did not end in the 1970s. Of course, not every election can be won simply by outspending one's opponent. As McChesney (1999) puts it (focusing on the late 1990s), the centrality of money in guiding elections "does not mean" that the bigger spender "will always win." But it does mean that "a candidate without a competitive amount of cash will almost always lose." Moreover, "candidates with the most money who run the most ads have the inside track to set the agendas for their races," for their advertisements will tend to determine what issues are discussed, and how they are framed (265).

It is already clear that this is undemocratic—but just how undemocratic? Just what portion of the citizenry does campaign money represent? McChesney explains that "in the United States the richest one-quarter of 1 percent of Americans make 80 percent of individual campaign contributions," thereby "purchas[ing] the allegiance of politicians who, when in office, pass laws that work to the benefit of the wealthy few" (261). In effect, the vast wealth of a tiny minority determines electoral politics. As